



THE HILTON EFFECT

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The Hilton Effect

By Chip Heath & Karla Starr

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Introduction

Most organizations celebrating their 100th anniversary might be content to throw themselves a party, but Hilton opted to hire a pair of skeptical outsiders—business authors with backgrounds in social science—to write about the company’s effect on travelers, the travel industry, its employees, and communities around the world. If we sum up the impact of Hilton across these domains, we can assess the impact that it has had on the world of travel, which we call “The Hilton Effect.”

We dug into Hilton’s history to examine how their beginnings made them effective, and how those historical successes have informed their current practices. Hilton is a massive business, with nearly 900,000 rooms across its 14 different brands, and it continues to grow rapidly, particularly in China. Because we had to focus, we focused on the core of the organization; most of the stories come from the company’s original flagship brand, Hilton.

We are not so naïve as to think we are unbiased. Hilton compensated us for this project, and research has shown that even small, subtle gifts make us more positive about the gift-giver. So you, savvy reader, should be aware that we may be more positive about Hilton than we should be, but we don’t think the research predicts any distortion in the facets of Hilton we feel positive about.

We owe our ability to discuss Hilton’s history to personal tutoring by a wonderful historian, Mark E. Young, who runs the hotel industry archives at the Hilton College of Hotel Management at the University of Houston. From the very beginning, he helped us notice subtle and surprising things in the historical record that were ultimately key to our analysis, such as the significance of air-conditioning in hotel rooms, a reservation hotline, Lady Hilton, cross-cultural interior design, and pictures clearly demonstrating economic growth in the neighborhood after a Hilton hotel arrives. We’re also thankful to those who helped us with the diverse case studies in this book, including the regional groups that conducted initial interviews.

Because we humans are often overly grand in describing our role in events, we searched for outside sources to verify details of the case studies and Hilton’s overall impact in the world. We found that for the most part, Hilton employees undersold. During the second round of interviews, the stories often emerged as even more remarkable than we initially suspected. What the team members largely considered to be just another day at work was, actually, quite extraordinary. We are as excited to tell you these stories as we are surprised at having discovered them.

Hilton wanted to create this book to understand what aspects of their history helped them become so successful today, and how they can continue those practices to become better in the future. But they also hoped it might help the very people they care about: you, their guests, or their friends in other workplaces.

If you work for a competitor of Hilton, please put this book down now. If you work anywhere else—especially Hilton—welcome! Be our guest, curious reader. We hope you will take away something useful.

Perhaps you can learn something from Hilton about providing replenishment for tired customers, creating work environments that truly engage employees, becoming a focal point in your community, and the potential impact of creating a company that can stand the test of time.

May all of you be blessed with a workplace as committed as the Colombo Hilton in Sri Lanka,
Chip Heath & Karla Starr



A large blue graphic with a white border, featuring a cutout on the left side. The text is centered in the upper portion of the graphic.

**THE HILTON EFFECT
ON THE TRAVELER**

How Hilton's Hotel Is like Edison's Lightbulb

It's not quite accurate to refer to Thomas Edison as the inventor of the light bulb. Edison merely patented one component (the long-lasting carbon filament burning in a vacuum-sealed tube) and combined it with existing inventions (electrical wires and components). But his contribution turned out to be the missing piece of the puzzle that allowed the whole lighting system to take on a life of its own.

Henry Ford didn't invent the automobile, either—just the missing piece of the puzzle (assembly line) that was required for the whole thing (combining the engine, brakes, and body) to become economically viable, galvanize interest, and reach a mass audience.

Considering these precedents, it's not an outrageous claim to say that Conrad Hilton invented the modern hotel experience, particularly for business travel. People had traveled for work before (even Ferdinand Magellan was on assignment from God and the King of Spain) and hotels existed before Hilton (Christmas has a manger scene because local inns were overbooked). But we know that Hilton supplied the missing piece of the puzzle because his brand of hotels was the first to truly take off.

In 1943, Hilton became the first hotel chain to go coast to coast.

In 1946, Hilton Hotels Corporation became the first hotel company to sell stock, and in 1947, it was publicly listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

Three years later, Hilton built the first new modern international hotel, the Caribe in San Juan, Puerto Rico. By 1963, a reporter for *Life* magazine even wrote "In some countries, like Spain, there actually has spread an impression that the word 'Hilton' is English for 'hotel.'"

In 2016, Hilton established a presence in its 100th country.

And now, Hilton is celebrating its 100th year.

Conrad Hilton's firm took off by supplying the missing core of the hotel experience, which it stumbled upon by catering to a group that Hilton himself knew very well: business travelers.

Hilton grew up in a well-off family—his Norwegian-born father, Gus, made his fortune selling coal mines—but in 1907, a bank in New York experienced a currency panic that exhausted its reserves. It closed and spread panic, creating a nationwide cascade of bank closures. Gus Hilton was left holding loads of stock that he couldn't translate into cash. "Suddenly, we weren't rich anymore," writes Hilton in his memoir, *Be My Guest*.

According to Hilton, the abruptly penniless family convened a crisis management meeting, and concluded it had to use its four remaining assets to stay afloat:

1. Manpower
2. Stock on the shelves of its general store
3. The "biggest, ramblingest adobe house in New Mexico directly facing a railroad station on a main line"
4. Mary Hilton's cooking

The best analysis was rendered by 20-year-old Conrad, "This added up to only one thing—a Hilton hotel."

Conrad and his brother, Carl, went to the train to hustle for guests every day at midnight, 3:00 a.m., and noon. Their guests were often traveling salespeople because they had the money for overnight lodging. Three times a day, Conrad would find himself making the walk

from the train station to his family's home and boarding house, carrying the salesperson's bag of samples. While presumably talking about life on the road, Conrad looked for an opportunity to advertise his mother's cooking and derive an insight about how to keep his guest happy during his stay.

Conrad and Carl minded the general store and handled luggage. They woke up sleepy guests. They slept wherever they could. Gus managed the guest experience; Mary kept everyone fed.

The family experiment quickly proved a success. A comfortable bed, clean sheets, home-cooked meals, a general store on location, a prime location near a transportation hub, *and* a pair of hustling bellhops? For \$2.50 a night?

Very quickly, word spread among savvy salespeople (an old-fashioned version of TripAdvisor) that there was a new place to stay if you ever went through San Antonio, New Mexico. "Try the Hilton place."

Within six weeks, word had spread to Chicago. "If you have to break up your sales trip," went the recommendation, "break it at San Antonio and try to get a room at Hilton's."

First, it's worth noting that this original homestead where Hilton learned entrepreneurship and hospitality was in San Antonio, *New Mexico*—not San Antonio, Texas. The Hiltons were pinpointing the needs of business travelers so well that salespeople would intentionally "break up" their trip in a small town halfway between El Paso and Albuquerque (or, in mathematical terms, halfway between nowhere and nowhere).

What was so special there? Word continued:



"They serve the best meals in the West and they have a boy there who is a *crackerjack* at *making things comfortable for you.*"

In 1919, Conrad Hilton purchased his first hotel, the Mobley in Cisco, Texas, which he described as "a cross between a flophouse and a gold mine." The Mobley catered to oil field workers in Cisco, but Hilton's next several hotels, both bought and acquired, focused on business travelers making work-related pitstops through small towns in Texas, like Waco and El Paso, during the oil

boom of the early 20th century. In becoming the patron saint of the mobile business class, he accidentally stumbled upon a recipe that worked for a much larger audience: people want to go anywhere and feel as comfortable as they do at home.

Twilight Zone Episode #157: Hilton-Free Hotel

To get a picture of how Hilton's ability to hone in on the missing piece of the puzzle for business travelers—comforts—has evolved over the years, let's take a step back and consider

how a Hilton-free world might *feel*. If you can, call to mind the bizarre imagery and soundtrack from the introduction to the old TV show *The Twilight Zone*. It struck us one day how different the world would be if the things Conrad Hilton created just disappeared from the world (along with those firsts created by the hotels, like the Waldorf Astoria in New York, which Hilton had the good taste to acquire). His presence would be noticed by his absence, almost to the point of scary Friday-evening television.

Submitted for your approval . . .

Imagine a hotel room with no thermostat: the room's temperature when you walked in is going to be its temperature all day. It's a little hot for your liking, so you get a drinking glass to fill with water. The water is room temperature. So, like the room, it's warm.

Searching for a quick way to decompress—the flight was abysmal—you dump the lukewarm water into the sink and hunt for the mini-bar. You keep hunting. No mini-bar.

You sit down on the bed and take off your shoes. Instinctively, your hand darts toward the TV remote on the nightstand. Nothing. You look over for a listing of the cable channels. Nothing.

You look around the room for a TV. Nothing.

You're beat from the endlessly long ride from the airport, which made you miss your normal dinner time. Wasn't there a hotel near the airport last time you came to town?

You decide to order some food to make up for your missed dinner, vividly imagining your favorite comfort food: french fries! Your hand springs to the phone, but the guy who picks up at the front desk hilariously pretends he's never heard the term *room service*. "You mean I'd just cook your meal and deliver it to your room?" Exactly. "We don't do that—you can order out."

He gives you the number of a pizza delivery place.

You decide to go downstairs to sort this out so you can at least grab a Starbucks. But downstairs, there's no coffee.

Elsewhere, piña colodas fade from the hands of drinkers sitting beneath umbrellas around the world.



Unsurprisingly, people want to feel as comfortable on the road as they do at home. Hilton's insight? Since the road is extra exhausting, the comforts of home aren't sufficient. All of Hilton's innovations offer comforts and conveniences that make traveling easier.

In the pre-air-conditioning era of 1925, the first hotel bearing the Hilton name proudly featured no guest rooms facing west, so that guest rooms wouldn't heat up during the day under the Texas sun.

In 1930, the Waldorf Astoria in New York City introduced the concept of room service.

In 1947, The Roosevelt Hilton in New York became the world's first hotel to install televisions in its guest rooms.

In 1954, the Caribe Hilton in Puerto Rico invented the piña colada.

In 1955, Hilton began installing air-conditioning into every guest room with an individual thermostat.

Hilton pioneered the concept of the airport hotel when the San Francisco Airport Hilton opened in 1959. Do you crave staying at an airport hotel? Probably not. Can you see how they'd be useful when you're crunched for time? Of course.

