

Management & the ski/snowboard school may be experiencing the same day, but they're looking at things through a different lens.

PRIORITY RULES:

HOW TO STRENGTHEN THE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SKI & SNOWBOARD SCHOOL

.....

BY JOE HESSION

The relationship between area management and ski school management is a symbiotic, if not delicate, balance: They value each other's role, acknowledge each other's talents, and recognize there can't be one without the other. At the same time, there may be a subtle disconnect based on different objectives, different motivations, different people to please, and even different interpretations of success. Sound familiar?

Over the last five years I've had the privilege to work with numerous ski resorts on the implementation of Terrain Based Learning, and when I'm meeting with the resort leadership, a lot of the same issues tend to come up. Nine times out of 10, I get asked this question: "Why do I have such a hard time relating to my ski school?"

The concept of resort management not "relating" to the ski and snowboard school isn't a new or rare occurrence—nor does it apply to every resort; in fact, many of them have this totally dialed in (more on that later). But for those that struggle to attain a better connection with their learning department staff, here are some thoughts on why and how to establish resort-wide communication, respect, and shared purpose, so that everyone is moving in the same direction.

POINTS OF VIEW

Having worked in various roles at ski areas over the years, I can think back to several instances when I encountered a less-than-ideal rapport between area management and ski school.

I started my career working in the rental shop at New Jersey's Vernon Valley Great Gorge, now known as Mountain Creek. I clearly remember the day I was promoted

to "ski tech," which was a big deal for me because the pay was slightly more than the gig at the boot counter and I got to actually work on hard goods rather than just hand them to people. The rental shop helped mold my career. It was process-driven, and taught me a lot about the importance of speed and efficiency (or at least my high school interpretation of that concept).

Our team took a lot of pride in how well we were running things. We were moving guests through the rental process in less than 30 minutes on peak days, and we had a very strong labor-to-sales ratio. When one of the ski school supervisors announced he was coming over to help conduct a training session with our rental team, I was pretty sure we were going to get kudos for how things were going. I was in for a big surprise.

You can imagine the shock and disappointment when the "training" turned out to be a talk about how the rental shop team "just didn't get it." In a nutshell, the ski school supervisor told us we were focused more on getting people through the shop as quickly as possible and on our labor-to-sales ratio than we were on whether guests were getting the undivided attention and TLC they deserved.

We didn't see it then, of course. It's not that we didn't care about the guest, we just didn't see the importance of making a true emotional connection with the individual. I still remember the post-meeting debrief, where the entire team believed it was actually the *ski/snowboard school* that "just didn't get it." I mean, how could they not think we were killing it in the rental shop?

This singular experience led me to feel alienated from the ski and snowboard school for the next 15 years. I went ▶



on to work in a variety of departments... patrol, food and beverage, lodging, terrain parks, Lean Ski Sigma, and mountain operations... and interactions with the ski/snowboard school always seemed to go the same way.

Fast forward to early 2011, the first year of NSAA's Conversion Cup Challenge. I was at the National Conference and was soon to learn that a new concept (to me, anyway) was going to change my life forever. I'll never forget when I saw the Cup for the first time... the sheer size! I remember asking the person sitting next to me, "What is that for?" Sadly, my follow-up question was, "What is conversion?"

At this point I was the vice president/general manager at Mountain Creek, and after learning about our industry's conversion issues I became really intrigued and wanted to make sure this became the highest priority for our resort. When I got back, I formed a project team to start looking into our conversation practices to see if we had a mechanism of tracking our conversation rate. This team was made up of people from marketing, ticketing, guest services, rentals and, of course, the ski and snowboard school.

Facilitating this conversation was a revealing learning experience on the cultural differences between the groups. There's nothing quite like seeing things through someone else's eyes to help you open your own a bit wider.

BALANCING ACTS

A great mentor of mine, Frank DeBerry, the current president of Snowshoe in West Virginia, once said resorts that run the most smoothly and successfully have instilled the perfect balance of the employee experience, the guest experience, and the shareholder experience, while keeping everyone safe.

When these elements are in harmony, it's like seeing some sort of operational art form. It looks easy, but it isn't easy at all—and ski area managers know this better than anyone, given all the administrative and operational "moving parts."

During my conversion team meeting at Mountain Creek, it became abundantly clear that these distinct perspectives and priorities—profit-driven vs. guest experience-driven—were the root cause of the misalignment between management and the ski school. Instructors (the best ones, anyway) are inherently focused on *people*, and they're most interested in providing the great guest experience. It's what they do and why they do it. If they could rewrite DeBerry's equation for an ideally run resort it would likely be: "the perfect balance between the employee experience and the guest experience, while keeping everyone safe." It's not that they don't care about the shareholder but rather that they care that much *more* about the guest!

That's why it's easy to see how an instructor may feel a little like the ugly step-child now and then. Instructors are well aware that ski school is a strong revenue department ▶

DURING MY CONVERSION TEAM MEETING AT MOUNTAIN CREEK, IT BECAME ABUNDANTLY CLEAR THAT THESE DISTINCT PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES—PROFIT-DRIVEN VS. GUEST EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN—WERE THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN MANAGEMENT AND THE SKI SCHOOL.

and that each student helps pay their salary. At the same time, bringing in revenue isn't their *primary, immediate* motivation, nor should it be. The guest has already paid for the lesson before they get to the ski school. The instructor's role is to share their love of skiing and riding with each and every person they teach—and that can be a tall order depending on the number of people assigned to them, the amount of time they have with each person, and even the results they know management is expecting from them and the department overall.

They aren't thinking about how an extra person in their group represents extra revenue, they're focusing on how they can possibly give everyone the best possible learning experience and leave feeling successful. Their

“boss” is the guest, and if the guest isn't happy, the instructor probably won't be either.

