Helping Teachers Teach Workplace Skills

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This week, members of our ‘ohana working in Waikīkī may have been surprised to see groups of teachers walking down the halls of some of our properties or they might have noticed a teacher observing them closely as they performed their duties. Not to worry, there is nothing sinister afoot. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. Outrigger is participating in a wonderful program that gives Hawai‘i public school teachers an opportunity to learn about the business community and the types of skills that their students will need in the future to be successful in business, no matter what occupation.

Growing up in the hotel industry, my sisters and I learned about business, work, and customer service first-hand from our parents, Roy and Estelle Kelley. Like kids who grow up on a farm, there was never any question about whether we would work. The only question was what job we would do that day.

There was always plenty to do. We learned to jerk sodas and scoop ice cream from an open-air soda fountain next to the beach where the Outrigger Reef Hotel now stands. We operated the old-fashioned plug and cord telephone switchboard, checked guests in at the Front Desk, and even completed the hotel night audit with a hand-cranked adding machine and a big, manual-entry spreadsheet, long before the days of technology.

By watching the examples of our parents day after day, we learned customer-service skills almost by osmosis. We also learned about the need for advance thinking, accuracy, double-checking results, communication skills, and the importance of completing a job on time and well. We also learned how to team up with fellow employees to be even more effective workers.

I believe that Jean, Pat and I have successfully passed that work ethic onto our offspring in a similar fashion. I know that my kids used to clean and service the laundry machines at the Islander Hotel on Seaside Avenue on their way home from school in the afternoon. They all worked in Housekeeping somewhere along the way. One summer, my daughter Colleen designed, built, and operated a shave ice stand in Waikīkī and learned volumes about organizing tasks, dealing with governmental regulations, staffing work shifts, and, perhaps most important, profit and loss.

In today’s world, things are quite different and very complicated. Generally, both parents are working full time, even overtime. Kids’ lives are so busy with athletic and educational extracurricular activities that there just isn’t time to squeeze in a real job. On top of this, labor laws, liability concerns, security worries, and restrictive workplace policies typical of large corporations make it very difficult for children to obtain work experience at an early age.

This means that, more than ever, the teachers in our community have an important role in passing on work, customer, and business skills to the next generation. And that’s a challenge. Relatively short school days, less-than-ideal physical conditions in Hawai‘i’s often rundown classrooms without air-conditioning, competition for time from other activities, and large classes all make it difficult. In addition, the teachers themselves may not have had any business experience.

The Hawaii Business Roundtable, Department of Education, and Hawaii State Teachers Association have partnered to improve teaching effectiveness by exposing teachers to “real-life business cultures, values, and work experiences outside of the classroom to create teaching that is rigorous and relevant.” Hopefully, this will enhance teachers’ understanding of current workplace competencies needed by students who will soon be entering the workforce. Skills and knowledge in these areas will enhance students’ chances of future success.

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About 34 teachers are participating in the program, which included two days spent at Outrigger properties this week. Before arrival, they were asked to visit our Websites and apply online for a job as a way of familiarizing themselves with our company.

On arrival, Pila Hanson, Kaipo Ho, and Dr. Chuck Kelley briefed them about our company, our local ownership, corporate culture, and the opportunities for training and acquiring new skills through Outrigger University. Then the teachers spent time in many of our departments observing how our corporate values are used everyday in our jobs and interacting with guests, vendors, and fellow workers.

Pila reports that the teachers were very impressed. Many particularly noted that members of our ‘ohana are very, very happy with their jobs at an Outrigger or OHANA property and look forward to coming to work every day. They all came away with a strong feeling that “Outrigger is a great place to work and grow!”

It was a great day for all. Let’s hope that the Outrigger philosophy and culture, as well as the need for first-class workplace skills, get back to our keiki (children) through these teachers. Their students will be applying for jobs and perhaps some will be working alongside us in just a few years.

There is no time to waste.