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A LEISURE INDUSTRY EXECUTIVE VIEWPOINT

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the similarities and differences among leisure and non-leisure businesses.

A LEISURE INDUSTRY EXECUTIVE VIEWPOINT

Before decisions can be made by an executive, understanding of the problems and goals must take place. The search for this understanding often involves an attempt to categorize people and problems in order to get a handle on the situation. A chart of this kind of categorization would look like a complex work of string art.

Similarly, in trying to sort the leisure industry into little piles we find categorizing becomes a monster with many heads. In fact, categorizing causes difficulty in even trying to define similarities or differences between leisure industry and traditional executives.

Nevertheless, leisure business has some generally recognized characteristics that can reasonably be compared to traditional business. The search for these characteristics, however, poses this riddle: "What two things are just alike yet completely different?"

The answer of course is: traditional businesses and leisure business. First the similarities:

These two categories of businesses are just alike to the executive who has to handle marketplace decisions, internal and external change, the all-important bottom line, whether it be profits, or other goals, and employee relations.

Few executives in leisure business would see any reason to be singled out as different from the traditional executive. Many have moved back and forth comfortably in seeking career growth. The good executive in either area of business is aware of the need to manage in a dynamic way. As a matter of fact, issues posed as problems in a study are often the very challenges that the executive desires.

Marketplace decisions are a very personal aspect of each executive's job. The marketplace for a campground operator is different from that of a first-class hotel. A similar market might be found for auto makers (a traditional business) and camper builders (is this traditional or leisure business?) From another angle, however, the camper builder and the campground operator are selling to the same clientele.

Internal and external change are elements that every management person has to wrestle with on a day-to-day basis. It has been said that no job exists that is not in the business of solving problems. This can be seen in dealing with the dynamic aspects of internal and external change. Whether the executive came to his position through education or through job advancement, he knows at the outset that one of his tasks will be to juggle a constantly changing set of circumstances, both internally (employees, organizations) and externally (markets, economy, and government regulations).

The company's goals vary less from traditional businesses to leisure business than they do from one facet to another. It becomes easier here to compare profit-making companies with each other, and separating them from not-for-profit companies or public service agencies. Money is obviously not always the bottom line. Other goals might include maintaining a certain level of quality, standing in the community, or providing needed services.

Managing employees is much the same in both areas of business. The needs of the hotel maid, the steel worker and the office clerk are not unlike. The executive's attention to their motivation, productivity and role within the organization require not only a good understanding of the rules of the game, but a "feel" for these matters as well.

In working with people, the executive finds himself in the position of facilitator; bringing people and tasks together in the pursuit of productivity. A good manager knows how to use people well. He also recognizes that he often must do this under less than ideal conditions.

Realistically, few bosses can hand-select their staffs. Because of the dynamics of business, and the emotional and legal complexities of forced change, most executives move into their roles with the members of the organization in place. This increases the necessity of obtaining greater understanding of people and the factors that motivate them.

This points to another similarity, and that is the matter of on-going education for the executive. All managers need to keep pace with the evolving needs of personnel as well as the dynamics of the organization. This is approached through formal education or through informal education such as professional organizations, subscriptions to helpful publications, and a highly evident desire to continue learning.

Although the needs of various members of the work force are quite different, the opportunities for the organization are the same. All companies have access to the same kinds of bonuses for their staff. These might include such incentives as time off, group trips, organizational family outings, sponsorship of sports, allowing staff to become involved in certain community projects on company time.

The differences that set leisure businesses apart from traditional businesses are harder to define. Particularly, these differences are more relevant to vertical comparisons than they are to horizontal comparisons.

One major area of difference might be noted in the leisure business trend to work with non-traditional work forces. The leisure industry ranks high in employment of minority workers, unskilled and untrained persons, women and youths. Many leisure businesses anticipate this by having continuing training programs.

Seasonality, too, adds to the uniqueness of leisure businesses. Often an established core of workers are maintained on a year-round basis to provide needed continuity, with large numbers of people hired during the travel season to provide services to the public. These people are hired with little or no background, trained on the job or just prior to opening, and re-employed in succeeding years if possible. Many young people use these positions as stepping stones into full-time positions, while others view them as nothing more than temporary employment that have little to do with ultimate career plans.

Training and educational processes obviously are different, but here again, the comparison is more aptly made as a vertical one. There are varying educational modes for certain aspects of the leisure industry, just as training for a dental assistant must necessarily be different from training for an assembly line worker.

Another area of difference deals with problems in perception. Not long ago, a former President of the United States was heard to ask leaders of the leisure industry if it was "frivolous"

Travel and tourism in America is a \$157 billion business each year, and across the country employs 4.3 million people. Obviously, not a frivolous industry, but a leader in the service-oriented economy that the world will soon know.

Other elements, such as community service, concern for employee morale and the need to keep step with a changing world are already well served by the leisure industry, which, in many of these areas, has developed in advance of other types of industries. The responsibility for meeting social and emotional needs both in and beyond the work place is felt by both executives. In fact, the leisure industry executive, by the nature of his business, is often more highly involved in community issues, public service projects and economic growth through hiring of harder-to-place employees.

The leisure executive is also providing much needed services to the traditional executive for the societal needs of his employees. For this reason, it seems unfair to put additional weight on the leisure executive to solve these problems. Both executives, whether a hotel operator or a product manufacturer, need to live up to society's changing expectations of the employer.

Fortunately for all executives, the leisure industry has found ways of providing the needed incentives and rewards that help the employer keep pace with change. The exposure to these opportunities is available through the free-enterprise system for any business executive who wants to use these means to fill the holistic needs of his employees.