



UNVEILING VALOR: HOW TAJ HOTEL'S HR POLICIES SHAPED HEROIC RESPONSES IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY DURING THE 26/11 ATTACK

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Abstract: This research paper delves into the transformative impact of Taj Group's human resource policies in response to the 26/11 attack of 2008 at Taj Hotel, Mumbai. With the hotel accommodating approximately 1700 guests at the time, most of whom were successfully evacuated, this study investigates how the hotel's HR policies played a pivotal role in shaping the remarkable response exhibited by staff and management. By examining the interplay between the company's hiring strategy, training initiatives, and recognition practices, this paper sheds light on the connection between these policies and the exceptional actions of employees during the crisis.

Purpose of Study: The primary aim of this research is to unravel the intricate relationship between Taj Group's HR policies and the heroic response of its workforce during the 26/11 attack. Through an in-depth exploration of the company's hiring practices, training programs, and recognition initiatives, the study seeks to illustrate how these organizational strategies contributed to cultivating a values-driven, customer-centric culture. By analyzing the congruence between these policies and employee actions, the study seeks to illuminate the underlying mechanisms that facilitated the hotel's resilience and heroism in the face of adversity.

IndexTerms: Taj hotel, Human resource policies, Values-driven recruitment, Resilience, Heroism, Customer-centric culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

The 2008 terror attack on Taj Hotel, Mumbai, remains etched in history as a tragic incident that tested the mettle of the hotel's staff and management. Hosting around 1700 guests during that fateful period, the hotel's response to the crisis showcased extraordinary heroism and resilience. This paper explores the underlying HR policies that enabled the hotel's employees to respond with courage and dedication. Central to this investigation are the Taj Group's hiring strategy, training programs, and recognition initiatives, all of which contributed to shaping an exceptional service culture.

The Taj Group's unique approach to recruitment, focusing on values-driven candidates from smaller towns, is examined in relation to the courageous actions of the frontline staff during the attack. The training programs provided by the Taj Group, designed to equip employees with technical skills and crisis management abilities, are analyzed in the context of the staff's quick thinking and effective communication during the attack. Furthermore, the paper investigates the Recognition-as-Reward System and its impact on fostering employee dedication, as exemplified by the commitment of the managerial staff during the crisis.

By connecting the dots between HR policies and employee actions during the 26/11 attack, this paper highlights the symbiotic relationship between organizational practices and the extraordinary response of the workforce. Ultimately, it showcases how the Taj Group's emphasis on values, leadership, and guest-centricity laid the groundwork for a remarkable display of resilience and heroism.

II. HIRING STRATEGY: FOSTERING VALUES-CENTRIC WORKFORCE

2.1 Frontline Staff Recruitment: Tapping into Traditional Indian Values

The Taj Group's acquisition policy revealed a strategic focus on sourcing frontline staff from smaller cities and towns. This unique approach aimed to leverage the traditional Indian values prevalent in these areas, such as respect for elders, humility, and empathy. By recruiting individuals who inherently embraced these values, the company sought to create a workforce that would naturally prioritize guest satisfaction.

2.2 Recruitment Process: Character Traits over Credentials

The recruitment approach for frontline staff involved visiting local schools in semi-urban areas and engaging in discussions with headmasters to identify potential candidates. The emphasis was on character traits like respect for elders, cheerfulness, and neediness, which reflected an individual's suitability for customer-centric roles. Academic performance took a back seat to these qualities.

2.3 Junior and Managerial Staff Recruitment: Ties with Hotel Management Institutes

Moving up the organizational hierarchy, the Taj Group recruited supervisors and junior managers from over 100 hotel management and catering institutes in India. The company maintained relationships with about 30 of these institutes through a campus-connect program. The tie-up involved training faculty and facilitating student visits, contributing to a talent pipeline of individuals familiar with the hospitality industry.

2.4 Top Management Recruitment: Embracing Values Over Prestige

For its topmost echelons, the Taj Group defied convention by recruiting management trainees from India's second and third-tier B-schools. This approach aligned with the acquisition policy's focus on values-driven individuals rather than credentials. The company believed that individuals from these institutions were more likely to be committed to customer-centric cultures and values.

III. EMPLOYEE HEROISM DURING THE TAJ ATTACK:

3.1 Frontline Staff Heroism: Risking Lives to Save Others

The heroism displayed by frontline staff during the 2008 Taj attack can be attributed to their inherent values and the company's acquisition strategy. Employees, recruited from smaller towns based on values like empathy and humility, exhibited extraordinary courage by re-entering the hotel to rescue more guests. Their selfless actions were a direct manifestation of the commitment to service ingrained in them through the recruitment process.

