

## Pandemic Response Helps Expand Horizons for Human Resources

By [Valerie Bolton](#), Vice President of Human Resources, McNeill Hotel Company | March 26, 2023



*Co-authored by Deanne Frame, Director of Human Resources, McNeill Hotel Company*

We never truly know what we are capable of until we are tested. In the case of the pandemic, organization, preparation, our intrinsic skills-and good measures of patience and empathy-came face to face with the unknown and the unexpected.

Working in hospitality, we were familiar with dramatic changes of fortune due to economic cycles, natural disasters, and other current events.

We were experienced with solving financial structures and managing debt obligations; how to adjust staffing levels due to room demand; as well as taking on the challenge of lodging competitors, be it brands new to the market, independent

properties or short-term rental formats like Airbnb and VRBO.

It became clear early in the pandemic, this was much different. The physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual tolls on us as people was unprecedented. A novel disease process disrupted jobs and life schedules, altered education for many of our children, and added additional stress and worry for our aging parents or other relatives. Remote learning and social distancing entered our everyday vocabularies. Through our response, we learned much about ourselves, while demonstrating the skills, resolve and resiliency of our industry.

In this article, we will consider some aspects of the pandemic through the lens of human resources. We will be able to reflect on what we accomplished in such extenuating circumstances. We will be able to speak to what we learned, the adjustments we made, and the birth of new or evolved strategies to propel us forward.

### **Never Stop Investing in People**

Fortunately for our organization, many of our branded properties were in excellent locations that proved irreplaceable during the pandemic, as well as secondary cities with strong, multi-demand drivers. Moreover, McNeill Hotel Company had always been a people first organization since its inception in 2014. This was the philosophy of two second-generation hoteliers with a combined total of over 60 years' experience; Phillip McNeill, Jr. and Mark Ricketts.

With a distinct understanding of our mission of being people serving people, we were positioned well to build trust and cohesiveness between Human Resources and Operations. This allowed us to be more prepared and nimbler in navigating the pandemic.

As an organization that is focused on people first, the partnership between operations and human resources had a strong foundation that was able to expand during the pandemic rather than fracture. Quickly establishing best practices and very open lines of communication between the property leadership team and above property support teams was essential for our organization to thrive. This communication allowed us to bridge the needs between the human factor side of our business and the operational needs. Thus, continuing our people first strategy in an active crisis, human resources partners acted as the direct liaison between the associates' concerns and the general managers. There were standing calls to each individual General Manager daily to capture information that needed to be relayed and sentiments that needed to be received.

We didn't stop there. In a time of crisis, our leadership team made a conscious effort to provide stability through assistance with benefit premiums, creative measures to equitably divide hours among all of the full-time McNeill Hotel Company associates, and continued to educate ourselves on the recommended approaches crucial for creating a safe work environment.

As we identified the needs of the associates, we quickly realized that, at times, the on-property leaders needed another level of management to support their operation. This was evident through coverage needs at the hotel in every department. We were experiencing, like others, elevated callouts, and extended absences for many associates. We knew we had to take measures to provide coverage in all areas of the hotel.

During this time, we created a new area general manager position. We added five leaders from our internal bench. Each area general manager managed their own assigned property, but, also, had "consulting" responsibilities for several nearby properties. Their assignment was to help general managers as issues arose in conjunction with navigating the pandemic by adding to the existing resources from our department and the executive leaders of operations. When possible, these area general managers would make on-site visits to these secondary properties of responsibility, helping infuse our "we are all in this together" spirit.

This was a great way of spotlighting up-and-coming leaders in our organization. Eventually, as our organization has grown, we have re-established the Regional Director of Operations position. We are proud to note that two of the area general managers have now advanced to become regional directors of operations.

We have several leaders who truly emerged through one of the toughest time periods of hospitality and endured the challenges. For example, we have a newly promoted assistant general manager at one of our properties. She started her career with us in the laundry department, then progressed into an executive housekeeping role, and from there she has completed many stretch projects. She has taken this as an opportunity to instill in her team the importance of arriving on time, being a team player and believing in self growth. To be able to share a success story of a leader developing and promoting from a difficult experience is indispensable. In her interview, she shared how much she values our culture and how we truly have an open-door policy.