When the London Hilton on Park Lane opened in 1963, its guest rooms had two remote controls: one for the television and one for the radio.

A few years later, Hilton introduced the minibar (thus introducing the work traveler to the "I can't believe I ate the whole pack of cashews at 1:00 a.m." guilt trip).

If you've ever bought a Starbucks coffee or a razor at a store inside a hotel, you can thank Hilton. Perhaps inspired by the value of having the general store next to his family's boarding house, Hilton was the first to bring outside businesses into his hotel.

Conrad introduced a central reservation line for guests to book a room at any Hilton hotel in 1947.

If you've ever booked a reservation through a *computerized* database, you can again thank Hilton's 1973 update to that convenience.

Hilton's initial impulse was to focus on business travelers making work-related pit stops. Conrad catered to the time-poor by stuffing his hotels with replenishments, like air-conditioning, mini-bars, TVs, and room service. If you can take a time-starved salesperson far from home who's stressed out about closing a deal, and simply stopping over in a New Mexico town because he's bone-tired—and make that person feel comfortable in the middle of August—then you can make *anyone* comfortable.

Business Travelers: Replenishing the Depleted

"So suppose Conrad did invent the business hotel experience," a cynic might say. "Is that a cause for celebration? Hilton chose the most pampered group of travelers, and gave them additional tools—a generic room, identical across cities, complete with room service and coffee downstairs in the lobby—so that they never have to see the place where they've traveled, at all!" *Wasn't Hilton just catering to the worst aspects of fearful experience-phobes?*

Is business travel a phenomenon worth celebrating or cursing? Travel writers have long chided this group and its willingness to pay top dollar to stay in their business-class bubble. A writer for *Vogue* in 1965, adopted a patronizing tone when describing a Hilton guest he saw eating breakfast in Turkey:

One morning in Istanbul I was having breakfast in a glass-walled room looking out over the Bosphorus. At a table nearby was an American businessman. . . . He peered through his glasses at his native [i.e., traditional American] breakfast: fresh orange juice, wheat cakes and maple syrup, and plenty of good hot coffee. . . . At that very instant, a few miles away in the Blue Mosque, there were going up calls to heaven which might well have appalled his soul. But did he notice them? Not he. He felt safe in his oasis.

Decades later, Duke professor Annabel Jane Wharton echoed this sentiment, writing that in her younger years she "disdained Hiltons as sites of institutionalized inauthenticity. To me they represented a retreat from the real experience of difference."

A nearsighted businessman, eating his wheat cakes in ignorance of the broader culture.

Safe in his oasis.
A retreat from the real experience of difference.
Institutionalized inauthenticity.

Those are some pretty vehement and righteous critiques. *Retreating from the real experience of difference* runs counter to the whole idea of why people travel in the first place—we leave home to expand our horizons, to experience something greater than what our daily lives offer.

But the critic's view is merely a snapshot without a broader context: the business traveler's wheat cakes and coffee just represent the first part of his day. Indeed, breakfast may be the only familiar part of a day entailing nine hours of work, including a half-day of being shown around an (alien) business and another half-day of intense negotiations. During all of this, he's grappling with trying to remember how to pronounce unfamiliar names and to adhere to local norms. (Present your business card with both hands! Don't show the bottoms of your shoes!) Later, he may be drinking with locals, eating meals with locals, and singing disco at a karaoke place with locals.

Consider the two travelers below.

Traveler A: someone who dines with locals for breakfast before spending the day as a *flâneur*, wandering the city, viewing art, and sipping tea.

Traveler B: a working professional who eats pancakes before venturing to a new office in a foreign country to make progress on a contract with locals.

Aren't these just *different* ways of engaging with a new culture?

Not only is traveling for work as valid a reason to travel as any, it's also extra tiring. If you've ever snapped at your spouse, dog, Wi-Fi router, or child after a hectic day of work, you've experienced a phenomenon called "depletion," which is one of psychology's hottest research areas over the last two decades. Across a variety of experimental manipulations, studies show a very consistent result: our mental energy, depleted by self-control, appears to be a limited—but replenishable—resource. After being asked to exercise self-control for a period of time, we feel taxed, making it increasingly difficult to stay motivated, even after switching to a different task.

Our pool of available resources can be drained by any aspect of life. When a supervisor is constantly emailing us with stressful, time-sensitive demands, ignoring those constant requests to channel our focus elsewhere depletes our energy, making other tasks more difficult. After a hectic day of reigning in our disappointment over the missed deadline, or our snarky comments about the proposed strategy, we have less fortitude to be kind to our own family when we get home.

Things get tiring when we don't have a say in the matter and have to keep going. External demands take their toll. There's no better natural experiment to examine the effects of depletion than looking at what happens when people work longer shifts. One study examined the hand-washing behavior of 4,157 caregivers in hospitals, using radio frequency identification technology on worker badges to monitor their actual behavior. In theory, workers are supposed to wash their hands within a minute and a half after they finish seeing a patient. Given the

lopsided ratio of costs (washing your hands doesn't take long) and benefits (every year, poor hand hygiene contributes to an estimated one million health care–related deaths around the world), it seems like a no-brainer.

But over the course of a shift, people become less likely to wash their hands. By the end of a twelve-hour shift, workers are 8.7 percent less likely to wash their hands, and when the demands of that day—as well as the demands of recent shifts—are higher, the rate of hand washing drops even further. Feeling tired makes people cut corners, even when they could take a simple action that would actually save lives.

Work feels tiring because it enacts constant demands on our behaviors—we need to exert self-control from the very moment our alarm goes off. We're required to meet our grouchy, negative, and lazy impulses with an even greater force: self-control, defined in one meta-analysis as “the capacity to alter or override dominant response tendencies and to regulate behavior, thoughts, and emotions.” In the workplace, we must use this force in many domains at the same time. We must put our best foot forward socially (Make sure you get Mohammed's buy in on this before you tell the group), emotionally (Smile at the customer!) and cognitively (Can you see if the carried interest provision works in our favor?). Work enacts such a constant, tiring demand on both our energy and time that someone has to pay us money *just to get us to show up*.

The Possibility of Refreshment

There's no need to explain any further that work is tiring. But what about the opposite of depletion—what is *replenishing*? Let's look at one more example that seems, at first, like yet another story about depletion but turns out to be a story about something very different. Researchers in Israel looked to see whether parole boards—judges and social workers—granted parole to prisoners.

The prisoners who are requesting parole are not a random sample of hardened criminals. Building a case for parole usually requires either evidence of miscarriage of justice or real repentance, followed by years, perhaps decades, of hard work and good behavior.

The researchers studied the boards' decisions over the course of the day, which was divided into three portions, during which time they broke for a mid-morning snack and lunch.

At the beginning of the day, the board granted parole over half of the time, but as the day went on, the odds of a prisoner being granted parole steadily fell.

In other words, laboring over each case led to an increased sensation of fatigue or mental exhaustion that made subsequent decisions even more difficult. The data clearly show a downward slope: the board became less likely to grant parole as their shift went on. The problem with using all of that mental energy is that the accumulating sensation of fatigue makes *everything* feel harder. Denying parole actually *increases* the parole board's amount of work because they will likely see the file again next year, but it feels like the safe way out; granting parole is more likely to lead to criticism than denying it.

The depressing message of this study is that even in normal work situations, even in high-stakes situations, even with experienced employees, depletion has a large effect.

The second thing to note is that it's relatively easy, if we're aware of the problem and use the right tools, to counteract depletion. In the parole study, judges rebounded after a break with fruit and coffee.

Researchers have spent years arguing about the theoretical explanation of depletion, but, in practice, the methods people use to replenish themselves share one characteristic: we unwind and recharge with rewards of our own choosing. The most common answer to the question of how people prepare to return to work is simple: a form of caffeine. (The fact that soda and coffee are two of the largest retail industries may not, in fact, be a coincidence.) Beyond this, there's little consensus. Some people swear by naps, but for others, a midday snooze leaves them feeling even groggier. The endorphin rush of exercise invigorates some, but sends others to bed.

Regardless of your preference, the research proves we can counteract the effects of fatigue through momentary breaks, comforts, and other boosts of happiness that bring us back to baseline and get us back on track—which brings us back to the study in Israel. The parole board didn't work in one long session, it actually worked in three distinct chunks of time that were divided by two breaks for morning snack (in Israel, sandwich and fruit) and lunch. When the board began deliberating after those breaks, something magical happened to the quality of their work: it went back to *normal*. Spending less than an hour away was enough to fully refresh and counteract the effects of depletion. Even when the feeling of fatigue and exhaustion accumulated over the course of the day, breaks replenished. So much, in fact, that the first cases they examined right after snack or lunch looked just like the cases they saw at the beginning of the day.

Now let's consider something equally surprising: *travel* is depleting. *For everyone*. Entering a world full of new experiences requires us to leave our comforting nest of certainty and habits, and navigating this new territory requires additional mental effort. For starters, we have to figure out the basic tasks required for survival: how do I get food? which way do I look when I cross the street? what time is it? Travel gives us a sense of chronic disorientation typically reserved for the morning after the open-bar holiday party. On top of feeling constantly sleep-deprived or crazy, every single purchase requires figuring out a currency conversion, followed by the lingering sensation that we may have been ripped off.

On vacation, we endure the weirdness of doing constant math while feeling hungover because the entire trip is something we want to do—we're finally in Italy! Seeing things we've wanted to see for years!—and internal motivation helps prevent mental fatigue.

One of the great joys of leisure travel in general is the ability to craft our days as we see fit. It's easier to stay alert and refreshed when we're calling the shots, because that includes the ability to rest and reward ourselves—with the very things that counteract depletion. Was the line long to see the *Mona Lisa*? We can shop for souvenirs! Did the Great Wall of China fail to inspire awe? Dumplings, it is! If braving public transportation in South America felt tiresome, no worries: we can go for a stroll in the park.

But traveling for work is work *on top* of work. Traveling for work requires replenishing as quickly as possible. We have to keep our wits about us for the event that requires our presence abroad in the first place.

And so: we eat comfort foods for breakfast. We sleep in extra soft beds. We blast the air-conditioning. We have our suits professionally pressed. When we know the entire day is going to be extra taxing while requiring us to constantly perform at our absolute best, we frontload our rewards by doing things that make us feel good—they give us enough to get going when the road ahead looks tough.

