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The Impact of the Toxic Worker in Resort Hotel Operations

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This conference presentation will be a discussion regarding my findings from research undertaken to look at the effects of toxic personality in mountain resort hotel operations. Over the years, there has been much literature and research on both finding and developing excellent personnel within the workforce, those employees that help to drive a successful organizational performance. This research is fully supported by studies, models and theories within the tourism management literature that argues that employee attributes are an essential part of creating business-specific advantages (Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan, & Buyruk, 2010). There has been much less examination of how to manage those workers who can actually be harmful to an organization. This type of worker, in its most extreme manifestation, can in the long run cost an organization millions of dollars in lost reputation, litigation disputes, and lost productivity, making it a priority for organisations to be able to recognise and respond to worker toxicity. Kusy and Holloway (2009) describe the costs of toxic behaviour within an organisation as being similar to an iceberg: a small percentage is immediately apparent in the toxic person's behaviours, the tip of the ice-berg. The ripple effect within the organisation spreading into lost productivity, low morale, stress induced illness, and employee turnover, is represented by the majority of the ice-berg hidden under water. Resort management practice is another area where there has been limited investigative research; this is an aspect of the hospitality industry that has a wide range of unique management challenges. The size of the plant – usually extensive and often including staff accommodation – and the remoteness of the location are just two examples of distinctive operational issues unique to managing a resort. I have undertaken this research as there is no evidence in the literature studying the management of deviant workers in resorts nor any explanatory examination of resort managers' understanding of and practices for dealing with toxic personalities within their workplaces.

I gathered data by conducting semi-structured interviews with people who are either currently work, or have in the last five years worked as manager/supervisors, in one of the following three Western Canadian resorts: Whistler, Sun Peaks or Jasper. I chose these parameters as people who have worked in a supervisory or management role will have dealt with human resource issues as part of their responsibilities, therefore increasing the likelihood that they may have had a direct working relationship with someone exhibiting toxic personality. These managers will also have a "big-picture" view of some of the issues inherent with resort operations. The three resorts have been chosen as they are remote Alpine towns, situated in Alberta and British Columbia; all have a large target-market within a four hour driving distance, and they are not so remote that they are boating or fly-in access only. They all provide a four-season resort experience – with the main season being the winter for Sun Peaks and Whistler – and have extensive staff accommodations, meaning the majority of staff both work and live together.

The findings clearly demonstrate that all 11 interviewees had a good understanding of what a toxic personality is, had experience of working with a toxic person, the negative influence of toxic workers in the resort environment, and the financial impact on human

resource management due to recruitment costs and loss of productivity. Some of the operational issues specific to resorts already make it a very distinctive and challenging segment, within the hospitality industry. An impending labour shortage has long been recognised by the tourism industry, which will only be intensified in resorts that are situated in remote areas, with a need for seasonal workers, high cost of living and low unemployment rates (Taylor & Finley, 2009). The combination of these challenges and the findings that toxic personality can be a cause of high staff turnover rates, lowering of morale and loss of productivity shows a need for this overlooked HRM issue to be covered within Hospitality and tourism management curriculums.

References

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