



The influence of corporate culture and leadership style on the success of Four Season Hotels

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Abstract:

This paper examines the extent to which the success of Four Seasons Hotels can be attributed to its corporate culture and the leadership style of its founder, Isadore Sharp. Using a combination of primary and secondary data, the study delves into the company's organizational structure, leadership approach, and corporate culture to understand its impact on its success.



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INTRODUCTION

The desire for lavish lodging from vacationing families and corporate travelers has dramatically fueled the luxury hotel market. Luxury hotels are a competitive market with small market share; thus, companies must be innovative in gaining a competitive edge. The emergence of online accommodation booking services has accelerated market growth, with the market expected to grow from \$119.55 billion in 2021 to \$238.49 billion in 2028 at a CAGR of 10.4% in the forecast period [2021-2028] ("Luxury

Hotel Market"). What makes guests choose a particular luxury hotel over another and how a brand can successfully develop return clientele is an important consideration for managers within this market.

Increasing competition and other factors have determined how hotels function (Vohra). As the dynamic market continues to grow, other factors, such as the growing popularity of Airbnbs, affect the industry. One innovation adopted by Four Seasons in 2017 designed to enhance guest experience was the introduction of mobile messaging through multiple channels, such as KakaoTalk and WhatsApp. These messaging apps provide an additional conversation channel between employees and guests. In order to remove any possible language barrier, the service translates into more than 100 languages and can be used for restaurant reservations, recommendations, and nearby shopping to cater to guests (Williams). This focus on customer experience is part of the Four Seasons brand.

Four Seasons has transformed from a small motor hotel in downtown Toronto, Canada, to one of the world's foremost luxury hospitality companies (Faik). Thriving for more than 60 years, Four Seasons now has more than 100 properties in more than 40 countries (Sharp XV).. Throughout, this hospitality company has focused on putting the customer first.

The founder, past CEO and chairman, Isadore Sharp, has built Four Seasons on four pillars: quality, service, culture, and brand (Sharp XV). Four Seasons Hotel values its customers the most with its consistent service quality. These services are drawn on by corporate culture – culture cannot be mandated but essentially grows from within. Hence, another critical factor is the importance of corporate culture, organizational structure and leadership style in the success of Four Seasons. Therefore, this essay will explore the research question:

"To what extent can Four Seasons Hotel's success be attributed to its corporate culture and Isadore Sharp's leadership style?"

Methodology

Sources

This essay will utilize, for the most part, secondary resources regarding organizational structure, corporate culture and Sharp's leadership style. The sources consulted included academic journals, news articles, and databases, such as articles from ScienceDirect, Jstor, Harvard Business Review, Forbes and Sharp's Corporate bio. Primary research will be based on anecdotal feedback from returning guests and staff from Four Seasons, Seoul.

Industry experts will give an impression of how the hospitality company operates. Furthermore, this data will provide critical details to account for Four Seasons' success. Consultation with hotel users and staff will add experiential data, allowing for a more fulsome understanding of the impact of corporate culture and leadership style.

However, as news articles and anecdotal feedback include personal opinions, they can be seen as biased or outdated. Therefore, a wide variety of sources were consulted to combat possible publication biases.

Additionally, research was continuously carried out to prevent this, as planned in the Gantt Chart (Appendix 1: Gantt Chart).

Tools & Theories

Five business tools/theories will be applied in this essay: Matrix Organizational Structure, Situational Leadership Theory, the Blake Mouton Managerial Grid with the Tannenbaum & Schimif Continuum of Leaders, and Edgar H. Schein's corporate culture theory.

The Matrix Organizational Structure will be used to demonstrate how vital the various roles at Four Seasons are to the company and how all the positions in the business are intertwined. However, despite the advantages of using the Matrix Organizational Structure, such as providing balanced objectives, this tool does not consider the blurred lines of coordinating tasks and accountability (Stuckenbruck).

Black & Mouton's Managerial Grid model will be applied to understand the company's managerial style and situational leadership theory. The managerial grid is based on two dimensions, concern for people and result; this tool shows five management styles. A drawback of this tool is that it only

considers two factors, while many factors contribute to leadership style, causing this tool to be oversimplistic (Mind Tools Content Team). Additionally, the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum of Leadership will place Sharp's leadership style along the continuum based on the balance of authority and freedom between the leader and the subordinates ("Examining the Leadership "). However, this tool does not consider the changes in the leadership that the manager may have for different situations (McPheat). Lastly, Edgar H. Schein's corporate culture theory will be applied to qualify Sharps's impact on corporate culture.