Conrad Hilton struck gold when he focused on catering to the business traveler, an emphasis that was unique among hoteliers. Compared to luxury travelers in Europe—who took great pride in demonstrating how much they weren't in a hurry to return to work—Hilton's guests were time-poor. Focusing on this group's experience resulted in innovations that allowed his guests to recharge quickly. Because traveling is work *on top* of work, Hilton's catering to the professionals on the road meant turning the comforts, pleasures, and possibilities for joy to an 11 out of a possible 10—the missing piece of the puzzle that made his brand of hotels the first to take off.

Lady Hilton

Rewards motivate, which is why a piece of chocolate buys us ten more minutes of hacking away at math problems. An indulgent lunch with our best work friend can give us the boost needed to finish a report when we return. But a presentation in front of an audience from a culture trained to not smile too broadly may require half a bottle of wine while sprawled on a pillow-top bed.

Our Lady Hilton rooms are so attractive, we're having a hard time keeping the gentlemen out.

Some fifty years after the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote, we're giving them the right to be women when they're away from home. Maybe it's about time.

After all, everybody knows that being a businesswoman doesn't mean not being a woman. And that all women, for business or pleasure, are traveling much more these days.

We just went ahead and treated them like the ladies they are. Some of our choicest rooms were picked out to be Lady Hiltons. Bedrooms and bathrooms were made more feminine, fanciful. We added flowers, a jewelry drawer, special mirrors (including a magnifying one for putting on make-up), skirt, hat and dress hangers. We added more, but you get the big idea. Service.

That's always been what we're all about. Why you can expect the same kind of hospitality and efficiency at the Buffalo Hilton as you'll find at the Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills, the Shamrock in Houston, or the San Francisco Hilton.

Lord or lady, you can be sure you'll be treated like one. At any Hilton, anywhere.

The friendly world of **Hilton**

Call the Hilton Reservation Service in your City.

Business and leisure travelers alike stay at a Hilton for fast replenishments, but whereas vacationers can use their mental resources to go to museums, engage with locals, and learn local customs, business travelers have to channel toward preparing for their presentation and making sure they've packed the right voltage converter for their laptop.

Traveling means being the obvious stranger in a strange situation, but the same situations can feel even stranger to some travelers. For decades, Hilton had been catering to business travelers, a group that was largely a boys' club. In the early 1920s at the Mobley, Conrad Hilton's first hotel, male guests outnumbered female guests, 4 to 1.

By 1950, the Stevens Hotel in Chicago started wooing female travelers by placing folders labeled "For Women Only" in each of its 3,000 guest rooms. The folders contained social notepaper and envelopes, a sewing kit, and an informational booklet to make the idea of traveling easier for women, including how to arrange for a babysitter at the hotel and where to have dresses repaired.

Following a period of research at the Palmer Hotel in Chicago to see what female guests rated as most helpful in their journeys, the Lady Hilton program was officially introduced in 1965. The program was designed to help women who were venturing out on their own for business travel feel more comfortable—not to mention readier to take on the male-dominated workplaces they were sure to encounter.

The adjustments were relatively simple. At some hotels, the Lady Hilton program placed guests in rooms with additional luxuries, such as hair dryers, special clothes hangers, and

vanities. The target audience was small. Some estimate that women traveling for work only accounted for 1 percent of business travelers in this era.

Carol Brock, a Hilton employee who was part of the Lady Hilton program at the Statler Hilton in Boston in 1969, says that many women who used the service never even knew about these amenities. Given the extremely lopsided gender ratios of business hotels in the *Mad Men*-era, a woman's need to feel she was staying in a secure space—not the availability of hairdryers—was the more pressing concern. Some of the Lady Hilton artifacts that may now seem sexist, like makeup and perfume kits, appear to have been marketing tools overshadowing the core of Lady Hilton: an *actual* Lady Hilton, a designated concierge working at the hotel.

“The biggest thing Lady Hilton provided to female travelers was having a person caring about them,” said Brock. The program made additional tweaks to increase guest security. Upon check-in, employees were careful to not announce room numbers. Some hotels set aside special floors for Lady Hilton guests, and instructed elevator operators to make sure they weren't followed by male travelers.

Travelers are strangers in strange lands, and the common guest room provides the universal comforts that help everyone replenish. But in the mid-20th century, female business travelers were on the outside fringe of this group of outsiders. Adding a sense of social connectedness and personal support offers an unmistakable sense of security—yet another source of replenishment. Hotels that provide for the niche comforts of their guests are like restaurants that finally put something on the menu for guests with dietary restrictions. Because even carnivores crave the occasional light meal, making a vegan risotto worth tasting—something they might not even consider until seeing it on the menu—can provide an additional source of joy for *everyone*.

Hamptonality: When A Waffle Is More Than A Waffle

Phil Cordell qualifies as one of the pioneers of the hotel industry: he was the general manager of the second-ever Hampton Inn when it opened in 1984. The brand, now called Hampton by Hilton, doesn't have the number of staff at a traditional hotel—you, and not a full-time bellhop, handles your luggage, for example.

But it does have some key amenities. Thirty years later, the free breakfast remains popular; more than 90 percent of Hampton by Hilton guests take advantage of the chance to get

Hotel Notes for our women guests

- ★ The Conrad Hilton is in the center of all Chicagoland activities. Cultural, educational, religious, entertainment, shopping and sight-seeing centers are just a few minutes away by public or private transportation.
- ★ Airport limousines at door. All rail and bus terminals are close by.
- ★ Room key, mail, general information and postage stamps can be obtained at our Mail and Information Desk, Main Lobby.
- ★ Checkout time is 3:00 P.M. If you desire to stay a few additional hours – at no charge – please contact our Lady Hilton Representative or Assistant Manager.
- ★ During your visit in Chicago be certain to visit the other outstanding Hilton operations . . . The Palmer House with its superb restaurants and entertainment . . . The Presidents' Walk Restaurant at McCormick Place and The Marina City Restaurants at Marina City.

It is a pleasure to have you with us at
The Conrad Hilton.
We hope to see you again in the near future.
For comfort and convenience,
STAY HILTON AROUND THE WORLD!

Lady Hilton
ROOMS
...a number of selected rooms in Hilton hotels and inns—decorated with feminine touches—and full of important little extras...all for the comfort and convenience of women traveling alone or together.
For your next visit, request a LADY HILTON ROOM

For your pleasure...

Lady Hilton
EXCLUSIVE SERVICES FOR WOMEN WHO TRAVEL

THE Conrad Hilton
CHICAGO

their first meal of the day for free. Because of the popularity of this free breakfast offering, Hampton started an arms race among other hotel chains.

“It started out as basically glazed doughnuts, orange juice, and coffee,” Cordell says. But over the years, the breakfasts became more elaborate, evolving to complete hot meals, which remained free despite the difficulty of providing a hot meal, given the hotel’s lower price point. As competition intensified and there was less and less to distinguish Hampton at the breakfast table, Cordell and his team decided to do something to reassert Hampton’s primacy.

But customers aren’t good at brainstorming things that make them happy. “If you were to go to them and say, ‘Tell me five things that would make you feel great,’ it’s hard for them to articulate that,” says Cordell, now the global head of New Brand Development at Hilton.

The leadership team at Hampton, instructed to look for “cool, different things” that would really excite customers, pulled people together to explore breakfast alternatives. The group included key opinion leaders and chefs inside and outside the industry. “We went through some of the most convoluted things we could think of, or what is something that a customer wouldn’t expect.” One of their tested ideas was breakfast on a stick: sausage rolled in scrambled eggs, rolled in pancake batter.

Another item they tested was a plain, pre-made waffle that initially failed to inspire. But when paired with interesting topping options (strawberries, canned whipped cream, flavored syrups), the waffle option started to attract more interest.

Cordell says, “We felt, OK, there’s something here, but what can we do beyond that?” Someone raised the idea of making waffles fresh. Immediately, the group was intrigued but wary.

A freshly made waffle is a highly sensory food. The vacant squares on top act as receptacles for maple syrup and butter, gobs of fruit and whipped cream. The waffle is a clever bit of food sleight of hand, a dessert-caliber treat that’s been granted the legitimacy of a breakfast entrée.

And making fresh waffles is, for some reason, impossible at home, where the typical waffle iron is stored in the back of a cabinet covered in dust. When Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* declared, “Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast,” one of those things may have been the ability to meet the simple demands of a waffle — mixing batter, preheating, and assembling appropriate toppings. In the morning, before our coffee kicks in, these tasks are not simple but Herculean.

So if guests saw a waffle maker with pre-mixed batter and toppings—well, that might give them something to get excited about.

The brilliance of waffles was not immediately obvious in the corporate environment. Cordell reports, “As we first started to talk about it, had we listened to ourselves, there would have been some red flags.”

When you’re brainstorming in an office, a waffle maker composed of a large hunk of blisteringly hot metal resembles a collection of risks waiting to happen. Cordell says it would have been easy for the group to find reasons that it couldn’t work: “Lines are going to be too long, it’s going to make a mess, people aren’t going to know how to use it, they’re going to get burned!”

To handle the naysayers, the group piloted the process, setting up waffle machines on the breakfast buffet at various Hamptons.

As it turns out, a few days of observing guests enjoying breakfast can turn up more insights than a few years stuck in brainstorming sessions at the office. The team found that the key to creating smooth guest experiences was to create a dispenser that offered just enough batter for one waffle at a time. While the system is easy enough to figure out on your own (even before the morning coffee has kicked in), it's also novel enough to spark a conversation between guests as one—a rank amateur only 3.5 minutes before—removes a perfect waffle and fields questions about her technique and banters about topping preferences.

The team hadn't anticipated how much that tiny bit of social interaction would enhance the experience. "Candidly," says Cordell, "we didn't even think about [the social component] until we heard guests interacting with one another." The waffle-making process allowed each person to pass on their newfound culinary knowledge, basking in the glory typically reserved for the Julia Childs or Gordon Ramsays of the world.

"We tested that in a number of hotels and it was just a home run," he says.

