



Hotel Industry Movers & Shakers

Thulani Xhali

General Manager • Stenden Hotel, Leeuwarden, Netherlands

“The practice of hospitality is a delicate blend of art and science,” says Thulani Xhali, General Manager of the Stenden Hotel in the Netherlands. “It also requires one’s full effort, one’s entire heart and soul, for success,” he adds.

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Having grown up in South Africa during the apartheid era, Thulani credits his success in part to his family’s commitment to his future. “My family was very sensitive to the new opportunities Black people had post-apartheid, as South Africa transitioned into the Rainbow Nation period in 1994,” Thulani says. “They made significant sacrifices to make sure my brother and I had the best education possible,” he remembers.

Thulani recognized this sacrifice and in response, his ambition revealed itself in high school. “I started an events company after school,” he says. “Much of it was motivated by wanting to throw parties for fun, but I also made enough pocket money so that I could do things like buy my own sneakers instead of asking my mom for the money,” he remembers. He also credits this experience with his decision to pursue a Bachelor’s of Commerce with a focus in International Hospitality Management at Stenden South Africa, a branch of Stenden University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. Although the school was quite expensive, Thulani’s family agreed that the price was worth the opportunities the degree and experience would provide.

Valuable life lessons

At university, Thulani credits a particular professor, or coach, with a lesson that he says made his career. During his first year, he was doing well in class, he was captain of the football team, and he was involved in the school council.

“But,” he admits, “I was also partying and carrying on a bit. I wasn’t giving it my best effort.”

One day, his coach called him into her office. He recalls, “‘Thulani, you’re wasting time,’ she said, ‘I believe in you. At test time, you’re getting some of the highest marks. But for all of your other contributions, it seems like you’re just getting through it.’ She invested in me, and made sure that I understood I wasn’t working as hard as I could or should,” he says.

From then on he gave school his absolute best, which ended up saving him when his dad told him at the end of the year that the family wouldn’t be able to afford tuition for the next year. He approached his coach, worried he would have to drop out of school. “After I redoubled my efforts in the classroom, she became my best advocate,” Thulani says, “and because of her advocacy, a member of the board of governors awarded me with a scholarship that allowed me to finish school.”

Because of this experience, Thulani says, “I now find it completely unacceptable not to put a genuine effort into everything you do.”

A young GM

After Thulani graduated cum laude in 2009, it was time to get to work. He started with an internship at the No5 by Mantis, a boutique art hotel in Port Elizabeth, and quickly worked his way up to become the food and beverage manager. He then landed his first general manager position at the age of 24, working in hotels in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria. “This was a challenging role, but it was a wonderful experience and I had great support,” Thulani recalls.

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Four years later in January of 2016, he found himself accepting a general manager position at Stenden Hotel, the property in Leeuwarden where Stenden University students in the Netherlands gain practical experience in hospitality. “Stenden Hotel is a learning hotel that operates as a full service 4-star property, complete with catering facilities and events services,” says Thulani. “It has been wonderful to come full circle in this way, to give back to an experience that once provided such opportunity for me,” he adds.



Bridging the generation gap

As a successful young person in hospitality, Thulani has some observations regarding challenges for the future of the business: “I’ve stood in rooms with well decorated and seasoned hoteliers, GMs of big chains, all talking about the problem with millennials. The question being asked is, ‘How do we fix them?’”

Thulani posits that bridging this generation gap in both the practice and management of hospitality is one of the primary challenges facing the industry today. “I hate the term millennials,” he laughs, “but as millennials, we came of age in a different climate than the previous generation, and as such we want different things.

“I think there will be a shift toward a luxurious feel in hospitality. The relative price of a house or land is much greater today, so instead, young people are spending their money on experiences. That presents a great opportunity for hospitality - our want of experiences will, in the long term, create a resurgence of the luxury climate,” he says.

Finding the science in the art

One of the things Thulani has learned during his tenure in hospitality: “It’s true that most everything is about hostmanship and generosity. People will come to you if you are warm and kind. But, sometimes that’s not enough.

“I’m a process person. I know that hospitality is a beautiful expression of creativity. It’s an art. But, I really do try to find some science in this art. It’s important understand the processes for guests and for your employees and trigger the right

responses to those processes. I don’t think this art is without reason,” he says.

For hoteliers who want to take their careers to new heights, Thulani says overall, success in hospitality is about finding the right combination of empathy and data. “Look at what motivates people to figure out what they need. Find that blend of science and art, that blend of data-based management and personal one-to-one understanding,” he says. He has three pieces of advice:

1. Trust the numbers. Numbers don’t usually lie. Inform your decision making with data points, and measure your results quantitatively as much as possible. This can be difficult with qualitative data like guest opinions, but a guest feedback solution that includes sentiment analysis can help you analyze this kind of qualitative information in a quantitative way.

2. Take time to invest in yourself. Sometimes we want to rush to the next career level, but it’s important to slow down and dedicate time and effort to education, training, and personal growth.

3. Listen. When it comes to customer service, management, and taking advice from mentors, people are happy to share their experiences. Let them speak, take it all in, and learn from it.

Revinat Heroes is a series of articles profiling successful hoteliers who are moving the hospitality industry into the future.