Analyses

Success

Four Seasons Hotel has expanded from one small sized hotel in Toronto, Canada, to currently operating in 47 countries with 124 hotels and resorts. Additionally, in major cities such as Los Angeles, Four Seasons now offer 50 residential properties. Four Seasons cites 50 new projects in their growth plan, including expansion into private jet journeys in 2024 and luxury yachts in 2025 (Darma; "Four Seasons Private"; "New Openings."). The continued success of the Four Seasons is illustrated by their expansion into new markets.

Importance of Leadership and Culture

Leadership, culture, and organisational structure are three factors that are beneficial for the success of a hospitality company. Leadership style plays a significant role in the culture and employee environment, which contributes to one component that the customer is purchasing, the guest experience.

Leadership style is critical in the hospitality industry. When leadership is appropriately used, it can improve work relationships between employees and managers and organizational climate, and ameliorate service performance. A critical factor in a hospitality company's success is for leaders to inspire employees to achieve their full potential, be engaged, embrace change, and make quality decisions (Derya).

Culture is also a vital part of the hospitality industry. Two distinct cultures combine to create the environment of the hotel, the physical product as well as services delivered, and it is this

Situational leadership style is a leadership style which is based on the demands or circumstances of the business (Arenas). This style permits combined strategies in order to achieve the best leadership style depending on the situation (Walls). In order to become an effective leader, you must be able to recognize your subordinate needs and adapt your leadership style to address their issues. Sharp's philosophy leads to flexibility in interacting with staff and responding to situations according to need rather than a set style of leadership; however, he has consistently enforced with the whole company his Golden Rule: to treat others as you wish to be treated. Sharp states, "The Golden Rule guides our interaction with our guests, our business partners and investors, but most importantly - with each other"(Tuite). Sharp's Golden Rule shapes the employees' actions within the Four Seasons team and their actions towards the guests. Through this, Sharp shaped the way this hospitality business operates into always putting the guest first, no matter what. Additionally, Sharp believed that key decisions include "Focus on managing only medium-sized hotels of exceptional quality; to manage, rather than own, those hotels; and to make service the brand's distinguishing edge" (Faik). The implication here is that Sharp prioritizes guest experience and the building of a brand of service over ownership and the number and size of hotels as a measure of success. This quote depicts that Issy Sharp's priority is to always make the guests' experience the best during their stay and not the size or number of hotels that there are. This belief resonates throughout the business, making the business unique. Due to this, Sharp was able to transpire a clear message to all employees, making all hotels follow the same concepts. Sharp's motto of the golden rule applying to staff and guests is an integral part of how The culture of this hotel prioritizes guest experience. Guest experience is intimately impacted by their interactions with staff and the atmosphere of the hotel created by the staff and their interactions.

The Blake Mouton Managerial Grid (Managerial Grid) (Figure 2) compares a leader's taskcenteredness to their person-centeredness and determines five possible combinations and the leadership styles they create. This tool analyses and places Sharp's leadership style according to concern for people and

results. This is essential as leaders who inspire employees to achieve their full potential are crucial for the success of a hospitality company (Mind Tools Content Team).



Figure 2: Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid

(Mind Tools Content Team)

On the Managerial Grid, Sharp takes on management and leadership similar to a "Team Management" approach; his concern is for people and results. This is one of the most effective leadership styles as it creates leaders who are enthusiastic about their work and go above and beyond for the individuals with whom they collaborate. Team Managers are inspirational figures for their team who also ensure that all employees understand the organisation's purpose. The employees serving under this type of Team Manager feel that they are both respected and empowered and are committed to achieving their goals. Sharp's belief that: "Each of us needs a sense of dignity, pride and satisfaction in what we do. Because satisfying our guests depends on the united efforts of many, we are most effective when we work together cooperatively, respecting each other's contribution and importance" ("Mission Statement") is effectively served through this model. Anecdotal evidence gathered from returning guests clearly states that they choose the Four Seasons specifically "because of the service" and "atmosphere", "everyone is happy and always greeting you in a nice manner". They sense that "people are there because they want to be there" (Appendix 2; "Returning Four Seasons"). These guests are able to experience this as all employees understand the mission of the Four Seasons' brand and feel respected and empowered to do their jobs.

The Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum of Leadership (Continuum) places one's leadership style based on how much freedom and authority is used (Figure 3). The Continuum depicts a range of actions connected to the manager's level of power and the amount of flexibility accessible to subordinates in making decisions. On the spectrum between the two extremes of authoritarian and free rein, a wide number of leadership styles are presented (Juneja).



Figure 3: Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum of Leadership (Tannenbaum)

(Tannenbaum)

On the Continuum, Sharp acts by the Manager permit subordinates to function within limits defined by superiors (Figure 3). Sharp focuses on the behavior point that is the more subordinate-centered end of the Continuum, meaning that the focus is towards the subordinates and on "what they are interested in, how they look at things, how they feel about them" (Tannenbaum). Entrusting managers of the hotels with a set of guidelines, such as the four pillars and the Golden Rule, ensures his vision is enacted. The management team cooperates to identify and diagnose problems and develop alternative procedures for solving them. The only constraints directly imposed on the group by the organization are those specified by the team's boss's superior. This is significant as it allows the employees to develop a sense of creativity and innovation to generate solutions for the business. Additionally, the subordinates are responsible for some of the decision-making, allowing employees to seek the best possible solution to a problem and permitting an examination of one's potential. Subsequently, it conveys a sense of involvement and worth for the given opportunity. Employees pursue opportunities to learn new skills and knowledge, thus allowing them to take the lead and propose solutions, which drives a sense of competence and personal growth among the subordinates (Bhuvanaiah). As a result, the Four Seasons

employees achieve a sense of purpose due to Sharp's leadership style on the continuum. One Four Season employee revealed she and her colleagues "love working at the Four Seasons. The support that I get from superiors is nothing like the other hotels that I have worked at" (Appendix 3; "Various Staff"). Conversations with other staff members echoed her sentiments. This contributes to Four Seasons' success: "engaged employees lead to a healthy organization as they are satisfied, committed, innovative and highly performing, with optimal physical and mental health" (Bhuvanaiah).

Based on the analysis, Sharp's leadership style is situational leadership and Team Management on the Managerial Grid, with the highest degree of subordinate-centered leadership on the continuum. Sharp's ability to adjust his leadership to respond to different circumstances ensured that the best outcome would be achieved. Sharp's choice to build strong teams, to ensure the Golden Rule motto applies equally to staff as to guests, his ensuring staff feels valued and building caring relationships, is an integral part of Sharp's leadership style. Building cohesion among staff through focus on a common motto, feeling valued and informed (Figure 1: Simple Matrix Organisation), impacts interactions with guests, contributing to an exceptional service performance. Sharp's leadership style, therefore, is a factor that contributed to Four Seasons Success.

Organizational Structure

The organizational structure of Four Seasons is relevant to the research question as it demonstrates Isadore Sharp's role in the company and the importance of various departments.

The Matrix Organizational Structure (Matrix) was derived from the need to be capable of managing very large, complex programs, projects or problems as individual departments have a tough time tackling very large challenges as they fail to see the big picture and tend to sub-optimize or tackle the problem inside their own discipline. The Matrix allows multidisciplinary units, whose employees are from multiple departments of a hierarchical organization, that strives to maximize the project's strengths while minimizing its flaws (Stuckenbruck). The Matrix is represented in one of its simplest forms in Figure 1.

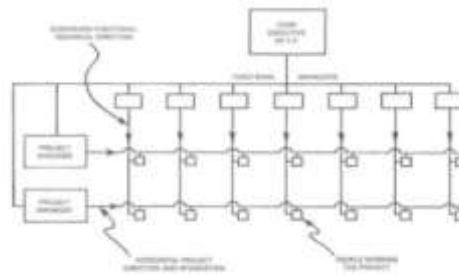


Figure 1: Simple Matrix Organisation
(Stuckenbruck)

The Matrix permits information flow as there is both horizontal and vertical flow. The horizontal flow permits project information to flow from one department to another, while the vertical flow permits detailed information to flow from one project to another (Stuckenbruck).