The Hampton in New York City's Times Square boasts just under 300 rooms, and feeds 1,200-1,500 people on a typical weekend. When Cordell last visited the location, he observed "the moment" he designed 30 years before was still working well. "Was it perfect? No. Because you have a lot of people come down. Is there a little bit of wait sometimes? Yes. Is there a little bit of mess? Yes. Have people been burned on the iron? No. Do they break frequently? No."

Cordell gives the box score: "So none of the bad stuff happened, and the good stuff has been way more significant than we would have ever expected." Keeping this idea in the offices to iron out the kinks never would have given management the opportunity to see how just much the benefits outweighed the potential downsides. And they never would have identified one of the largest benefits of the product adding a moment for guests to create and savor a social connection during breakfast. Comforts are critical for the business traveler venturing to exotic destinations, but they are appreciated even by leisure travelers eating breakfast before they get back on the road to drive the next 200 miles. Before travel can change our lives, we need to feel fully replenished and fueled for the journey ahead. Sometimes, all it takes is a tiny moment of social connection... and a waffle.

Broadening Our World

Providing enough comforts that allow even the most fatigued among us to quickly replenish makes it even easier for leisure travelers to start to capitalize on the world-expanding effects of travel, getting a new perspective on both ourselves and the world.

Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson of Duke University has shown that positive emotions help people broaden and build their world. Travel can profoundly influence us once we reach that point and can feel grateful for a good meal or awe-struck by a work of art. These powerful emotions foster our creativity, connection to others, and heighten our appreciation of the world around us.

We need to feel safe before we can be happy, and positive moods allow people to think more creatively, consider more viewpoints, and generate a greater number and quality of solutions. When we're not rushed or feeling resource-hungry, we can feel a sense of security and comfort in the present. After our baseline needs are met, we can explore and get in touch with novel aspects of the environment—which can even make us more creative, if they allow us

to make new connections between our typical way of viewing the world and a new insight provided by a different culture or person. Even (or especially) adults benefit from a sense of wonder and play, which makes it easier to have positive interactions with others, in turn building our skills and social connections broadening our world.

Waldorf Astoria Amsterdam

“He moves through the room as if on castors,” wrote the *Condé Nast Traveller*, describing the smooth progress around the cocktail party floor of 69 year-old, Hilton Amsterdam General Manager. “[Roberto] Payer is an Amsterdam legend.”

At a dinner years ago, a friend of Payer’s revealed that his daughter had recently purchased a series of 17th century canal palaces along the Herengracht. The set of buildings, spread in a continuous block along a canal, contained a 18th century bank flanked by palatial residences.

Payer had an idea of what to do with the buildings. “We should have a Waldorf Astoria.” After purchasing management rights for New York’s fabled Waldorf Astoria hotel in 1949, Hilton bought all of it in 1972; in 2009, Waldorf Astoria became Hilton’s brand of high-end hotels.

So here’s the real challenge: if you’re building a luxury hotel in Europe, how do you create experiences that feel unique for each guest, allowing even those who already have or have seen it all to truly reap travel’s happiness-boosting benefits?

Roberto Payer—an Amsterdam legend and Hilton team member for 50 years—was uniquely suited for the task.

“We had the idea. The idea was that we should not try to copy anybody else, but to place the hotel in another position.”

First, clearly, is history. “It is a unique place.... a palace of the 17th century.” The six palaces comprising the Waldorf Astoria once housed the Netherlands-based MeesPierson bank that was founded in 1720. Over the next hundreds of years, they housed some of the most elite families in Dutch history, with names like Geelvinck and Huygens; in 2011, UNESCO placed them on its World Heritage list. Even the front staircase has a story that can’t be bought: it was built by Daniel Marot, the architect of Louis XIV.

Next, the people. “What is the most important thing when you arrive somewhere, that first impact? And that is people and the way they look,” Payer says. As social animals, other people capture our attention like magnets. Jan Taminiau is a Dutch fashion designer who launched his own line, JANTAMINIAU, in 2003; a decade later, Queen Maxima of the Netherlands wore one of his creations during her husband’s inauguration. (Abroad, his couture has been seen on Beyoncé and Lady Gaga.) Taminiau designed the clothes worn by the Waldorf Astoria staff members. Women working in the front office wear silk dresses with a beautiful beige and brown print. Upon further inspection, you might notice that it’s a map. And only if you ask the staff or have a deep obsession with 17th Dutch cartographers would you get the full picture: the print is based on a map of the area drawn by the 17th century Dutch cartographer Balthasar Florisz van Berckenrode.

Luxury hotels pay attention to the details in every sensory domain, so it’s no surprise that aromatic candles placed around the hotel add an elegant, delicate aroma. The scent was developed specifically for the Waldorf Astoria, making it a distinctive pleasure that you won’t find anywhere else.

Upon getting situated in your room, a staff member presents you with four different scents. Choose your favorite. “It’s going to be in their bed,” says Payer, referring to the practice of spritzing guests’ linens. That unique aroma adds yet another level of personalization to your room. Later, guests receive special medallions with their signature scent from the hotel to take home and jog their memories of their stay.

“[Guests put the medallions] in their suitcase. And when they open the suitcase, here we are. You’re back in the Waldorf Astoria.” The candles and unique scents were created by Cire Trudon, a French company that’s been making candles since the era of the Marot staircase, in the 17th century.



Downstairs in the hotel’s main lounge, located in the former building of the MeesPierson bank, guests can order cocktails with culturally diverse ingredients. The Indian-inspired libation, for example, combines Chaat masala-infused vodka, coriander, verjus, curried pineapple, ginger, and IPA beer. That drink, “The Rupee,” is named after the currency of India. In lieu of learning about it in a menu, you get a wallet stuffed with colorful bills, each designed like a different

form of international currency.

Liquor bottles behind the main bar rest atop rows of staggered safe deposit boxes—yes, the money theme continues. The drink names, menu, and safe deposit boxes are all ways that The Vault Bar plays with its rich, historical past. It’s located in what was once the actual vault of the MeesPierson bank.

Travel can make us happy by giving us new positive experiences—but Payer had to entice guests who could afford to go anywhere in the world, people who already have it all, have seen it all, or are simply tired of it all. “*The idea was that we should not try to copy anybody else.*” Competing with the likes of Paris and London by building a standard luxury hotel in Europe simply wouldn’t do. So, while the staff uniforms, bar menus, and enticing scents are novel and beautiful, additional layers of meaning lie beneath each detail, offering additional possibilities to intrigue. Young, beautiful faces at the front desk wear dresses inspired by a centuries-old map of the very city you’re in that were created by a Beyoncé-approved designer.

The hotel’s pleasures run deep, weaving sensory delights with centuries of narratives found within Amsterdam’s cultural history and the history of the hotel itself.

It’s guaranteed to be a novel experience, because its variety of offerings simply *cannot* exist anywhere else. The fully restored Louis XIV-era staircase has been there for centuries. The honey-themed treats served during the afternoon tea service in June use honey from the beehives located on the roof of the Librije’s Zusje, a two-Michelin star restaurant located in the hotel that’s one of the city’s finest.

Payer's innovations at the Waldorf expand on Conrad Hilton's initial impulse of catering to the most difficult-to-please guests: if you can make a group of ennui-filled tourists happy, my lord, then you've cracked the happiness code.

London Hilton on Park Lane

For some time, Conrad Hilton wanted a hotel in London to call his own.

On July 26, 1952, the *New York Times* reported that the directors of Grosvenor House, a luxury hotel in London's Mayfair District, rejected Hilton's offer to buy its 500,000 shares, reportedly not wanting to see the well-known British institution fall in to American hands. A little over a year later, on October 5, 1953, the *Times* reported that Hilton had announced plans for a proposed 550-room hotel overlooking Hyde Park, less than half a mile from the Grosvenor.

Brits seemed to fear a hostile American takeover of British hostelry. "Telephones and radios in every room—and television in the suites—threaten to disturb the peace that visitors have found for years in London hotels," wrote foreign correspondent Thomas F. Brady in the *New York Times*. "The American tourist boom of recent years has begun to lure United States capital and management into the British hotel business, and competition for dollars will force British hoteliers to follow the innovations established by the invaders—barbaric as they may seem amid the richness of Edwardian woodwork, crystal chandeliers and respectful servitors."

When Hilton did finally get a piece of land, it was both expensive and small (1.25 acres), so to get a return on the investment, Hilton had to fit as many hotel rooms as possible on that small parcel. This, of course, required building tall. Building *very* tall. Hilton's initial plans were met with what passes for an angry outburst in England: public inquiries and a veto by the London City Council. Newspaper headlines like "Skyscraper Hotel Plan Attacked: Symbol of Dollar Supremacy" did little to help cool the tensions. In 1959, when the City Council reversed its decision, Hilton's speedy reply was to build—and build quickly.

A triumphant 328 feet tall, the London Hilton on Park Lane was the city's tallest structure—the first to overshadow St. Paul's Cathedral. At one point, the Queen's people allegedly called to address Her Royal Highness's concerns that guests would be able to see into the garden of Buckingham Palace.

It was also Europe's largest postwar hotel when it opened on April 17, 1963, including five bars, five restaurants, and a lobby charitably described as "too small and too low." The rooms were replete with barbaric American comforts. "An individually adjustable air condition system heated or cooled every room. Remote control systems operated radios and TV sets which were built into the walnut-paneled chests of each room. Four piped radio programmes were a novelty at the time," writes travel author Andreas Augustin. A slew of telephone operators answered the hotel's 88 lines, routing calls and taking messages for absent guests, who were alerted to a message upon their return by a red light on their room's phone.

Capitalizing on the 1964 *Goldfinger* craze, food and beverage director Lim Ewe Hin reinvented one of the bars as Hilton's 007 Night Spot, furnished with props from the movie studio. It also had temporary touches from the movie: the Japanese-American actor Harold Sakata—Oddjob, who played main villain Auric Goldfinger's henchman—spent the first few weeks there. Oddjob was decked out in his original movie costume, complete with steel brimmed bowler hat, and had the job of greeting guests at the elevators and escorting them to the bar.

Its signature drink? Martinis shaken not stirred, of course.

Even in this context, it's clear that the hotel wore its Britishness like a borrowed blazer rather than a perfectly tailored suit, unable to hide the occasionally appearing flecks of Americana: the floors in the hotel, for example, were originally numbered American style, designating the lobby's level as 1, not the ground floor. Wine wasn't originally served with dinner, as is the European custom.

