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THE HOSPITALITY HOST ROLE IN THE TRAVEL/TOURISM INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Sources of strain associated with the role of hired "host" in the hospitality industry are explored by focusing on the host-guest, host-host, and host-management relationships. Means for reducing role strain and enhancing the effectiveness of hospitality workers are suggested.

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INTRODUCTION

Travel, tourism, and vacationing have become increasingly important aspects of people's lives. As more time becomes available (through the benefits of paid holidays, shorter work weeks, early retirement, etc.) and individuals have more discretionary income (a result of smaller families, economic growth, etc.), pleasure vacations have come to be viewed by many as not only "desirable," but also as "deserved." It has been estimated that nearly two-thirds of the population engage in travel in any one year.(1)

To meet the needs of vacationers, a vast array of tourist-related businesses have evolved, ranging from large-scale recreational, amusement and entertainment facilities, hotel/motel/restaurant chains, transportation services, and travel agencies to locally owned and operated tourist homes, eateries, and souvenir shops. This growth has made the travel industry the second largest retail operation in the country -- providing \$191 billion in revenues and employing nearly seven million people.(2) If the current rate of growth continues, travel and tourism will likely become the number one industry in the United States during the next two decades.

Many of the individuals employed in tourism and travel work in human service occupations and have direct contact with vacationers. Some of these serve as "hospitality hosts" (whether or not they carry that specific title) in parks, hotels, transportation centers, stores, and recreational facilities. These workers greet, advise, and otherwise aid visitors as they seek to orient themselves to unfamiliar settings and obtain information about the opportunities available in the local area.

The quality of the guest-host interaction is an important component influencing the satisfaction of leisure travelers with their vacations (3, 4), determining whether the guest will return, how he will relate the experience to others, and affecting how the vacation will be judged in retrospect. If interactions are viewed as good, then repeated and expanded attendance is likely; conversely, when negative interactions between hosts and guests are encountered, the business of the site involved, as well as the surrounding community and/or region may suffer.

Despite the importance of the host to the vacationer's enjoyment and evaluation of the tourist area, there is no systematic analysis of the expectations, perceptions, realities, and conflicts associated with the role. Indeed, a review of the literature published by and for the hospitality industry found little reference to the human factor. Most writings focused on amenities and decor, rather than the facilitation of congenial and gracious host-guest interactions. The lack of industry attention to this matter has likely contributed to the high turnover rates of hospitality workers (5) and difficulty in recruiting and maintaining competent employees.(6) Understanding and helping employees to cope with the stresses of their jobs in order to prevent "burnout" and enhance job satisfaction may contribute not only to worker retention, but also to worker performance. While previous research has demonstrated that job satisfaction is not simply or directly related to productivity of factory or clerical workers (7), it seems likely that for service occupations, where the quality of job performance depends heavily upon the individual's pleasant and courteous manner, job satisfaction and stress management would be important conditioners of job performance.

The present paper draws upon the author's experiences in both guest and host capacities to: 1) explore the expectations associated with the role of hospitality host with particular attention being given to the possible sources of stress and conflict that are likely; and 2) to suggest mechanisms for reducing such tensions and enhancing worker satisfaction and effectiveness.

THE HOSPITALITY HOST ROLE

While there are many occupational roles in the tourism/travel field for which host responsibilities are secondary to other instrumental tasks (travel agents, transportation sales, motel clerks, etc.), in other instances the host role is primary. The latter situations often involve persons who work in areas such as guest relations, information, or as tour guides. They may be hired by the public sector in national, state, or municipal parks, or employed by the private sector in motel/hotel,

recreation, or amusement settings. Regardless of the specific environment within which they operate, in their capacity as "hosts" they are likely to share certain role patterns.

The role of the host in the tourism field cannot be discussed in isolation. Like most social roles, it is best elaborated by focusing on the linkages between it and other sectors in a set of counter-roles.(8) Each role/counter-role sector, along with its assumptions, expectations, and perceptions, impacts upon the interpersonal relationships between role incumbents. Each person responds to the nature of the role definition, surrounding situational cues, and personal needs in the light of knowledge structures and conceptual categories derived from previous experience to arrive at interpretative schemes and behavior patterns which are deemed appropriate. Inconsistencies in expectations and meanings can occur and these often lead to strain and conflict for the individual.(9) For the present discussion, the reciprocal expectations and obligations involved will be described in terms of three role/counter-role sectors: 1) the host-guest relationship; 2) the host-host relationship; and 3) the host-management relationship.