At the Four Seasons, the daily ritual of the morning meeting is a clear demonstration of the Matrix. During these morning meetings, it is clear that the department heads are there for a single reason, the guests; egos are disregarded in the meeting. For most cities, the guest relation manager, the equivalent of a department head, gives a recap on the guest staying: new arrivals, extended stay, VIPs and special attention guests. The guest relations manager then verifies with all the department heads that everything is ready for the guests. The next area of discussion is the mistakes that occurred the day before - the Glitch Report. All the departments have a file with a detailed layout of what went wrong and the steps that have been taken to correct this glitch. All the department heads responsible will be listened to by the others; as a result, each department in the hotel will be aware of what happened and who the affected guests were (Sharp 231-232). This is an example of horizontal flow as all the projects and problems are "flowed" from one department to another during these morning meetings. This demonstrates that there is a strong relationship between all departments and employees, which enables Four Seasons to provide the guests with a seamless experience as all the employees are able to cater to the needs of the guests. For example, if a guest requested anything in particular such as extra pillows, only water in a mini bar or even a special dietary request, all departments are made aware and this can assist to ensure requests are fulfilled and the experience of the guest is exemplary. Through this

information flow, the guest feels accommodated and justified in choosing Four Seasons as their hotel choice.

The organizational structure that a hotel follows has an impact on its success. At Four Seasons' the Matrix is used. The department heads and employees are aware of all the "glitches" going on within the hotel and all the guests staying at the hotel at that current moment as well as future guests. As the employees in all departments know the guests, a sense of belonging for the guest is created, which makes the guest want to return. Therefore, the success of Four Seasons can be attributed to its organizational structure as it enabled the guest to be provided with the best possible experience. Corporate Culture Sharp had a lot of power and a strong presence at Four Seasons, and because of this, the corporate culture still revolves around his business philosophy and vision. To this day, on the Four Seasons website, Sharp's vision is there: "We demonstrate our beliefs most meaningfully in the way we treat each other and by the example we set for one another. In all our interactions with our guests, customers, business associates and colleagues, we seek to deal with others as we would have them deal with us" ("Mission Statement"). This vision is the base of the corporate culture - all employees are aware of it and follow it on a daily basis.

According to Edgar H. Schein's theory, there are three levels in organizational culture: artefacts espoused values and shared basic assumptions. Artifacts are an organization's visible and behavioural components that are simple to see but not always easy to understand. Espoused values are the principles that the company believes are essential and to which the workforce is devoted. Lastly, shared basic assumptions represent the most profound level of culture -- the culture that is invisible and difficult to identify because it is so deeply embedded in the organization. Rather than professed beliefs and ideologies, this displays the actual values displayed via behaviour. Shien believes that this level of culture drives a business.

The corporate culture present at Four Seasons is similar to Schein's theory - culture is a result of the behaviour of individuals. This is first seen during the Four Seasons hiring process. Four Seasons focuses on hiring more for attitude than experience. As the culture at Four Seasons resonates through the

behaviour of individuals, the presented attitude of the employee triumphs over the number of years of their experience (Sharp 229).

Furthermore, Simon Sinek, a British-American author and inspirational speaker, discussed his experience at Four Seasons in Las Vegas during his talk show, "Most Leaders Don't Even Know the Game They're In". Sinek first points out that the critical thing that makes Four Seasons so different from other hotels is because of the people who work there. He states, "If you walk past somebody at the Four Seasons and they say hello to you, you get the feeling that they actually wanted to say hello to you, it is not that somebody told them that you have to say hello" (Sinek, 2016). This portrays that the employees understand the values and the Golden Rule that Four Seasons bases itself on. Moreover, during Sinek's time at the Four Seasons Las Vegas, he questioned his barista about his thoughts working for the chain. Sinek described Noah as fantastic, friendly, fun and engaging. When asked how he felt about his job, Noah replied quickly, "I love my job". Then, Sinek asked a follow-up question, "What is that the Four Seasons is doing that would make you say to me I love my job?", Noah replied, "Throughout the day managers will walk past me and ask me how I'm doing, if there's anything that I need to do my job better, not just my manager but any manager." Noah goes on to make a comparison to his past work experience at Caesars Palace: "the managers are trying to make sure we're doing everything right, they try to catch us when we do things wrong. When I go to work there I like to keep my head under the radar and just get through the day so I can get my paycheck. Here at Four Seasons I feel I can be myself" (Sinek). This is the same person in entirely different situations. But at Four Seasons where Sharp's Golden Rule is followed and a culture of employee wellness is created, the employees have a sense of belonging and are happy to be at work. Subsequently, their positivity to be at work impacts the guests' experience and makes them feel like they are at home, just like in Simon Sinek's experience.

Four Seasons Hotel has spent over a decade establishing what they considered the most substantial culture in their industry. Four Seasons was quick to create such a culture that incorporates a clear corporate vision that all employees know almost instinctively the right thing to do and how to do it

(Sharp 229). Like Shein's theory, instead of professing and stating their values and ideologies, Four Seasons embodies their values through their daily behavior and attitudes towards the guests and their fellow employees. Consequently, the guests are able to receive an extraordinary experience - driving the success of Four Seasons.