It was American at the core, but flexibly so; the real goal was to create a cultural *mélange*, a place for guests of all backgrounds to feel welcome.

To wit, at the London Hilton on Park Lane, Augustin writes: "In 1963 there was a Hungarian trio of musicians at the International Restaurant, entertaining and serenading the patrons. The musicians' uniforms and music changed every few months to complement the prevailing theme, decor, food and drink of the restaurant. As the restaurant changed from European to Mediterranean, to North American, to South/Central American, the musicians changed from Viennese violinists in tailcoats, to Italian gondoliers, to Spanish guitarists, to Mexican mariachis, to cowboy fiddlers."

The hotel's vaunted guests over the years have included entertainers (Sammy Davis Jr., Ray Charles), actors (Peter Ustinov, Telly Savalas, Raquel Welch, Michael Caine, John Cleese), playboys (Hugh Hefner), Nobel Peace Prize laureates, and actors-turned-heads of state (Ronald Reagan). Immediately after the Apollo mission featuring the first men to walk on the moon, President Richard Nixon sent *Air Force One* to whisk Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins to London, where they and their wives were put up at the Hilton on Park Lane.

When you make a space that's comfortably inviting to a diverse array of guests, you hit the cultural jackpot, creating a location that can simultaneously soothe *and* inspire.

Research supports the value of cultural juxtaposition. In one study, American college students were divided into groups and shown various cultural items, 45 minutes worth of creativity on display. Each participant saw four music videos, four movie trailers, and 160 images running the gamut from decorations and architecture to clothing and design. They were then given tests of their own creativity: reimagining the tale of Cinderella for Turkish children as vividly and uniquely as possible, another task of coming up with creative analogies for time.

In the baseline creativity condition, students saw nothing creative to prime their process; they simply showed up at the lab and were given a creativity task. The others were divided into four groups. One group of students were shown 45 minutes of the most creative products available in their native American culture; their creativity was only slightly higher than the control group. Another group saw 45 minutes of creative products from China—their creativity also tested slightly higher than the control group but was on par with the baseline condition.

However, two additional groups did show improvements. In one, which we'll call the "buffet" condition, participants saw a series of cultural products, alternating between Chinese and American—a Chinese dress followed by an American dress, then Chinese architecture followed by American architecture. In another group, which we'll dub the "mashup" condition, participants saw cultural items that combined elements from both American and Chinese culture, like McDonald's rice burgers.

The experiment suggests that seeing cultures side-by-side increases creativity. Judges rated the subjects in both the buffet and fusion conditions as demonstrating higher levels of creativity than the other conditions. Creativity depends on juxtaposing elements, shifting perspectives, blurring boundaries, and generating new variations on familiar themes.

From his days in the boarding house in New Mexico, Hilton consistently worked to make sure his guests felt some of their home comforts. But at international hubs, people from a plethora of cultures and countries all seek the comforts of home, and making them all feel at home creates interesting effects. Many of Hilton's international hotels have demonstrated creative aesthetics or service offerings stemming from the juxtaposition of cultures.

At the Hilton Istanbul, foreign managers oversaw most of the hotel's eight separate bars. The Roof Bar was originally a hotspot for Istanbul's elite. After renovations at the end of the 1960s, it reopened in 1971 as the Cloud 9 Disco, which became Istanbul's first-ever discotheque.

The Karagöz Bar, a traditional Turkish bar was also removed during this series of renovations. An architect went to London on a design pilgrimage for Hilton to study drinking establishments in England for months. The result was the Pilsen Pub, which evoked a typical English pub and was constructed entirely of wood. Its most commonly served drink, draft beer, was half price from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m., earning it the distinction of becoming the first happy hour in the city of Istanbul.

Does this odd cultural juxtaposition and play on cultural elements disparage history? The notion of authenticity is merely a viewpoint, not a fact: cultures are always evolving and subject to interpretation. Respectfully playing with cultural boundaries can increase our exposure to other ways of life and make us more creative, make the foreign seem less foreign, highlight our connections, and make everyone feel at home.

From the very beginning, Conrad Hilton was said to be a "crackerjack" at making others feel as comfortable as they were at home. The missing piece of the puzzle he filled in? Turning the comfort dial up to an 11 out of 10, allowing people to quickly reverse the effects of fatigue and mental exhaustion, and return to the world feeling refreshed. Travelers need to return to this sense of mental equilibrium before they can truly begin to capitalize on the world-expanding benefits of travel.

The concept of "broaden and build" suggests that hotels can add joy, delight, and another layer of meaning by looking for higher-order meaning in all of the details. Opportunities to personalize experiences, even through simple choices, can deepen social bonds with the ones we're traveling with. Shared experiences simply feel more rewarding.

The results of the creativity study we recounted earlier are very clear—creativity happens when we consider different cultures at the same time: juxtaposition is better! Simultaneous is better! We can turn cultural delights into sparks of joy and creativity by anchoring them in familiar territory (vodka) and then adding a variation from a different culture (Chaat masala infused). You can also spark interest by juxtaposing elements from various times by anchoring a cultural delight in familiar territory (contemporary dress) and mashing that up with a variation from an older time (old cartography print).

Seeing these juxtapositions lets us connect the dots between cultures—and different times—by giving us a different perspective of our own culture, viewing it as a variation on a theme, rather than the center of the universe. One of travel's great benefits is increasing our attentional breadth and awareness—to broaden and build our world. And if we can do this with culturally inspired cocktails and gorgeous dresses, *everyone wins*.

Hilton always wanted each of his hotels to have a unique, individual personality. Abroad, that's frequently achieved by combining design elements of the host and guest culture. In the United States, that can be as simple as reflecting on the past in the present. We can anchor in the familiar and extend to the new; a good experience can comfort and stretch at the same time.



**THE HILTON EFFECT
ON EMPLOYEES**

Chris Silcock: Waiter to AI Guru

After graduating with a degree in computer science, Chris Silcock opted to study for a master's in a less lucrative field: music. To make ends meet, he spent his evenings and weekends working as a banquet waiter at the Hilton Watford in England.

"I really enjoyed the community of it," he says of his early days. "You are working unsocial hours with other people who are working unsocial hours. Therefore, you become each other's friends and support because you're off when everyone else is working."

After finishing his master's degree, Silcock's bosses approached him. "They offered me a job and responsibility that I didn't think I deserved," he admits. In what became a theme in Silcock's career, he was rewarded for his good work with more responsibility. Would he, they asked, consider being a banquet manager?

Just 21 years old, Silcock suddenly was in charge of managing a team of dozens, who were serving banquets and weddings with hundreds of customers. He was also the chief customer contact, and interacting with the customer was intense. "Obviously, this was quite an important event for them." He picked up the job by initially shadowing a more senior banquet manager, and then the banquet manager would shadow him as he made the key calls himself, offering an opinion only when needed.

A few months later, his manager offered him another position, an intense learning experience that would stretch his skills: they wanted him to run the hotel overnight as night manager.

Silcock described the night manager position as a job "where you learn so much because there are times at night when you're the only Hilton person in the hotel. So whether it be room service or checking in or a problem in a room, or anything, you have to deal with it."

After the manager talked up the benefits of the job, he said, "And by the way, you start tonight because we don't have anyone," Silcock recalls with a laugh.

Regardless of location, division, or level of seniority, promotions at Hilton offer a universal reward for good work: *more* work. But instead of expressing appreciation for Silcock's ability to serve banquet guests by providing an uptick in weekly hours, his bosses offered him more *interesting* work.

Silcock eventually found his way to the corporate level, earning international experience as an area project leader. "For the first time, a company paid for me to travel around Europe, which I thought was incredible. A *huge* step."

His next step took him to another continent, where he took on a corporate training role that required traveling and training local groups on the central reservation and pricing systems. This next promotion was presented in an environment similar to the position of night manager, offering a set of training wheels to buffer the inevitable learning curve.

Silcock was sent to the Hilton Alexandria in Egypt, but the then-newbie traveler naïvely jumped into a cab when he arrived at Cairo and asked to be taken to Alexandria.

"It turns out that it's about a five-hour drive," laughs Silcock. "It was in the middle of nowhere, and the roads to it weren't particularly good. I thought I was being taken into the desert and that was the end of me," he jokes.

Using his computer science background alongside managerial skills he'd honed over the past few years, Silcock trained staff members on the reservation and revenue management

systems. He taught team members how to load their available rooms onto the central call center database and vary room pricing to maximize profit.

After successfully proving himself on a bigger playing field, Silcock was promoted to vice president of revenue management. There, he ensured that each of Hilton International's hotels followed a system he had piloted multiple times in hotels like the one in Alexandria, executing the software and strategies allowing the owners to maximize their return.

Silcock's current title of chief commercial officer bears little resemblance to his initial title as a team member of the banquet hall waitstaff. His team helps prices for nearly 880,000 rooms in Hilton's system. The complex multi-factor pricing models consider factors such as location (Topeka or Tokyo), brand (Embassy Suites vs. Waldorf Astoria), time of year, and infrastructure (does the hotel have a bar? parking? free breakfast?). They use data and analytics to create regional marketing messages that tailor Hilton's message to local events and handle e-commerce. After a guest stays at a property, his team also runs the surveys to assess if they enjoyed their stay. His responsibilities have grown beyond overseeing two dozen servers at a wedding dinner to leading thousands, located all around the world. Today, he's based in the company headquarters in McLean, Virginia, and reports directly to Hilton's CEO, Chris Nassetta.

Peak Experiences At Work

While Silcock's current title bears no resemblance to his original title, the autonomous nature of his career trajectory at Hilton dates back to the founder himself.

"He invented, for example, the unorthodox but healthy practice of making his hotel managers almost autonomous without exacting any investment except a manager's experience, honesty and zeal," writes biographer Whitney Bolton in *The Silver Spade: The Conrad Hilton Story*.

In 1969, the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began teaching a seminar on play, wondering if he could figure out why certain experiences were more enjoyable than others. In a seminal study, he randomly paged people who were passionate about their hobbies, asking what they were doing at the time and how much they were enjoying it.