HOST-GUEST RELATIONSHIPS

Without a guest, the host role cannot be performed (any more than the teacher's role can be performed without a student), and consequently, this role/counter-role sector is of primary importance. The host is expected to be courteous, friendly, knowledgeable of places and events in the local area, and available to provide information to the guest. Beyond these specific task requirements, the host is to be "hospitable" a term defined in the dictionary as: "welcoming guests with warmth and generosity; well disposed to strangers." Clearly there are limits in the extent to which hired hosts are expected to show "generosity" to the guest, but the host is expected to demonstrate concern for the guest's comfort, well-being, and enjoyment. Precisely how these concerns are to be expressed is often unspecified and this can lead to a lack of clarity in role expectations for the host. Guests may believe that a host should give his undivided attention for as long as help is needed or desired. Yet most hospitality positions require that the host respond to hundreds of people in a single day, thus limiting his time for personal interaction and service. Moreover, since the host is often assigned to some specific work site (e.g., an information booth or hospitality desk), the expectation that he remain "at his desk" may directly conflict with the expectation that he serve the guest. Thus, time and space constraints imposed by the situation may interfere with the host's performance of his "hospitality" role.

The guest is expected to observe courtesies ("please" and "thank you"), wait his turn for help, and avoid rude or overly intimate contact with the host. However, these expectations are minimal, and the system is oriented to pleasing the guest and providing "hospitality" even for those who violate courtesy considerations. The host may be provided with "support" or "backup assistance" to deal with discourteous or unruly guests, but in such a situation, the "backup" individual generally

strives to placate the guest and establish himself in the host role. Only when the guest engages in the most blatant and extreme violations of social norms is he denied service.

Thus, although the host possesses superior knowledge and information, and is operating on his own turf, the power is vested in the guest. The host is a "service worker" whose primary responsibilities are to serve and please the guest. In American society, "service workers" are, in general, viewed as low status positions, and this stereotype may affect resulting interpersonal relationships between guests and hosts. Guests may address the hospitality host in a condescending or impersonal manner, reflecting underlying prejudices and perceptions of him as a "servant-functionary." Such an orientation contradicts a basic cultural value in our society -- that of equality for all citizens. The host, who is likely to view himself as "as good as anyone else," may resent the imperious attitude of guests who flaunt their perceived superiority. The incongruity between the cultural value of equalitarianism and the subservient behavior expected (and sometimes demanded) of the host may lead to worker stress and difficulty in relating to guests in the expected, hospitable manner.

The opportunity for negotiation between hosts and guests to resolve the value conflict and incongruous expectations is precluded by the limited time frame within which they interact. Yet, it is possible to alter the host's perceptions, expectations, and attitudes toward the guest host, thereby helping to make the relationship more manageable and less stressful for the host.(10)

HOST-HOST RELATIONSHIPS

In many tourist situations, there are a number of hosts working in proximity to each other. These people share common experiences in the work setting in terms of their interactions with guests and management, and have reciprocal role responsibilities one to the other. As co-workers, they share comraderie and provide for mutual support. Although sometimes they are also competitive, such as when several hosts vie for a promotion to "lead" or "supervisor," competition is often precluded by the seasonal nature of their positions and the general lack of opportunity for advancement. Consequently, most host-host interactions are focused primarily on coping with the problems and policies for day-to-day job situations in which they have little power or prestige relative to the other members of the role set. Co-worker expectations include: "covering" to protect one another from management reprimands; being reasonably punctual and committed to carrying out the tasks required so as to not require continuous "covering" from others; and participating in informal co-worker interactions which provide for tension management. Since the host-host relationship involves shared work responsibilities, a co-worker who does not fulfill role expectations can negatively affect the entire work process. Excessive absenteeism puts additional pressure on those who are required to fill their own position as well as that of the missing individual; frequent requests to "cover" for another and/or refusal of a co-worker to "cover" results in

tension for all parties concerned; uncooperative or slow workers may irritate those who depend upon them. Such problems can result in an angry, tense, impatient work atmosphere where hosts take sides against each other and employee morale, cooperation, and job performance suffer because perceptions do not meet expectations.

