



Values Based Leadership

Developing Inspirational Leaders

Leadership Interview with Sawanee Areephan by John Frost

Leading in a Global Organisation in Thailand

In the summer of 2013 we visited Thailand, staying at a Starwood resort. The resort and the people who worked there delivered a great product with a very high standard of service. We were eager to find out how they achieved this high standard and in particular the role that leadership and values played in delivering such a successful culture and we were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to interview Sawanee Areephan following our stay at the resort. Sawanee Areephan is a senior leader within Starwood Hotels and Resorts and currently the Hotel Manager at W Bangkok. When we met her as the Hotel Manager at [The Naka Island](#), A Luxury Collection Resort & Spa, Phuket, she was responsible for managing up to 250 people who work for the resort and has been with Starwood since 1997 having previously worked for Dusit Hotels & Resorts. We asked her to share her thoughts on leadership, working as a senior leader female leader in Asia and her thoughts about working successfully in a multi-cultural global organisation.

What are your values and how do you apply them to your leadership style and approach?

I aim to give my team a clear direction and spend time communicating to



engage them in the vision that I have for the resort. My leadership values are also a critical element in the successful delivery of this vision;

The first value is **passion**. For me, this is about exceeding guest's expectations and passing on that culture and passion to the team so that it is reflected in their own behaviours.

Another one of my values is **happiness**. It's important to show happiness because if you are unhappy you cannot do your job as well as when you are happy.

Respect, as another value, is about taking the opinion of others and encouraging their input. This is part of the way that I build a relationship with those that I lead. It helps me build a relationship based on trust, respect and confidence in my leadership.

This respect for my team means I can work hard to **develop my People** and ensure that the culture that I have



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helped to develop at the resort is self-sustaining. In turn this helps me to deliver on my value of **Success**. I engage further in the value of success by asking my team members to think about the resort as their own business and to care for the culture, their colleagues and the clients.

In addition to my values, I understand that, as a senior leader, I am also a role model to those I lead. I always try to role model my values and the behaviours that I expect of others because I believe that this is the most powerful way to engage my people.

As a successful senior Asian leader what thoughts would you like to share with other leaders working in multi-cultural global organisations?

For me, having cultural agility is a key leadership skill so my leadership style flexes with the different cultures. You need to learn about the different cultures that you are working in and what is important to them especially if you are an ex-pat.

Aside from leading other cultures effectively, I would say to other senior Asian leaders that it is important to know and understand the business that you are working in and what is important in that culture. Working for Starwood, for example, I appreciated that the organisation is very structured but also gives people the opportunity to be creative in their leadership role so

that Starwood can get ahead of the competition.

There is also a good values connection for me with the Starwood organisation and this adds to my own personal inspiration to perform for the organisation on a daily basis.

What is your experience of being a female leader in Asia?

My view is that the world is changing and in my experience, the quality of work is the most important thing, so male or female distinctions are irrelevant. My focus is on behaving in a way that enables people to believe in me as a leader and to be there for them. In doing so I hope to help them to believe that there is nothing that we cannot achieve together.

I work a lot on developing my internal confidence and my perception of what is possible in my role. Having this self-awareness and self-management helps me to be comfortable in my leadership role and to explore what is possible. It helps instil self-belief in my capabilities and has opened up a different world of possibilities. This leadership journey has taught me that I have something to offer, something to give back to other female leaders in Asia. I hope to help them to learn by being a role model and, wherever possible, to encourage my female colleagues to believe in themselves.