3.2 Managerial Staff Leadership: Presence of Mind in Crisis

Mallika Jagad, the banquet manager, exemplified the leadership that the Taj Group's acquisition policy aimed to nurture. Her ability to think quickly and instruct couples to separate in order to protect families during the attack showcased the depth of leadership and responsibility ingrained in employees. Her actions highlighted how values-driven recruitment can shape individuals into leaders even in the most challenging situations.

3.3 Top Management Dedication: Commitment Amid Personal Tragedy

Even at the top management level, the influence of the acquisition policy was evident. Karambir Singh Kang, the general manager, continued to fulfill his duty despite learning about his family's tragic fate during the attack. His dedication to his role showcased the impact of values-centric recruitment on creating leaders who prioritize their responsibility above personal circumstances.

IV. TRAINING PROGRAMS AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT DURING THE TAJ ATTACK:

The comprehensive training programs instituted by the Taj Group were pivotal in enabling employees to respond with remarkable effectiveness during the crisis. The rigorous 18-month training regimen, comprising technical skills, customer-handling abilities, and crisis management, proved instrumental. Telephone operators, well-versed in effective communication through their training, called each suite inside the hotel to alert guests about the unfolding situation. This proactive and organized response demonstrated the impact of training in maintaining composure under pressure and ensuring guest safety. Such actions highlighted the success of the training in preparing employees to handle unforeseen and high-stress scenarios.

V. CULTURAL SHIFT AND EMPLOYEE LEADERSHIP DURING THE TAJ ATTACK:

The Taj Group's transformative cultural shift towards empowering employees to prioritize guest satisfaction found poignant expression in the actions of Mallika Jagad, the banquet manager. Her presence of mind and exceptional leadership during the attack highlighted the profound impact of the company's efforts to foster values-driven leaders. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, she took charge and ingeniously instructed couples to separate within the room, ensuring the safety of families amidst the chaos. Her actions underscored her individual leadership and reflected the broader cultural ethos that encouraged employees to take responsibility and make thoughtful decisions in the face of adversity.

VI. RECOGNITION-AS-REWARD SYSTEM AND EMPLOYEE DEDICATION DURING THE TAJ ATTACK:

The Staff Appreciation and Recognition System (STARS) played a pivotal role in amplifying employee dedication during the Taj attack. Karambir Singh Kang, the general manager, embodied this dedication despite personal tragedy. Even after learning about

the loss of his own family within the hotel, he remained steadfast in his commitment to his duty. This unwavering dedication to the well-being of guests underscored the impact of a recognition system that not only acknowledged but celebrated employee contributions. Kang's actions served as a testament to the motivational influence of a system that values and appreciates the workforce.

VII. FINDINGS

The findings of this research underscore the critical role played by the Taj Group's HR policies in shaping the extraordinary response of its workforce during the 26/11 attack. The company's unique recruitment strategy, emphasizing values-driven candidates from smaller towns, provided a pool of employees naturally aligned with the service-oriented culture. The intensive training programs equipped staff to effectively handle crises, as evidenced by their quick thinking and communication during the attack. The Recognition-as-Reward System reinforced dedication, exemplified by the managerial staff's leadership amid personal tragedy.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The harrowing events of the 26/11 attack on Taj Hotel, Mumbai, provided a backdrop against which the Taj Group's HR policies demonstrated their profound impact. With the hotel hosting 1700 guests during the attack, the actions of the staff and management were nothing short of heroic. The alignment between the Taj Group's acquisition policy, training programs, and recognition initiatives and the responses of employees showcased a deep-rooted service culture that transcended adversity.

The values-centric approach to hiring, where individuals from smaller towns were selected for their empathy and humility, proved crucial in fostering a workforce that prioritized guest well-being above all else. The intensive training programs equipped employees to handle crises, as evidenced by their effective communication and quick thinking during the attack. The Recognition-as-Reward System played its part in reinforcing employee dedication, notably observed in the leadership displayed by managerial staff during the crisis.

In conclusion, the 26/11 attack at Taj Hotel, Mumbai, not only tested the hotel's preparedness but also underscored the pivotal role of HR policies in shaping organizational resilience. The amalgamation of recruitment strategies, training initiatives, and recognition practices demonstrated how values-driven approaches could manifest in heroic actions and exceptional leadership in the face of adversity.

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