The host-host relationship provides opportunities for release of tension resulting from stress experiences with others in the role set. This is accomplished by hosts privately mocking or making fun of guests and criticizing management personnel and policies. These "gripe" sessions may be functional for the worker to the extent that they provide opportunities to release frustrations which result from their shared low-status positions. However, they are dysfunctional in that they promote negative attitudes toward guests in general (whom they are then called upon to serve with courtesy and graciousness) and toward the organization which they are hired to represent. A great deal of informal peer pressure may be exerted on co-workers to participate in these "gripe" discussions. Such involvement, however, is a two-edged sword. If a host withdraws from the interaction, he may jeopardize the host-host relationship; if he joins in, his behavior violates the norms of his host-guest role and the expectations of his supervisor. The result can be stress inducing for the individual and detrimental to his job performance.

Management may be able to intercede in this type of situation by encouraging co-worker interaction in solving on-the-job problems and/or planning social events. It seems likely that, for many hospitality workers, their shared experiences may be limited to the work setting. In the absence of other common interests, complaints or gossip may dominate their conversations. Thus, the introduction of other shared topics might limit the time spent in these less productive activities.

HOST-MANAGEMENT RELATIONSHIPS

Within the travel/tourism industry, the majority of formal host roles are found in organizational contexts. Hosts are generally hired wage-payroll workers, who are employed during the heavy tourist season to handle the influx of vacationers/visitors. As workers for a larger organization, they have both rights and responsibilities which can be dealt with in the context of the host-management role sector. In many instances these relationships are multi-layered. The host works for a company or business with specific policies and products, a desired image, and employee benefits and regulations. These general conditions, however, are interpreted and administered by supervisors who may be far removed from the upper echelons of decision making in the organization.

Often the initial orientation of an employee to the company is in terms of formal organizational goals and responsibilities. Whether done in a training meeting with an instructor and/or audio-visual aids prepared for that purpose, or through the distribution of printed materials, the training is focused on indoctrinating the new employee (host) in the policies and past and present accomplishments of the organization. There is little, if any, instruction in the skills required to carry out the role.(11) A formal employment contract,

subject to local, state, and national regulations is signed, which outlines the employee's rights and obligations. While these vary somewhat from organization to organization, they usually cover general wage specifications and working hours. The wages are usually close to the minimum required by law, reflecting a societal stance that technical or mechanical tasks require skill and/or training (and hence higher wages) but that "anyone" can work in a service role such as that of a hospitality host. Some administrators have begun to recognize that "you can train someone to fix a piece of equipment a lot easier than you can [train him] to deal with people" (12, p. 77), but most companies have not yet accepted this position and continue to offer low wages and little or no opportunity for advancement to their hospitality workers. Employees are often drawn from high school and college student populations, homemakers seeking part-time seasonal employment, and unemployed workers in search of more stable and lucrative jobs. As a result, turnover is rapid, and the continuous shifting of personnel restricts the on-the-job training and skill development of the hosts themselves. Nevertheless, hosts are expected to hold highly favorable images of their employers, to express satisfaction with and enthusiasm for the tourist facility itself and, in general, to be public relations agents for the company as a whole. To encourage longer tenure on the job, the organization may offer bonuses or other perquisites (free passes, discounts on admissions and/or purchases, etc.) based upon length of employment, but these modest inducements do not seem to be effective in slowing the rapid turnover in host employees.

Regardless of the positive or negative environment provided by the overall organization, the host may find the day-to-day realities of the work situation more dependent upon the actions and expectations of an immediate work supervisor than on any general company policy. The hospitality host is hierarchically far removed from the company executives and, because of his perceived replaceability and low status within the organization, there is often little recourse to perceived injustices through employee grievance procedures. This does not mean, however, that the host has no rights. On the contrary, the supervisor-subordinate role sector provides implicitly understood obligations and privileges for both role incumbents. Thus, the host, as a subordinate, is expected to be punctual and regular in his work attendance, perform assigned tasks, be cordial and respectful in his relationships with the supervisor, follow specific work regulations as identified by the supervisor, and be honest when completing time cards and other company records. The supervisor, in turn, is expected to treat employees impartially, listen and respond to subordinate's complaints, monitor worker performance, offer suggestions for improvement, and act as a liaison between the employee and the larger organization.