This is no secret for McNeill Hotel Company. We have high standards for our leaders regarding facilitating an open-door policy. This is not to evade the standard chain of command but to provide an opportunity to share feedback, ideas, and concerns with above property leaders safely. Creating this open door allows for our people to seek feedback, receive mentorship, and leave their thumbprint on new initiatives. This existed prior to the pandemic but flourished during and after the pandemic because of the connections made with our reoccurring calls.

Our growth organically developed into a bench system at a time when our industry is struggling to compete with other industries for talent. This is a huge talent win for McNeill Hotel Company. A win accomplished by supporting and providing an outlet for our current and prospective teams.

### **Attracting People New to Hospitality**

We find ourselves asking: what's next? How do we continue to attract new hospitality team members among the modern workforce in a post-pandemic era? Are we sensitive to executive and associate priorities? What are some of the accommodations we must make to recruit and retain new people while fulfilling our organizational objectives and protecting our unique culture?

We are thrilled to see the trends curve in our favor as some of the long-tenured hospitality veterans are starting to return to the industry. In the meantime, we've set our sights on candidates with the right core competencies from other industries beyond the hotel sector.

Naturally, there are service industries like the restaurant business that have many similarities to hotel hospitality in terms of serving guests, having comparable staffing needs, and shift work. Surprisingly, we are also having success from people with healthcare and educational backgrounds. If they are people focused, we can teach them the hotel pieces and reinforce their interpersonal skills.

### **It's on Us**

Most importantly, many organizations like yours are focusing intensely on understanding and enhancing "what is attractive about us," to bring talented people into hospitality, both former hotel people and, new ones alike. Our one key goal: build bench strength, which allows for staffing responsiveness within individual properties, and when we add hotels to our portfolio in the future.

From a practical standpoint, we are highlighting work-life balance, how we can introduce some aspects of work from home or a flexible work week at the property level, and ways to refine compensation such as paying hourly workers at more frequent intervals, which is popular right now, and developing a rapid response force of hourly workers.

The latter, a street team, can fill in at existing properties to cover temporary staffing gaps or allow for more flexible scheduling, including for vacation or short-notice personal needs; as well as assist in ramping up new properties. This is a reciprocal relationship that provides coverage for the organization but also development for the employee. Team members willing to be a part of the street team can gain exposure to different hotel markets, hotel types, leaders, and brands resulting organically in the experience needed for later roles and promotions.

This is something partly learned from the pandemic, as we would take advantage of contracted management "temps," which allowed us to give general managers, assistant general managers, and similar personnel short breaks during those stressful times. We expect to see more of these concepts in hospitality, aided by technology for scheduling and administration, solidified by a strong organizational culture.

At another level, it's incumbent on the human resources discipline to understand and perpetuate the good habits that came out of the pandemic, as we worked with equal measures of diligence and compassion to make our people feel respected, valued, and heard during a time when the entire country was in distress.

Similarly, since the pandemic, we feel that human resources has become more valued as a truly progressive discipline within the

hospitality industry. Certainly, we are attentive to traditional responsibilities like benefits administration, and regulatory compliance with employment law. Efforts are coming to fruition to be seen as a strategic partner and problem-solver, helping work across all departments within our organization.

The human resources challenges in the hospitality world only look to become greater given the evolving demographics of American society, the changing nature of work, and the competitive landscape. We are here to help.

***This article was co-authored by Deanne Frame, Director of Human Resources, McNeill Hotel Company. Ms. Frame provides mentorship to team members and contributes to the overall HR strategy for the company. Her areas of focus include: employee relations for an employee population of 500+, HR analytics, compensation, and high impact partnership for 26 locations. She was instrumental in the HR and Ops collaboration that successfully positioned McNeill Hotel Company to continue operating and retain talent during the pandemic period. Ms. Frame first supported Bowlero Corp, the number one brand in the bowling space. Immediately prior to joining McNeill, she supported Colonial Webb, a Comfort Systems USA company. She holds membership to Richmond SHRM chapter and is passionate for opportunities to put people first professionally and in community work.***



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**[Extended Biography](#)**

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