

ST. CHRISTOPHER SHEPHERD'S HUT "KOLIBA" BANSKA BYSTRICA

Positive Working Environment and Recruitment of Restaurant Staff

Introduction

St. Christopher Shepherd's Hut "Koliba" is located in the Starohorska Valley between Banska Bystrica and Donovaly. The traditional wooden timbered building is sensitively integrated into the surrounding countryside. The interior design and services provided at Koliba are arranged according to traditional Slovak folk style providing customers with an authentic taste of traditional Slovak folk architecture, music, meals and drinks. Staff on duty are dressed in traditional folk costumes and on weekends, customers can enjoy live Slovak folk music. The Koliba was constructed in 2003 and was the first restaurant of this type in the region.

The Koliba offers three specific services to customers. The restaurant has a fireplace and grill and has capacity for 60 diners. The Coachman's Room "Furmanská izba" in the attic has capacity for 40 diners and is suitable for organized groups and work/social/family gatherings. The Koliba also has a covered patio for 60 guests which offers a pleasant oasis during the summer season.

The Koliba employs 21 permanent employees, comprising 8 chefs, 8 waiters, 3 cleaners, 2 technical support and maintenance staff and 1 restaurant/operations manager. In the summer season, the number of employees is supplemented by 4 temporary workers. Tax, accounting and HR issues are carried out by external suppliers. The Koliba normally achieves a high ranking in the annual national rating of "Trend Top Hotels and Restaurants". The chefs working in the Koliba were winners at the traditional national cooking and eating exhibition in 2008 for their version of the Slovak culinary speciality - Bryndzove Halusky.

The Strategy of Koliba

The Koliba's mission is to provide high-quality and tasty meals, especially Slovak traditional cuisine specialities. For this reason, there is a strong emphasis on traditional values, which is visible in the management style of the restaurant owners, a married couple. Traditional values such as an emphasis on family, home life, good interpersonal relationship, teamwork, honesty and sincerity are espoused by the restaurant. Such values align with the restaurant motto of "We are a family in one boat".

This strategy is based on a flat, two tier organisational structure. The owners hold the top managerial positions in the organisation and are responsible for setting overall strategy. The husband is the Managing Director and his wife is the Executive Director (Operational Manager). Both owners have extensive experience in the restaurant and hospitality sector and this experience has shaped the organisational strategy.

An important element of the emphasis on family is daily management–employee contact. This takes the form of daily operational meetings for all shift workers in the morning as well as in the evening after the end of the shift. The contents of the morning’s meetings include the most important tasks and activities of the coming day, while the evening meetings predominantly act as a retrospective assessment of the day. The meetings also focus on sorting out problems and clarifying differences of opinion. These meetings foster greater cooperation and generate greater levels of openness in communication. Employees can openly point out organisational shortcomings and problems and management have shown a willingness to act flexibly.

In relation to employee motivation, management work hard to treat employees fairly and equitably. Management employ a philosophy that employee should be financially involved in the business. Some of the motivational tools used include:

- Subsidised public transport travel costs;
- Accommodation for commuting employees;
- Provision of meals for employees – 47% paid by an employee, 53% by the employer;
- Monthly and annual bonuses;
- Loyalty bonuses related to the annual assessment of the company results;
- Financial rewards based upon guest feedback.

The company does not provide further training for its’ employees. When selecting employees, they give preference to people with appropriate qualifications and work experience. The restaurant is visited by many foreigners, and the menu is available in three languages. The staff are also encouraged to learn new languages. This effort is positively appreciated by visitors and has a motivational influence on employees. The company does not organize professional or language training for its employees. Consequently, there is a danger that employees with language skills may leave the organisation to take overseas positions.

Management have encouraged informality, spontaneity and a friendly approach to dining and this characterises the restaurant environment. The family emphasis of the restaurant has been considered a success by both management and employees. The success of the strategy can be evidenced by high levels of employee retention.

Limitations at Koliba

Sourcing appropriate employees appears to be the most critical problem facing the Koliba. Their target is to engage staff with practical experience and qualifications in an appropriate field. Emphasis is placed on the personality traits of honesty, responsibility and attention to detail/diligence. To find employees with all the above-mentioned qualities is very challenging. When looking for new employees, the company uses personal references and job advertisements. Filling vacancies with applicants from employment offices has proved very successful in the past.

The method used for elimination of conflict in the company is close contact between management and employees. Management have an open-door policy with staff and aim to build employee confidence between management, staff and guests. An example of this approach is “fasirka” (a fried meal made of ground meat) which features on the restaurant menu. In other restaurants “fasirka” is very often considered to be a dish prepared from leftovers and served usually at the end of the week. In Koliba, the honest, professional attitude to the preparation of this meal together with support and

supervision of management makes “fasirka” a favourite sought-after meal at the restaurant. It is always fresh and prepared in accordance with specified recipes. In contrast with its image, this traditional and affordable meal has won the confidence of Koliba visitors, and became a symbol of confidence between the management and the staff.

A significant threat to the retention of qualified employee is the brain drain of qualified and experienced chefs. The management of the Koliba see the solution in providing adequate financial remuneration and in fostering good working conditions for all employees.

The Impact of Koliba’s HR Strategy

The success of Koliba’s human resources management strategy has centred around the following aspects:

- Close contact between management and employees;
- Elimination of the middle management hierarchy;
- Filling of top management positions by relatives;
- The daily presence of top managers in the restaurant;
- Showing confidence in employees;
- Providing adequate remuneration to employees;
- Motivation of employees;
- Recognising and rewarding work performance.

The major advantage to the application of the above-mentioned principles lies in building and inspiring a well-balanced team. Within the team, confidence is intentionally built and supported; individuals know their rights and responsibilities and they know exactly what to do and how to do it. This approach saves both time and money and its application is seen and positively appreciated by visitors. It is visible in the helpful and pleasant employee behaviour towards guests and in the building of repeat business - a source of guaranteed future income.

Gaining a good reputation in the hospitality sector takes a number of years: it is the process of getting to know one another and learning under tough daily working conditions. Maintaining a good reputation is a matter of building good relations and inspiring confidence between management and employees, and subsequently between employees and visitors.

Future Activities of the Koliba

Management plans to finish the building of a boarding house with a capacity of about 10 beds. Further development aims not just to broaden the existing portfolio of activities, but also improve and complement existing restaurant services. This is to encourage customers to prolong their stay in the Koliba.

Because of the limited capacity of the kitchen, the company currently does not intend to increase the seating capacity of the restaurant. In relation to the menu, management intend to increase vegetarian options. To improve the working environment for employees, accommodation for employees will be provided.

Conclusions

This case study examines staff relations at St. Christopher Shepherd's Hut – known as the Koliba. Koliba is a facility which enjoys a good reputation and has a stable position within the Central Slovakia Region. It is a family type business built upon a tradition of quality service, traditional cuisine and traditional folk environment.

The success of the Koliba lies principally in:

- Honest and open communications with customers;
- Wages based upon both the performance of the restaurant and the personal performance of employees
- Broadening and improving services to customers;
- Confidence and balance within the work team;
- Immediate presence of company management in the daily operation;
- Taking care of employees and improving of their working conditions;
- Recruitment of qualified professionals.