

6 rules for choosing the right GM

by Jena Tesse Fox | Jun 14, 2018 2:32pm



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Climbing the ladder to the role of general manager is the dream of many a hospitality employee—but what an aspiring hotelier wants and what a management company needs may be two very different things. Whether a GM rises from within a management company's ranks or joins a hotel from a different company, the management groups look for some key factors when selecting a property's next leader.

1. Familiarity with the Company's Culture

Promoting from within can be a good strategy for a management company, cutting down on the time it takes to teach the corporate mindset. "You've got someone who's already gone

through the acculturation and who really understands the semantics that we use and the cultural elements and its systems," said Carlos Flores, president and CEO of Sonesta International Hotels Corporation.

But there's another benefit to promoting internally. "From a very practical, tactical perspective, it gives people comfort that there's a path forward to grow and develop in their careers," Flores said. Other companies also emphasize that message with their employees. Chartwell Hospitality, for example, has a specific program to prepare potential GMs for their future roles, and to get middle managers up to the next level, said Kevin Green, COO at the company. "It fits with our mission statement," he said of hiring from within. "We look for people who want to do things the right way, not the easy way."

2. Dedication to Hospitality

Whether hiring a GM from another company or promoting from within, experience matters. "We want longevity in the business," said Green, emphasizing that Chartwell avoids "job-jumpers" when hiring GMs for its hotels from other companies. "We want people in the people business."

When hiring a GM externally, a management company should look for demonstrable signs of a candidate's success. "We look for guest satisfaction scores, employee turnover stats and success on profit and loss and sales," Green said.

3. Associate Engagement

Pete Sams, EVP of full-service operations at Interstate Hotels & Resorts, agreed that metrics can be a good indicator of a candidate's potential—but added that the numbers don't always paint a complete picture. "Associate engagement is a critical factor," he said. "We look at not just guest service scores, but [at] an ability to positively effect change and demonstrate improvement in those arenas. We look for a track record of developing people because, ultimately, you can't do it yourself as a general manager."

A GM must be able to inspire others, said Sams, creating the direction for a hotel and setting the operational standards. "We're looking for examples of people that have developed others in positions of greater responsibility because we know that they have ability in that area and that they can perpetuate our brand and our success. Are you utilizing the resources available to you through your expenses, whether it's labor or direct expenses, etc., to drive continuous success on the top?"

Leadership, said Gary Isenberg, president of asset & property management services at LW Hospitality Advisors, is more than just the ability to manage a team. “It’s the ability to be open-minded and see other people’s perspectives,” he said. “As a general manager, you need to herd the cats, so to speak, and everyone’s contributing to the common cause of improving customer satisfaction and driving profitability for the owners. But at the same time, each department head in each discipline has a different perspective on how to do that. The general manager needs to be able to tie that together and keep them all working in harmony.”

4. Experience within a Property’s Segment

A candidate’s experience at a specific type of hotel is also an important factor to consider. A team at a convention hotel, for example, will have a tough time getting comfortable with a GM who does not have “big box” experience, said Larry Trabulsi, SVP at asset management company CHMWarnick. Similarly, if the staff at a property is unionized, does the potential GM have experience working with union reps?

5. Willingness to Move

But even when promoting internally, a management company may avoid keeping a new GM at the hotel where he or she cut his or her teeth. “As a department head, there may be relationships that you’ve forged or maybe some conflicts that you’ve created within that organization because that’s the way it’s best to operate,” said Isenberg, noting that department heads and GMs may have difficult relationships with one another or internal conflicts—and that those relationships may make promotions within the hotel problematic. “If you’re a controller, you think very differently than if you’re the director of sales. The director of sales and marketing is going to be much more creative in thinking whereas the controller is going to be much more regimental,” he said. While someone with demonstrated skill in either of these positions could be a very good GM, promoting one to oversee the other could make the transition difficult and invite internal strife. “The other managers may not allow them the opportunity to make that change,” Isenberg said. “It’s easier for those transitions and changes to happen when someone goes somewhere fresh, where there are no preconceived relationships and expectations.”

This is especially important for a first-time GM, who must turn departmental leadership into responsibility for an entire property, Trabulsi said. “[A food-and-beverage] director at a big hotel may have 150 people in their department,” he said as an example. “Can they carry that experience to management at another hotel? They’d be dealing with owners and dealing with other external factors.” In any kind of transition, Trabulsi added, it’s the responsibility of the management company to make sure the new GM is comfortable in his or her new role.

6. A Positive Attitude

At the end of the day, said Green, a management company needs people who fit into the culture of both the hotel and the company itself. "The culture of a management company is reflected by the people at each hotel," Sams said. "We can't push a culture down through the organization. The culture has to exist within each and every business unit."

Ultimately, passion matters more than experience or specific skills. "We can cultivate aptitude through the development of an internal promotion of that nature," Sams said. "You have to have the drive and the desire, and then we have to create an environment where we can cultivate and develop your skills."