Surprisingly, people's overall satisfaction in a week had nothing to do with how much time they spent working or engaged in recreational pursuits—it was how many hours they spent in a state of active engagement, regardless of its label as *leisure* or *work*. When we enter a state of what Csikszentmihalyi termed "flow," the experience is intrinsically rewarding. Flow experiences occur at the intersection of the demands of a situation and our abilities—being able to rise to an interesting challenge makes us feel alive—but for this to happen at all, we must have an interesting challenge to meet.

Imagine you were talking to one of Csikszentmihalyi's mountain climbers with a baseline Skill Level of 9. If you ask them to scale a Level 4 peak, they'll be bored. To engage people, you need to ask them to climb a little higher—you want to ask that climber (Skill Level 9) to reach just beyond their comfort level (Skill Level 10, or 11 perhaps), but overshooting the request (Challenge Level 13), leads to an anxious climber who is likely to give up. When you want to engage people, you need to calibrate the challenges you offer employees, providing a task that's only one or two clicks away from their current level of skill.

Silcock's managers seemed to have been running drills from Csikszentmihalyi's playbook. To tempt him away from a career in computers, they offered him a challenge: (Skill Level 4, Challenge Level 5): can you manage two dozen waiters to satisfy a customer? After mastering that job—but before mastering it so well that he became bored and disconnected—they offered him a new challenge: can you run the whole hotel? Night manager was a new position, requiring him to learn the whole operations (Skill Level 6, Challenge Level 9), but presented in a forgiving context. The slower, overnight pace allowed him to confront a new dilemma that didn't require an immediate decision. He could spin his wheels, make a wrong turn, and recover from any mistakes before anyone else even woke up for breakfast. One of the key aspects of flow is autonomy: the ability to choose how to bring yourself up to speed.

Silcock's role at corporate made use of his computer science background so the challenge could be greater because his skills complemented the new role. As he was traveling around, bringing groups up to speed, the demands were higher but the remote locations where he was training were reminiscent of the night desk—off the standard corporate radar screen, with some breathing room that gave him time to experiment and perfect his system. After honing his skills by teaching many remote groups to do their thing successfully, he was ready to step into the spotlight as the vice president for revenue management.

Hilton encourages managers to offer promotions to employees like Silcock who enjoy a good challenge. By advocating their autonomy over standardized guidelines, the company enables intrinsic motivation; flow and engagement are deeply embedded in the company's DNA. Flow happens when people can completely lose themselves in the task, which requires clear goals, personal interest, concentration, a loss of self-consciousness, a sense of control over the moment, and a balance between personal skills and the moment's challenges. Combined, these elements enjoyably increase mastery by expanding our sense of self.

Conrad Hilton's father, Gus, helped instill in his son an entrepreneurial spirit as a young boy.

"I was peddling sow-belly bacon, grits, beans, and coffee in my father's general store before I could really see over the top of the counter." While other kids were choosing which toy to play with, Conrad was choosing how to contribute to the family businesses, including a general store, a lodging house, and later on, a bank.

A 1949 *New York Times* profile of Hilton discussed his autonomy-fostering management style: "Conrad Hilton does not burden himself with the minutiae of operations. When he turns a hotel over to a manager he gives that man complete autonomy. Each unit is, for that reason, run differently and has individuality."

There's a recurring joke at Hilton: "The reward for good work is more work." But it's not just more work, it's more *challenging* work. And, that additional challenge is presented in a way that makes it easier for employees to do well, whether its managing out of watchful eyes at the overnight shift or at a still-empty hotel that's just gearing up for the limelight.

Unsurprisingly, research finds that when we sense we might be negatively evaluated on a task, it saps our motivation, especially tasks we have yet to master. Good work affords us the opportunity to go offstage for the next level of challenge. Once we've mastered it, we can venture onstage and be seen applying our new skills to excel at even more challenging work. In contrast, being watched while we perform well-learned tasks actually improves our

performance. Sensing that praise lies ahead, can make us hungry to get it, whether in the form of praise or a promotion to the next, more challenging task.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

Dianna Vaughan



Dianna Vaughan knows hospitality. Like founder Conrad Hilton, Vaughan's first exposure to the industry was helping out at a family business as a child. When she was eight, Vaughan helped check in guests into her aunt Gladys's roadside inn in Houston.

Two aspects of Vaughan's first paid job as a night auditor helped shape her career.

"I was fortunate to have a female general manager. She was a great role model and made me believe that if I worked hard enough, I could also become a general manager," she says. Vaughan didn't realize there weren't any female general managers at the larger hotels in her company with more than 300 rooms. But simply having a female boss was enough to let Vaughan imagine herself in that role and not view her gender as an obstacle.

During that night audit job on the 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. shift, one of Vaughan's first general managers approached her with an additional task. "You're going to call 10 hotels and see if they're sold out, and if they are, you're going to ask them to send you their business.' And I remember thinking as a team member, 'Why? Why do I want to create work for me? I'm doing my college homework during the 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 am shift, why do I want to call and direct more people over while I'm trying to do my homework?'"

"I went back to him and said, 'What's in it for me?'"

After her boss laughed ("You get to stay employed"), she came up with a formula: if Vaughan got 10 walk-ins a night instead of the typical five, she would get 10 percent of the extra revenue. Feeling controlled—you have to call ten hotels—is what leads to a sense of mental fatigue and depletion. Being personally driven by an outcome ("I want to earn more revenue") allows us to muster more energy and stay focused, the motivational shift that can result in flow.

Workers on the other shifts soon asked for the same incentives.

"So we did it, and we experienced huge revenue gains for each shift along with a fun competition which now added a sense of play to the extra money in our pockets," says Vaughan.

Vaughan's remarkable career trajectory has taken her from night auditor, front desk manager, food and beverage director, assistant General Manager, director of sales, General Manager, regional revenue manager, then into several corporate Vice President roles. More recently, she launched two of Hilton's new brands, the very upscale Curio, and Tapestry. Today, Vaughan serves as the Senior Vice President & Global Head for Hilton's All Suites brands-

“At its core, hospitality (and the hotel business) is about generously opening your home and welcoming people—helping them on their journey,” says Vaughan. Helping people on their journey isn’t just about the guests staying at the hotels, but also about helping her fellow team members in their career journeys. This sense of camaraderie has helped Vaughan accrue social contacts all over the organization.

“I can immediately get in touch with anybody in the company if I email or call,” she says. “In return, if somebody needs me, I’m going to get back to them right away, as soon as possible. Life and work is all about creating a bank of relationships.” These other relationships can assist during your new challenges, helping you get to that next skill level by offering support.

Houston Triptych: an Engineer, a Chef, and a General Manager Face a Hurricane

Citizens of Texas are unusually interested in big things. They like to think of their state as the biggest, conveniently ignoring Alaska, which has held this title since 1959. The biggest city in that big state is Houston. And the biggest hotel in that biggest city: the Hilton Americas—Houston. The 1,200-room hotel, partly developed with the city’s own investment money, is located right next door to the city’s convention center. Understanding how Hilton allows its employees to innovate on a stage that big can tell us how a company can continually engage and motivate its employees.

It’s not far from the epicenter of Hilton’s history, when Conrad Hilton bought his first hotel—the Mobley in Cisco, Texas—in 1919. In 1925, he opened the first hotel he’d constructed from the ground up in Dallas.

Mo Khan



Mo Khan started his 30-year Hilton career as an assistant chief engineer; today, he’s its director of property operations at the Hilton Americas—Houston. Khan hails from India, where his family had to make do with little. He says that his personal experience planted the seeds for his professional obsession of over thirty years: efficiency. Today, he’s highly attuned to finding and fixing inefficiencies. Khan specializes in energy savings and environmental conservation.

“I hate waste,” he says. In his current position, he’s in charge of the entire building’s infrastructure—from renovation, construction, and engineering, to maintaining the electrical,

plumbing, and air-conditioning systems, as well as managing projects and overseeing the budgets.

In other words, his current position affords him plenty of opportunities to engage his passion: identify and eliminate waste.

After 11 years in Houston at two different Hilton properties, he moved to the Pacific Northwest, and spent seven years working as director of engineering at the Seattle Airport DoubleTree by Hilton before returning to Houston. His childhood interest in conservation deepened during his stint in the beautiful Pacific Northwest.

The Hilton Americas–Houston came loaded with technology that fostered efficiency even when guests chose otherwise, but a few inefficient decisions made their way into the design of the hotel’s basic operational machinery. Khan has zealously been attempting to eliminate these, one by one. For example, every room in the hotel has sensors that detect when the rooms are empty and adjust the thermostat—saving the waste of blasting air-conditioning into an empty room.

One of his first measures of eliminating waste: lights. Since Khan came on, he’s had nearly 7,000 LED bulbs installed to light various areas in the Houston property, including its lobby, conference center, and pool deck. The city of Houston even gave Hilton a rebate check for over \$66,000. “It essentially paid for itself!” he gloats. (Plans are in the works to convert all guest room lighting to LED during an upcoming renovation.)

While Conrad’s decree—“we won’t skimp on linen”—is still being followed, it comes at a price. Laundry water is a big source of waste, especially cleaning the towels and linens at a 1,200-room hotel. Khan discovered a water recycling unit that captures and purifies 80% of the water dumped out by washers. Lint removal, carbon filtration, and a bacteria-killing UV treatment make for such clean water that the person who installs the system usually engages in a flight of showmanship—drinking a glass of newly purified water that had laundered sheets in its most recent incarnation.

When the clean, recycled water emerges from the system, ready for another load of laundry, it’s 40 degrees hotter than city water. The laundry reuse system means that millions of gallons of water need only be heated 40 degrees (not 80 degrees, as normal) before the wash can begin. This creates enormous energy savings, in addition to saving enormous amounts of water by reusing it six times.

The system was installed in September 2011 and paid for itself in a few months; two years later, it had already saved the hotel over \$750,000. Hilton New Orleans now also uses this system, and Khan has fielded calls from colleagues at Hilton properties in San Francisco, Florida, and Dubai.

The Hilton Americas–Houston is loaded with technology that maximizes energy efficiency, and Khan is working on minimizing any remaining areas of waste. In addition to this system, Khan has also installed more efficient air-conditioning and water pump systems that save the hotel thousands of dollars while reducing its environmental impact.