The point is not that the ski/snowboard school cares more about the guest than any other department, because that is simply not the case. But the ski/snowboard school will have the most direct interactions with your guest, which makes them hyper-focused on the guest and his or her needs.

This may be one of the most important lessons I've learned from working with instructors over the years. It's not that they don't have the same appreciation for the “business,” it's that they have a personal investment in each one of their students, making the “business” very personal to them—and that's exactly why they are so terrific at teaching. Their measure of success is the guest's success, not the bottom line.

Management, on the other hand, cares every bit as much about the guest experience, but *their* primary, immediate motivation is to keep the area running as safely and efficiently as possible. They're juggling so many things at once, they wouldn't be able to function if they zeroed in on just one of them. Resort leaders are trying to provide an experience for thousands of guests and hundreds of employees at the same time, which makes it unrealistic to expect them to focus on hundreds of individual experiences simultaneously. Therein lies the rub... both management and the school may be experiencing the same day, but they're looking at things through a different lens. ▶

INNTOPIA
INNOVATIVE TRAVEL TECHNOLOGY

The Snowsports Industry's Leading eCommerce & Reservation Platform

Your Tickets, Your Rules

- Control your own pricing and payment policies
- Manage type, timing, and naming of your products
- Interface directly with industry leading POS systems
- Reach mobile customers with Responsive Commerce design

Get a demo, learn more: Inntopia.com

RANKED 8TH BEST PLACE IN THE WORLD TO VISIT IN 2013
THE NEW YORK TIMES
DEC 2012
www.RedResort.com

As mentioned, these differing motivations and concerns aren't limited to the relationship between management and the ski/snowboard school. Similar issues can and do arise between management and other departments too. Rental managers, for example, naturally want to defend how well their staff connects people with the right gear. That's their purpose, their passion, and their skill. So when the conversation turns to how they need to change their focus, it's no surprise if they feel a little misunderstood.


SILO EFFECTS

Breaking down departmental silos doesn't require a bulldozer, it requires a shift in thinking, an insistence on honest, respectful communication, and a willingness to compromise when needed so that everyone feels they are heard and appreciated for what they bring to the table. Otherwise, the unique culture of each department can easily change from something that inspires pride in performance, camaraderie, and high morale to an "us-against-them" mentality where people don't feel valued.


At the risk of stating the obvious, area management sets the tone, but the positive intention needs to go both ways. Department heads need to be mindful of the different stressors and priorities not only for management but also for other departments, and convey that awareness to the people they supervise. Resorts that have the best "culture of conversion" regard *everyone's* role as essential—as one giant process with every single person working together as a team to deliver the best guest experience possible.

The Fairbank Group is great example of a resort that has developed a strong culture of conversion. This culture starts from the top. Brian Fairbank, the resort chairman (who also happens to be a PSIA examiner) and Tyler Fairbank, CEO, have a strong connection to the ski and snowboard school and developing conversion-related programs overall.


This commitment helped drive the creation of the GET (Guaranteed Easy Turns) program and Kids Rule program, all-inclusive initiatives where guests arrive in a place specifically designed for the first-time visitor and first-time lessons. Employees from various departments (rental, ticketing, and ski school) work together to make sure each




Geise Engineering



Handle Tow Lifts



Magic Carpet®



www.sgeise.com
570-490-2818



Courtesy Jiminy Peak Mountain Resort

guest is carefully attended to. The silo effect is reduced because every employee within the process has a common goal: to provide a great guest-focused experience. They all work together as one united team.

ALL FOR ONE

When people are caught up in their own role, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that this is all about the guest experience, and the guest couldn't care less about the hierarchy at a ski area, the logistics of how things run, who's responsible for what, and least of all the profit margin. The guest doesn't see the resort as a collection of different departments but rather as one whole experience. When they get back to work or school on Monday they will say: "I went skiing at [resort], and it was great!" (... or not).

Each and every department is critical to providing great guest experiences. We are all working toward the same thing, which is to help people tap into all the tangible and intangible benefits of sliding on snow, for life. Fast ticketing, highly efficient rentals, and smooth lesson check-ins are all critical to the overall experience, but there's an over-arching theme that we need to be reminded of now and then, and that is why we are doing this in the first place: Sliding on snow makes people feel good.

AREA MANAGEMENT SETS THE TONE, BUT THE POSITIVE INTENTION NEEDS TO GO BOTH WAYS. DEPARTMENT HEADS NEED TO BE MINDFUL OF THE DIFFERENT STRESSORS AND PRIORITIES NOT ONLY FOR MANAGEMENT BUT ALSO FOR OTHER DEPARTMENTS, AND CONVEY THAT AWARENESS TO THE PEOPLE THEY SUPERVISE.

That should inform the way every single person working at a ski area listens to each other, thinks about each other, and relates to each other, regardless of whether they're teaching a turn, tuning equipment, or sitting at a desk. ■

Joe Hession is founder and CEO of SNOW Operating, a company dedicated to increasing industry conversion rates. Hession developed the Terrain Based Learning program used by resorts throughout the country to simplify the process of learning to ski and snowboard.



FOR SOME IT IS ACCESS TO WHISTLER BLACKCOMB. FOR OTHERS THE BEGINNING OF A GREAT PARTNERSHIP.

SKIDATA is a pioneer and global leader in access and ticketing solutions for mountain destinations and winter sports regions. For over 35 years, SKIDATA has been helping clients increase revenues and optimize business processes. With integrated solution models based on state-of-the-art technology and user-friendly designs, your customers will benefit from the greatest possible convenience and the best possible service.

www.skidatausa.com

SKIDATA
KUDELSKI GROUP

S WEB