

Soft Skills at Work: Going above and beyond can turn a job into a career

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If you check most employee manuals, you probably won't find a list of soft skills employers expect their workers to demonstrate. But if there were such a section, "Exceed expectations" would likely be at the top.

What does that really mean?

At the Hilton Baltimore at BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport, it can be sewing on loose buttons on a coat - without being asked. It can be escorting people to their locations instead of just pointing the way. It is all about going the extra mile for their customers.

The Hilton calls this extra touch "*Wowing*" the guest, said Tishuana "Tish" Hodge, director of Human Resources at the BWI Hilton.

"Our guests expect to be greeted with a smile and get their needs taken care of," Tish said. "But it is that added touch that is important."

How do employees at the Hilton exceed expectations? Tish said there were several ways she has noticed staff members demonstrating this attribute.

1. Be proactive: "An example of being proactive is to anticipate needs, assess the situation and be prepared with a Plan B or C in the event things should change on the course of a given day," Tish said.

She told me of a sales manager who determined the temperature in a guest's room was not right. The guest had not yet commented about it, but this manager decided to find a new room, which turned out to be next door, and set it up for the guest.

When the guest returned, he was told about the situation, that the new room was ready, and was escorted next door.

2. Take the initiative: "Taking the initiative is being a self-starter," Tish said. "Another word I think of is empowerment. Taking ownership of a situation and performing necessary tasks without being asked to do them."

She recalled a situation when a guest missed the hour that clothes were picked up to be cleaned and the woman needed that article of clothing. A hotel staff member hand-delivered the garment to the cleaners so that it would be back in time.

3. Do more than is asked of you: Tish spoke of an "Associate of the Month," Lisa Wilson, who is a bartender at the hotel and exemplifies this quality.

"Lisa serves a group of AMVETS who regularly come to the hotel. She talks and jokes with them, making them feel at home. She is definitely taking her job to the next level," Tish said.

This quality is demonstrated by employees in all positions at the hotel.

"A banquet server might pay special attention to a guest with a baby, and offer assistance to the mother such as warming up bottles. She'll ask if there is anything she can do," Tish said. "When associates or team members see that something has dropped on the carpet, they pick it up or take mail out when it needs to be dropped off. People who exceed expectations do not sit around when their own work is done. Instead, they see what else they can do - without having to be told."

How does exceeding expectations affect your career?

Tish talked about a standout employee, Pamela Sharps, who has been promoted because she possesses this attribute. Pamela started as an operations manager working in the evening and is now the Rooms Division manager responsible for both the front desk and housekeeping departments.

In all her positions, she has consistently performed beyond her job description. Pamela also has the ability to sense when people are not feeling well and helps out in those situations. She doesn't have to be asked.

Tish said about Pamela, "I need it and it's done."

These types of skills are usually not written down in manuals or job descriptions, and it is often small or subtle actions that impress others. Grasping their importance is something savvy people master because they know it is a way to build their reputations as exceptional employees.

As Tish said, "Exceeding expectations is important if you want to turn a job into a career and you want upward mobility and promotions."

CONNECT! Coalition

The Program and Curriculum Subcommittee had its first meeting to talk about specific workplace skills desired by employers. The goal is to develop a set of guidelines trainers can use to teach the skills so that students of all ages are eligible to receive a Workplace Skills Certificate.

This certificate can be shown to employers as evidence that the job applicant or employee consistently demonstrates the soft skills all employers expect.

The subcommittee is developing an online survey to determine the specific skills most important to businesses. Companies interested in completing the employer survey and others wanting to get involved with CONNECT! can e-mail Sue Gallagher at sgallagher@aawdc.org.

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