The hotel’s chiller system consists of three massive vats and a fourth, slightly smaller one, all designed to provide cool air to guest rooms and conference venues. Unfortunately, they were not designed to monitor capacity or regulate output. When Khan arrived, two of the three large vats were structurally dedicated to feed cool air to the lobby and conference floors, while a separate, smaller vat was dedicated to the rooms.

“We had three chillers running 24/7 regardless of the outside temperature,” Khan said. “That was a bad design.”

Together with the help of outside heating and cooling consultants, Khan was able to link the four chillers through a common header, which allowed any chiller to produce cool air for any part of the hotel. Now, during the winter, the entire hotel can be cooled with just the smallest chiller—instead of three, as before.

More surprisingly, Khan found that even when temperatures skyrocketed in the summer to more than 100 degrees, they still required only one large and one small chiller to cool the entire building. Their monthly electric bill went down \$100,000.

“Here’s an interesting thing,” he says. “We’ve had three different companies come in and offer to do an energy audit for free.” These companies pay for their audits by discovering ways to improve the client’s energy efficiency, pitching those money-saving ideas to the general manager. But the audit firms were sorely disappointed at the Hilton Americas.

“All three of them came back and said, ‘Oh, your building is too tight; we can’t figure any way to make improvements.’”

Khan is an engineer who loves the environment and hates waste, so he sees any victory over waste and inefficiency as valuable. He seemed just as excited about the one-time \$66,000 check for using LEDs as he was with the chiller redesign that reduced the hotel’s electric bill by over a million dollars a year.

Khan’s projects have taken him from small, simple hotels to overhauling integral components to one of the largest hotels in Hilton’s ecosystem, and his formal positions already provide an ample supply of problems to be solved. But Khan loves solving problems. He actively seeks extra challenges and assigns himself extra work that allows him to get closer to the state of active engagement where time disappears that researcher Csikszentmihalyi referred to as *flow*.

Despite an innate sense of intellectual curiosity, things falling outside the purview of his self-assigned problems fail to capture his interest. When asked what Hilton sub-brands are doing on this whole environmental initiative, he says, “Don’t know!” When asked about competitors’ activities, he says, “Don’t care!”

This is not a man who responds to social cues, but a man who responds to internal cues, who prides himself in making his job more challenging. The difficulty that Hilton and other heavily entrepreneurial firms face is that by allowing employees to always pursue their individualistic, entrepreneurial tendencies they often fail to reach standardization around even clear wins. Every hotel in the country should have a chiller system designed the way Mo Khan redesigned his system. Every hotel. But entrepreneurial firms often resist standardization. Your wheels are yours alone to constantly invent and reinvent at an entrepreneurial firm—but because not every engineer is as relentless and clever as Mo Khan, standardizing what he has already learned would certainly help.

How do you manage the tension between creating enough space for creativity while simultaneously raising the bar for everyone? The answer comes from a dispositionally iconoclastic group: chefs. Chefs who take pride in performing without a recipe; chefs who insist on “a little of this, a little of that”; chefs who would be insulted by the notion that they have to measure something precisely.

Chef Ruffy Sulaiman



“We have a great banquet and conference business that Ruffy built,” says General Manager for Hilton Americas–Houston Jacques D’Rovencourt of Chef Ruffy Sulaiman. “He has very loyal customers that keep coming back and spending big budgets with us, just because of his creativity and his food.” D’Rovencourt is not alone in his praise of Chef Ruffy.

Daniel Yergin, the Pulitzer-prize winning author of *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, founded Cambridge Energy Research Associates (CERA) in 1983. Today, CERA’s five-day conference is an annual magnet for members of the global energy business. (The only time the Hilton Americas–Houston simultaneously housed two Presidents, Clinton and Bush, was during CERA.)

When the conference theme was “disruption,” Chef Ruffy got an idea while listening to conference organizers discuss the industry’s surprising developments: what if one of the dinners presented its guests with disruptive experiences? He developed a dinner for the conference, organized around five dinner stations, and each station featured its own little disruptive surprise.

One served Himalayan food, but to taste it, guests had to adopt Himalayan customs by sitting on imported mats and eating the food with their hands.

Other surprises came because of the food. One station served “bone marrow” that emerged grilled from the oven with each bone-half browned perfectly. Upon biting into the marrow, guests got a shock: it was *actually* lobster mousse.

Another station served what appeared to be ordinary hamburgers. They looked mouth-watering, of course, but hardly “disruptive.” The disruption was in the details: that delicious-looking beef turned out to be vegetable protein.

The dessert display looked like a laboratory with things bubbling in glass jars. They used a food printer to print chocolate medallions.

“We blew their minds,” grins Sulaiman.

This kind of creativity is no accident. Sulaiman chose Hilton because it appealed to his entrepreneurial side, and he has consistently worked hard among his peers to make sure his menu is always thoughtful and on-point for the client.

Nigeria-born Chef Ruffy started his culinary career with a twelve-year stint at the now-defunct Adam’s Mark hotels. Then, a hotel in Orlando gave him his first job as an executive chef, from 1992 to 1997. He then moved to Texas where he worked as the executive chef of resorts and country clubs, but the country club atmosphere was not for him.

Sulaiman wanted to find his way into Hilton and spotted an ad for an executive chef at the Hilton Americas–Houston, a beautiful new hotel under construction. He didn't get the executive chef job, but was offered and accepted the position of executive banquet chef over an offer to be the executive chef of another hotel in Norfolk, Virginia. Knowing that many team members had been at Hilton for years suggested to Sulaiman that he'd be able to grow and extend his career there. He came to Hilton because he wanted to work for a company where he could "go home and stay."

Chef Ruffy, joined Hilton in 2003, playing a key role as a member of the founding team that opened the Hilton Americas. Two years after signing on as an executive banquet chef, he was promoted to executive sous chef. Eight years ago, he was promoted to executive chef. It was a dream job.

Not every chef in the system shared the skills and creativity of Chef Ruffy's team. The quality across hotels varied—widely. "Food and beverage was not where it should be for one of the largest hotel companies in the world," he said.

After noting obvious inconsistencies in food, a company-wide upgrade began to change Hilton's food and beverage program and raise its general standard.

The first step in the company-wide upgrade was bringing in a new head chef: Marc Ehrler, whose culinary experience was gained in luxury hotels around the world. While customers rarely complained about Hilton's food, it wasn't inspiring awe. And Ehrler wanted customers to be *wowed*.

Ehrler formed a group—the Hilton Corporate Culinary Council, composed of "C1" members—to raise the company's standards. Each of the eleven regions was asked to choose a star chef, known for consistent quality and a love of learning, to represent it on the committee.

Sulaiman was chosen as his region's all-star. The group of culinary virtuosos met to discuss ideal dishes and menus, compare regional notes, brainstorm ideas for new menus, and cook with each other. (The authors would like to note that they are available to attend future C1 meetings.)

Once finalized, the new menu was sent out to all domestic Hiltons. Rather than put chefs on the night shift to bring them up to speed, the C1 Council developed materials, like videos, to help chefs with the culinary techniques used in the new meals. The committee's eleven chefs were in charge of teaching and evaluating skills throughout their region's kitchens.

Chef Ruffy traveled to eighteen hotels throughout Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma to lend a hand training other chefs on the new menu. They kept the educational lines open for months by holding workshops at the hotels and hosting training events via video.

You can easily imagine the C1 Council infrastructure congealing into an unattractive bureaucracy: "Could we add a sweet potato with the pecan crust to our Thanksgiving menu?" "Go over by the clock and get one of the pink forms to make that request to C1. After you get the signatures and hand it in, you should hear back in about six weeks."

Instead, after C1 felt like their hotels' skill upgrades were consistent, they stepped back. And then? An explosion of creativity.

They ran a hotel-wide contest for "The Most Beautiful Dish."

Because of this, says Chef Ruffy, "we were able to realize that we have a lot of talents within the company. Some of the dishes that actually won, and we ended up using, are put

together by the sous chefs.” That is, they rewarded *talent* over tenure or title. They let team members set their own bar—and rise to that challenge.

“Now, there's a certain amount of pride within all the hotels. They own the core menus. Now, it's not something mandated to them anymore. It's something that they were part of [creating], which was really a great thing.”

Kitchens are inherently creative places that attract iconoclasts, but the work required by junior positions involves tedious preparation and repetitive, almost factory-line-style execution. Many jumped at the chance to challenge themselves doing what attracted them to the kitchen in the first place.

“Even some of the cooks participated,” Sulaiman says. “[It] gave everyone the opportunity to be out there and be as creative as possible.”

General Manager Jacques D’Rovencourt



After graduating from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas with a degree in hotel administration, Jacques D’Rovencourt completed the Hilton Professional Development Program in 1989. Following his first placement as the assistant restaurant manager at Hilton Irvine in California, he’s worked at hotels in Minneapolis, Chicago, Long Beach, and Baltimore. He began working at the Hilton Americas–Houston as a hotel manager in the spring of 2011. He was appointed as the hotel’s general manager in April 2016.

Hurricane Harvey made landfall on August 25, 2017. It was downgraded to a tropical storm on August 26th—winds over 100 miles an hour had slowed down to 40—but Harvey parked itself above Houston on the 27th and dumped over a year’s worth of rain in less than a week. Harvey’s rainfall totaled over 33 *trillion* gallons of water, more rainfall than any storm in the history of the United States—to build a cube large enough to hold all the water that Harvey dumped, you’d need to make each side 3.1 miles long. The hurricane caused over \$125 billion of damage.

As much as you can be prepared for a natural disaster of that scale, Hilton was prepared. Since the storm popped up on the city’s radar, the management team held daily prep meetings to make sure they had a full stock of supplies and kept the lines of communication open with all team members. There were guidelines and a playbook, but the team knew they needed to be fluid and collaborative.

Lots of things were in the playbook that management used to organize its response to the incoming natural disaster, like ordering supplies, filling up bathtubs, and ensuring an ample

water supply. But the scope of Harvey quickly outgrew what any playbook could have predicted, leaving many decisions up to the team members' best judgment.

D'Rovencourt and his executive committee were worried that the demands of this storm could outstrip the number of people willing to commit to working when the aftermath of the storm might prevent them from getting home to their families for days.

