

Hospitality

Tailor-Made Stays

An Interview with Christoph Schmidinger,
Regional Vice President, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts,
and General Manager, Four Seasons Hotel New York



Four Seasons Hotel New York on Manhattan's East 57th Street (left); the lobby (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Before assuming his current post, Christoph Schmidinger served as the General Manager of The Ritz-Carlton Chicago, a Four Seasons Hotel. Prior to this, he served as General Manager of Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta and for eight years in managerial positions at the parent company and Regent International properties in Asia. In his current role as Regional Vice President and General Manager, he oversees Four Seasons Hotels in Atlanta, Santa Barbara, New York, and Philadelphia.



Christoph Schmidinger

PROPERTY BRIEF The Forbes Five Star, AAA Five Diamond Four Seasons Hotel New York (www.fourseasons.com/newyork), rises elegantly over Manhattan's premier shopping and business district between Park and Madison Avenues. Boasting 368 oversized guest rooms, including 63 suites, this I.M. Pei-designed architectural icon features stunning views and a gracious style. It boasts an urban renewal spa now run by L.RAPHAEL, a 24-hour fitness center, the famous bar known for its martinis, and TY Lounge and The Garden Restaurant under the reigns of Executive Chef John Johnson. Catering to only the most discerning of travelers, Four Seasons Hotel New York offers a choice of one-of-a-kind specialty suites: the Royal Suite, two Presidential Suites, and for the ultimate stay, the Ty Warner Penthouse Suite at \$45,000 a night. The hotel is managed by Toronto-based Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts.

How important is it to provide a customized experience for the guest?

We compete with other hotels on who has the better location, hardware, etc., but we're doing well. I'm in a great location, I have stunning architecture, and I have great guest rooms.

The discerning customer's own home might be better outfitted than the hotel, but I can make a difference by providing an experience, if I tailor-make the stay.

You do this by opening a communication with the customer to get the information ahead of time. It becomes easier the longer one stays with us, because we try to monitor guest behavior. We try to monitor their expectations; and we are attentive to what they tell us. We're trying to capture those details in our guest history.

If you have stayed with us a few times, it would be shameful if we still didn't know your

desired expectations. Then, it's important that we deliver on that information.

If you want to differentiate yourself going forward in hospitality, if you want to ask for a premium rate, you have to customize the guest experience.

Although technology can assist with this, doesn't it come down to how the guests are handled?

The technology is a tool, but it's how the service is displayed.

I have two focus points in my training: one is to teach the staff how to get it right.

But what differentiates the stay is how you deliver that particular product – then, it's getting it right for that customer.

Can you teach hospitality? Is personality most important in hiring?

You hire attitude over skills. People coming out of management school are generally my preferred hires because they are moldable.

Our interviewing process is geared to a behavior-based interviewing. I want to find out about the person I'm hiring rather than the skills.

I'm better served with a great attitude over skills, although it's different with a specialist.

Do future GMs need to have experience in all different departments?

The more well-rounded experience you have, the easier it will be to do a good job.

Enrich yourself with work experience so when you are in a position to lead or manage, or coach, you're going to have an easy job. But it's not necessary to go through all of the jobs on site.

As a leader in an industry, it's important that you understand the principle of leadership; of mentoring; of management; and of coaching – those are four management styles that you have to apply depending on the situation you will face.

Can the service you touch on be driven consistently throughout? How much can you customize the systems?

Our desire is to customize as much as we can.

There are principle steps to be undertaken to check in a customer, and these are the same the world over.

But how you apply them and how you carry them out are different. As a customer, you expect a different experience in New York versus at a resort in Bali.

So you try to give the customer a sense of destination.

What makes it so enjoyable for you to see people grow and learn?

I'm drawn to coaching, because I cannot do the job myself – I cannot be in all areas of the property at the same time. I need to have good players who play well for me while I'm standing on the sideline.

I focus on making people want to do well, because then I can stand and watch the game and we will be successful.

It must be all about people.

When the expectation of your guest is already very high, how difficult is it to keep raising the bar?

It's the most challenging part of my job. With everything you do every day, you start new. You cannot take anything for granted – just because you make a customer happy today, doesn't mean you will make him happy tomorrow.

My hotel goes through ups and downs, and I'm here to level those out.

I want to make sure we have good economic performance. I want to see growth in all of my metrics over the years. Do I have this growth every year? Most likely not, and that hurts if and when that occurs.

But I'm realistic enough to say I have to fix those downturns to come back up, and ensure continuous growth over the years.

In this 24/7 environment, can you relax and reflect?

I'm blessed in that I can detach myself from the job once I walk out of the hotel; and I can also enjoy success, which I do.

I try to put the positive spin to the disappointments and downsides, where I say, this is where I learn – you don't learn from the ups, but from the downs.

I have made mistakes, but we never make the mistake of ignoring the mistakes – we do something about them.

My operation today is absolutely better than when I took over, and not only because of me but because of all the caretakers that work with me, to continually improve and raise the bar for ourselves. The beneficiary is the customer.

I also need the support of ownership to have the product, which is up to customer expectations. We are embarking on an extensive renovation program in 2014 that includes all guest rooms, suites, and public areas, including restaurant and bars, and building a completely new spa. ●