Conclusion

Sharp's choices to follow a situational leadership style and to focus on building strong autonomous teams has a direct impact on the success of Four Seasons. Sharp's concern was for both people and product; he ensures that both guests and employees have everything they need for an enjoyable stay and to execute their jobs. Furthermore, Sharp's ability to adapt his leadership to diverse situations played a role in guaranteeing the best outcome was reached.

Sharp's leadership and beliefs made a lasting impact on the business and the relationships in the business.

Building Strong autonomous teams is an integral part of the brand's success. The daily practice and display of the four pillars (quality, service, culture, brand) are executed in the ritual of the morning meeting, contributing to the Four Seasons brand. All employees are aware of all the current situations within the hotel enabling them to be able to cater to the guests' needs no matter what department they are in. This contributes to Four Seasons success through creating a sense of belonging for guests.

Applying Shein's Theory of corporate culture illustrates how vital the corporate culture was to Four Seasons Hotel's success. Instead of claiming and declaring its principles and ideas, Four Seasons lives them, demonstrating them through their everyday behaviour and attitudes toward both visitors and coworkers. The people working at the hotel make the difference, not the architecture, interior design, or luxurious beds.

This paper has limitations. As analyses are heavily based on qualitative data and include subjective grading, the conclusion may not be an accurate representation and may include bias. These limitations could be improved through consultation with different stakeholders and experts. Additionally, analyses of different potential impacts on Four Season's success, other than organizational structure, leadership style and corporate culture, could have helped to answer the "To what extent" part of the question.

Other factors such as marketing and the financials may have contributed to their success. Further study to include consideration of the competitive market and disruptors, such as Airbnb and technology development, would allow for a more fulsome understanding of the factors contributing to the success of the Four Seasons and the extent of impact of leadership style and corporate culture.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Gantt Chart

< Gantt Chart for the Extended Essay >

Task	April	May	June	July	August	September	October
Research Questions Submission	█						
Background Research	█						
First Reflection	█						
Confirmation of Tools/Theories		█					
Research	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Outline			█				
Introduction			█				
Methodology			█				
Main Body 1				█			
Main Body 2				█			
Main Body 3				█			
Conclusion					█		
Draft Submission					█		
Second reflection						█	
Feedback & improvement						█	█
Final submission							█

Appendix 2: Interview

< Interview with Returning Four Seasons Guests for the Extended Essay >

Extended Essay Interview Questions

The following interview is being conducted on October 19th. To clarify, the information contained in this interview will remain confidential and be utilized for academic purposes only.

Hello, my name is and I am a student studying at I am currently writing a paper on the Four Seasons Hotel. You have previously mentioned that you are a returning guest at the Four Seasons Hotel.

Questions:

1. Why do you stay at the Four Seasons?

Because nobody does it better. I have previously stayed at other hotels and they are too large, too impersonal, there is no greeting by the name or no "welcome back" or "nice to see you again". Just not much personal touch at other hotels.

At the Four Seasons everyone is happy and always greeting you in a nice manner. People are there because they want to be there. There is always consistent service, food and cleanliness no matter the Four Seasons location.

2. What makes you go back?

When you've stayed at the Four Seasons twice, you know what to expect and it really feels like you are going home. You truly become part of their family and you are not just another guest but a member of a family. This just shows how well they do it.

Because of the size of the hotel and the number of guests, the staff is able to get to know you and can track your preference. For example, they know I'm gluten free and before I arrive they make sure that there are gluten free options for me. And if you want your cappuccino with soy in the morning they will remember that for the next morning.

I specifically go to the Four Seasons because of the service and atmosphere.

Appendix 3: Interview

<Interview with Four Seasons Employees for the Extended Essay >

Extended Essay Interview Questions

The following interview is being conducted on October 8th. To clarify, the information contained in this interview will remain confidential and be utilized for academic purposes only.

Hello, my name is and I am a student studying at I am currently writing a paper on the Four Seasons Hotel and as you are employees at Four Seasons I have a question for you.

Questions:

1. How do you like working at Four Seasons?

I love working at the Four Seasons. The support that I get from superiors is nothing like the other hotels that I have worked at and I can definitely speak on the team's behalf that they feel the same. Personally, I previously worked in the United-States at different hotel chains and I can tell you that the culture at those hotels was definitely not as inviting, friendly and supportive