Differences among supervisors as well as differences between the supervisors and hosts concerning how these responsibilities are carried out together with the host-guest and host-host obligations can result in a lack of clarity in the role definition and conflict between supervisor and subordinates. Thus, when one supervisor emphasizes "hospitality" over "rules and regulations," while another insists that the rules are more important, a clash regarding what is "appropriate" behavior results. The ambiguity is compounded by the practice of many job descriptions

stating that the employee will "perform other duties as assigned by management." Thus, the host who expects that his role involves greeting and providing information to guests, may be surprised to discover that the supervisor includes only, quite divergent tasks (e.g. collecting trash, cleaning bathrooms, etc.) as legitimate areas of assignment. Understaffing and overstaffing can build tension by making both working and off-hours unpredictable. Disagreements among managers can create an air of uncertainty and confusion. Workers who are unwittingly caught in the middle of disputes between "higher-ups" may find themselves bearing the brunt of the resulting anger.

In many ways the host-management relationship is similar to supervisor-subordinate roles in any business setting. As such, awareness of the multiplicity of roles involved and the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations associated with each can form a starting point from which management and workers can negotiate. The unique circumstances of the host role, and its potentially high stress character, suggest that the enhancement of worker satisfaction and performance may require intensive efforts by management to train both hosts and supervisors in interpersonal and effective communication skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The hospitality industry deals primarily with intangible products -- experiences, "good times," relaxation, and fun. It is a "people business," where the quality of interpersonal interactions influences future growth. It is also a rapidly expanding industry and one which has not yet come to a full appreciation of the importance of hiring and maintaining competent and skilled workers. Turnover rates for hospitality workers are high, partly because of low wages, but also because the positions involve high levels of stress due to conflicting and competing expectations and attitudes, little opportunity for advancement, strict limitations on involvement in decision-making, and little job security. Hosts and other hospitality workers may be responsible for helping guest to enjoy themselves, but their own positions are limited in terms of personal growth and satisfaction, and fraught with tension and strain. How can the situation be altered to improve worker retention and performance? Two major areas of change seem relevant: 1) training of hospitality workers and their supervisors so that they develop the skills to effectively carry out their respective roles; and 2) establishment of a work environment which is sensitive to human needs.

It is not enough to tell employees to be "nice" to guests. Consideration must be given to instructing hospitality workers in interpersonal and communicative skills, including active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and relationship enhancement. They must be trained to anticipate the types of strains associated with their roles and given specific instruction in techniques for managing problem situations. Such training requires more than a single orientation meeting; it implies intensive initial workshop sessions and periodic follow-up meetings to enhance and refine existing skills. At the same time, it is important to cultivate desired attitudes toward the guests, the company, and the industry. This means that management and

supervisors must consistently reflect positive and constructive responses to these elements. Derogatory statements about the organization or guests by supervisors or middle management personnel can provide legitimation for negative attitudes on the part of hosts -- attitudes which may color their perceptions and inhibit effective and congenial interactions with customers.

Moreover, the work environment should be structured in such a way that employees find the setting satisfying. This implies the presence of effective leadership that is responsive to the worker's needs for approval and knowledge. It involves management taking a personal interest in workers, giving credit when a job is performed well, and sharing information and decision making with subordinates. These things, more than wages and job security are the primary motivational factors reported by workers.(12, p. 84) "Managerial leadership should be an integral part of the hospitality environment, a behavioral model . . . of how best to behave with people in general whether they be guests or employees".(12, p. 93) It is to take the axiom that "people are our most important asset" and follow it through to its logical conclusion in action. Peters and Waterman, in their bestseller, In Search of Excellence (13) document this as one of the distinguishing characteristics of what they described as the "best run" companies in the country. In the hospitality industry, where service and interpersonal interaction play such an important part, this emphasis would seem to be even more relevant. As one leader in tourism said, "You can dream, create, design and build the most wonderful place in the world, . . . but it takes people to make the dream a reality".(14)

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