

Treating line staff with respect pays off for Larkspur

San Francisco Business Times - by [Sarah Duxbury](#)

Find the right people and treat them with respect, and hourly employees can be the happiest around.

That's one lesson of **Larkspur Hotels & Restaurants'** top billing as a best place to work in the Bay Area.

Hospitality, it seems, is an innate quality, and one that Larkspur wants woven through the company.

"The issue (in this industry) is that it's the lower paid hourly line staff that interacts the most with guests, and from a business point of view, that's where it's most important that you deliver the genuine hospitality in this business," said Larkspur Chairman Karl Hoagland. "The key to doing that is selecting the right leaders. That's one of our secrets, and one of the things we really make sure we get right."

Hoagland said that he has taken as long as 18 months to fill a top position because it is hard enough to find someone with the skills and talent the job requires, but Larkspur will not be flexible on the values piece, either.

"That makes the pool of potential candidates really small," Hoagland added, but it also creates the sort of welcoming place where he wants to work — and is one of the reasons he left investment banking to found Larkspur.

The company, which employs 1,250, is as picky when it comes to hourly workers.

"We are painstakingly thoughtful about ensuring that all new joiners are a cultural match," said Rachel Hawkins, vice president of human relations for Larkspur. "It's more than just having critical technical skills. ... Our culture starts with a foundation of genuine hospitality. That drives our service standards, but also how we treat each other."

Keeping the four top executives accessible to all employees is a priority.

"One of the things we do well is involve all levels of the organization in big decisions or initiatives," Hawkins said. "For example, we rewrote the service standards for all the Collection hotels. A lot of times, those efforts are top-down driven. For us, we invited all general managers and subject matter experts, like food and beverage managers, and included them in the writing, review and eventually the roll-out of the new standards."

Lest Larkspur's claims sound too rosy, consider retention. The typical hospitality company has over 64 percent annual turnover. These are demanding positions that don't garner high salaries. Yet Larkspur's turnover is just 42 percent.

An inclusive rewards program also helps; every employee is eligible for some sort of bonus.

Larkspur is also serious about community engagement. Its Larkspur Legacy program specifically supports Toys for Tots and **Habitat for Humanity**.

It's begun Team Larkspur to get employees to participate in local charity walks or runs. Last year, its first, Larkspur employees raised \$20,000 at events in all its different markets.

"You can have policies and manuals and training, but unless team members genuinely enjoy and embrace taking care of people, you're not going to get the outcomes in the guest experience that will drive the success of the business," Hoagland said. "A culture that puts people first really is part of our business strategy, too."

Larkspur Hotels & Restaurants

Chairman: Karl Hoagland.
HQ: Larkspur.
Bay Area employees: 780.
Score: 94.05.



Spencer Brown

Chairman Karl Hoagland center rear) says he has the right managers at Larkspur.

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