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## Developing and Maintaining a Service Culture

### 'At Your Service' Spotlight: Isadore Sharp, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

With a name like Sharp, it goes without saying that Isadore 'Issy' Sharp has some sound business acumen. It has been his Golden Rule that has given Four Seasons a remarkable record of customer service excellence for half a century. In his quest to be tops for service, Sharp's modus operandi is to 'treat others as you wish to be treated yourself' and this considerate culture has permeated all levels of Four Seasons' personnel.

After a background in architecture and construction, Sharp identified a niche in the hospitality industry: stressing quality service in mid-size properties with luxurious appurtenances. He had studied architecture at Ryerson and worked with his father in Max Sharp & Son, the family renovation business. Then in 1960, he branched out to form Four Seasons Hotels, with a motel in downtown Toronto opening for business in 1961. The family element remained at Four Seasons, with Sharp at the helm and his wife, Rosalie Wise Sharp, the lead interior designer.

Aided by seasoned hotelier, Ian Munroe, Sharp was the first to introduce shampoo in bathrooms as well as value-added extras, such as 24-hour room service, bathrobes,



Isadore Sharp. Photo courtesy of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

laundry service, two-line phones, a desk, shoe repair and 24-hour secretarial service. His benchmark for excellence back then was London's Dorchester Hotel which inspired him to go one step further with the Four Seasons Inn on the Park in 1970. Winning 'hotel of the year', it was London's first modern hotel, even incorporating air conditioning in order to satisfy international visitors.

It is consistency that has paid off for Four Seasons which has benefited from the staunch leadership and unswerving vision of Sharp. His philosophy has always been that service is more important than fixtures and fittings. The Four Seasons' website ascribes its success to Sharp's Golden Rule: 'The reason for our success is no secret. It comes down to one single principle that transcends time and geography, religion and culture. It's the Golden Rule – the simple idea that if you treat people well, the way you would like to be treated, they will do the same.'

But this was no business plan, according to Sharp. It was instead a moral thread that has lasted from the outset, remaining steadfast through all his expansion plans. One of the reasons for this consistency was the early decision to manage only mid-sized luxury hotels. This is the company's first pillar: 'We will only operate medium-sized hotels of exceptional quality with an objective to be the best,' Sharp emphasizes. He has kept true to his word and, having no other business diversification, has ensured a sturdy brand. The second Four Seasons' core value is about service. 'True luxury will be defined not by architecture or décor, but by service. So we must make the quality of our service our distinguishing feature and a competitive advantage.' Sharp has made a science out of anticipating peoples' needs. Third comes the company's world renowned culture, based on the simple premise of the Golden Rule, which guides employees' actions towards its guests, business partners and with each other. The fourth is brand, reflecting a decision to manage rather than own its hotels: 'We will grow as a management company and build a brand name synonymous with quality'. This credo has always been accompanied by external quality control audits resulting in nearly 300 operating standards which are under regular assessment.

At Four Seasons, recruiting staff is primarily a personality search. Interviews take place over four sessions with in-depth behavioral assessments. Sharp believes that attitude is more important than experience in the first place as he can provide polished training once he has the right type of highly motivated employee. The interviews look for body posture, eye contact, communication skills, attitude to service, self-esteem, word choice, interaction with public. He looks for 'naturals' who can provide innate rather than scripted service. When the Four Seasons Hotel New York opened, only 400 staff were chosen out of 30,000 original applicants. Sharp's input doesn't stop at hiring, though. Attempting to increase longevity of employees, he promotes career planning within the company, employee benefits such as complimentary room nights, retirement plans and awards for those who go beyond the call of duty. Empowering his staff has paid off as on average his senior executives stay 25 years with Four Seasons.

What Sharp's personal service culture has garnered for him in business terms is an increasing customer base of repeat guests who perceived greater value for money because of all the thoughtful extra touches – such as the full concierge services, valet services, 24-hour room service, twice daily housekeeping, overnight valet service. Sharp astutely discovered exactly the right ratio between hotel size, price and amenities offered in order to provide a luxurious experience with the highest possible standards of service and additional amenities – meaning the customer would be willing to pay more, come back again and recommend it to friends.

Since its first motor hotel opened in Canada back in 1961, Four Seasons has expanded to employ around 36,000 staff with 88 hotels in 35 countries plus a division for residential property management. The group has been given many awards, including more Five Diamond AAA Awards each year for the past decade than any other hotel company. In 2004, after 11 consecutive years of being one of *Fortune* magazine's top 100 companies to work for in the USA, it was inducted into the magazine's Hall of Fame, earning the Great Place to Work' Respect Award two years later. Also in 2006, the special 30th anniversary edition of the *Robb Report* celebrated Four Seasons as one of 'the most exclusive brands of all time,' ranking alongside Rolls-Royce, Cartier, Louis Vuitton and Château Lafite Rothschild. Four Seasons properties are consistently named as top hotels by *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Gallivanter's Guide* and *Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report*, *Travel & Leisure* and *Institutional Investor*.

Sharp himself was the recipient of the American Lodging Investment Summit's Lifetime Achievement Award 2005. He won the Canadian Hotel Industry Icon Award the same year and has received three honorary doctorates. Now in his eighties, he has already paved the way for Four Seasons to perpetuate after his retirement. Rather than keep the company public, the board of directors sold to Bill Gates' Cascade Investment LLC, Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal's Kingdom Hotels International and the Sharp family in 2007 for a reported \$3.7 billion. The new owners' combined wealth of more than \$75 billion should ensure the company continues to grow in the way Sharp has planned. Currently as Chairman, Sharp stayed on initially as CEO until the appointment of Kathleen Taylor in 2010 as President and CEO. 'Four Seasons today is a brand that people equate with exceptional experiences and the lifelong memories that come with them,' says Issy on the company website. 'The business decisions we've made over the past five decades ensure that Four Seasons will continue to hold this esteemed position for decades to come.'

### Sources

Jackson and Naipaul (2008); [www.fourseasons.com/about\\_us/awards\\_and\\_accolades.html](http://www.fourseasons.com/about_us/awards_and_accolades.html); [http://www.fourseasons.com/about\\_four\\_seasons/service-culture/](http://www.fourseasons.com/about_four_seasons/service-culture/); correspondence with Rozvita Gabric, Administrative Assistant, PR, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, 24 August 2012.