D'Rovencourt said he had no objections when a few team members started asking if they could stay at the hotel and bring their families, but he would check with the executive committee (the heads of all the departments, which included Mo Khan from engineering and Chef Ruffy).

It was rare, but not unheard of, for team members to stay at the hotel; if a team member had pulled a double-shift and their manager was worried they might fall asleep while driving home, or if roads were treacherous due to an ice storm, then offering up a room would be an obvious choice. But overnight stays were rare and small scale.

So, to consider allowing family members to stay was a change in policy that was unprecedented for Houston. To their knowledge, no other hotel in the area had done it. But they were facing an unprecedented challenge and certainly more people would make themselves available to work during their hurricane if their family members could come along.

When the discussion happened, it was amazingly short for such a massive deviation from standard procedure. "We all agreed immediately that it was the right thing to do," said D'Rovencourt.

There was no debate? no controversy? he was asked. "None," he said.

The executive committee surpassed the requests for family members to stay—they allowed people to bring their *pets*. Dogs, cats, and birds were all welcome to stay with their family members. "No one wants to sit here for four days worrying about their dog," said one executive committee member. What if a non-housebroken pet wet the expensive carpets? "We figured we could solve that problem later," he responded, after the team members and their families survived the hurricane.

D'Rovencourt let the team members stay at the hotel before it even crossed his mind to get the area vice president's approval.

A chef stayed in one of the rooms with his wife, who works as a chef at another hotel. She had the option of staying at her hotel during Harvey—but she wouldn't have been allowed to bring her husband. Everyone was welcome at the Hilton. Of the 600-person staff, fully one in three team members volunteered to stay at the hotel. Family members responded generously. Spouses and kids served food in the cafeteria. Adults and teens volunteered in the laundry or with the Red Cross at the convention center across the street.

The kitchen kept everyone fed—*everyone*. Members of the Houston Police Department, team members and their families all ate for free in the hotel cafeteria during Harvey. When more empty mouths arrived in search of a meal, more tables were rolled in, feeding 500 people per meal.

"The first night it went from feeding 500 people to 1,000. And then before I knew it, it was definitely 3,000 people," says Chef Ruffy. "I worked almost two weeks. So yes. We did what we had to do. But in the long run, it was good to be there to take care of people, to take care of folks."

The hotel became a command center for two divisions of the Houston Police Department, who had been flooded out of their own spaces. The hotel fed them, too. “They had a free breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. We made sure everyone in the hotel had a hot meal every day,” noted Lula Broussard, the hotel’s cafeteria supervisor. In total, Broussard and her team served over 25,000 meals during the hurricane to everyone working in the hotel.

Innovation and teamwork smoothed out the initial bumps to be expected from hosting hundreds of newcomers. Newly erected signage helped guide the massive number of guests. After the hotel became a temporary command center for law enforcement, team members brought in extra TVs to common areas, giving the police department another way of staying updated. Police were grateful to use the gated parking garage—gratitude that increased traffic, resulting in a compromise: we’ll leave the gate open if you park a squad car to watch the vehicles inside. Other hotels in the area, meanwhile, were closing their doors to all police, fire and rescue personnel who needed to use the restroom.

Members of relief organizations, including the Red Cross, stayed at the George R. Brown Convention Center across the street, connected by a skybridge. The convention center was set up to house 1,000 displaced residents, but after a few days, 10,000 displaced Texans transformed the convention center into a sea of cots. The Hilton helped cook for the displaced residents, donated towels, and even washed linens. The front desk fielded constant phone calls about housing availability from residents, heads of various city departments, Homeland Security, the Department of Health and Human Services and Veteran Affairs, and journalists covering the storm for CNN.

People returned home as they felt safe to go; five days, for some. D’Rovencourt stayed for nine days. A few, whose homes were damaged, remained at the hotel for months. Harvey helped prepare the hotel for future disasters. They’ve since created a texting service that allows management to text all staff members quickly. Checking supply lists, keeping reserves and backups of everything, and emergency training practice became more frequent, from “before a storm” to “all the time.” They’re prepared for anything.

On Standardized Norms and Practices

If you were the energy czar of Hilton, you might be tempted to force every hotel to install systems to minimize energy usage, a surefire way to get massive savings. But enforcing specific practices runs counter to Hilton’s culture of granting autonomy over *how* team members meet their goals. If the organization truly ran like the wild west, there would be no Hilton organization left to discuss—but it’s the *how* that differentiates Hilton’s approach.

Opportunities for fostering team members’ engagement and entrepreneurial thinking happens in all departments, from engineering and food to crisis management. In operations, a system called LightStay facilitates the balance between team member autonomy and achieving Hilton’s corporate goals of reducing waste as well as energy and water use. LightStay tracks overall energy usage and sustainability efforts, but how each hotel achieves those targets is up to the Mo Khan of each property. Giving the team members ownership over which energy-saving mission to tackle makes it easier to find flow—and this, in turn, has led to over a billion dollars in energy savings over the past decade.

The chefs-in-competition C1 story suggests another workaround that could maximize the benefits of both regulations and autonomy: an occasional training period to ensure standardized skill levels, followed by a period with fewer external constraints that would allow creativity to flourish. Offering employees breaks between these periods of bar-raising and goal-setting decreases perceived depletion among workers. While repeatedly raising the bar seems like a good short-term strategy, research has shown that over time, it increases fatigue and burnout, and it may even backfire in encouraging unethical behavior as employees start to believe they are not going to be able to achieve the increasing targets by traditional means and decide to game the system.

While stories at the 1,200-room Hilton Americas–Houston are clearly massive in scale—Texan, even—examples of innovation by individual employees are not rare. Waffles flourish in Kansas City and 007 bars in London’s Swinging Sixties because of this very entrepreneurial spirit.

Hilton employees benefit from a kind of promise: your colleagues will challenge you to stretch your skills. If you’ve mastered the small-town hotel, it’s time to hit the center city.



**THE HILTON EFFECT
ON COMMUNITIES**

Commitment Importance, Social Connections, and Economic Development

In the late 1950s, Harvard professor Thomas Schelling quizzed people about a curious game he invented:

You have been paired anonymously with another individual. If, at some point over the next 24 hours, you both show up at the same location in New York City at the same time, you'll both win \$100. (You'll both be wearing big red buttons to spot each other.) Where do you go, and when?

Typically, we'd coordinate our behavior with someone else through communication; sharing information, after all, is the entire point of communicating. But here, Schelling has eliminated the option of communicating with someone else; he's also eliminated the option to learn from failures and successes over time. There is no second shot to get it right.

The reason this dilemma is a dilemma at all lies in the fact that it has an infinite number of possible solutions, like the supply closet of FAO Schwarz at 9:00 p.m., the southeast corner of Lexington and 48th Street at sunset, or the entrance of Rikers Island at four in the morning.

Despite infinite possibilities, Schelling's experiments revealed that people generated a remarkably finite number of answers. When people have to infer how the other person will answer, they gravitate toward a few iconic locations, the things that stick out most.

Everyone chooses to meet at noon, that most vanilla of hours. Native New Yorkers tend to pick the clock by the information booth at Grand Central Station. People who don't live in New York usually gravitate toward the site that sticks out more to their tourist-oriented minds: the observation deck at the top of the Empire State Building.

Schelling labeled these solutions—the most salient points in the same area—as “focal.” Certain locations, certain people, certain experiences become shared enough in common that people can, without discussion, almost telepathically know what someone else is going to find noteworthy or important.

Just imagine playing this game with someone in Paris: when do you meet? Noon. Where do you meet? The Eiffel Tower. There are multiple decks so you might pick the wrong one, but at least you've reduced an infinite number of guesses to a couple.

Playing in London? You meet at Big Ben.

Cairo, Egypt? You grab a camel and make the cross-desert trek toward the Great Pyramid. Who knows—maybe you'll meet your fellow red-button wearer on the way.

Istanbul? There's a good chance you might pick the entrance to the blue mosque. But there's a not-insignificant chance you might pick the entrance to the Hilton Istanbul.

Istanbul: an Important Place

Emerging as a focal point is a bit of a chicken-and-egg scenario: where do people choose as focal points? Important places. And why are they important? Because people go there.

Plenty of buildings in New York are older than Grand Central, so it takes more than time to create a focal point. Grand Central, for example, is a transportation hub—shuttling around

millions of New Yorkers daily—as well as an architectural icon, with both distinctions contributing to its reputation as a place to go.

Every icon was once unknown; something has to get the ball rolling. Conrad Hilton was ready to get the ball rolling when the Hilton Istanbul opened. When so many organizations in the era of post-WWII reconstruction efforts were spending conservatively and staying close to home, Hilton was ready to party. And that's just what the world seemed to need.

On June 9, 1955, a pair of Pan American airliners that Hilton rented, temporarily nicknamed *The Flying Carpet* and *The Magic Carpet*, landed in Turkey, packed with precious cargo—his guests for the grand opening. This 106-person list of luminaries included Carol Channing, the Olympic figure skating gold medalist-turned-actress Sonja Henie, and William R. Hearst Jr., all greeted at the airport by thousands of Turks. It took the bellboys 45 minutes to carry their 1,200 suitcases to the rooms. After the five-day opening extravaganza, the Hollywood celebrities returned home, but left the Istanbul Hilton with a lingering aura of importance. Their presence cemented the Hilton Istanbul as *the* place to go.

In his remarks to the assembled guests, Hilton foresaw that the Hilton Istanbul would be merely the first international location with many more to come, each acting as a focal point for people to come together from very different walks of life. (He even predated the language that would win Thomas Schelling the Nobel Prize):

The time is not too far distant when a traveler, circling the globe, will be able to stop at a Hilton hotel in almost any world city he may visit. . . . These hotels express our ideal that any hotel anywhere should be more than just the center of the community. From an international aspect, the hotel can become the focal point for the exchange of knowledge between millions of people, citizens and visitors alike, who have gathered there because they desire to know each other better, trade with each other and live with each other in peace.

– Conrad Hilton, 1955, Istanbul Hotel Scrapbook (Comments at the opening of the Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus)

The Hilton Istanbul ballroom became the city's largest room for festivities, a place for locals to celebrate weddings and milestones (in thoroughly air-conditioned comfort as one might expect from a Hilton property). Its cafés became places for important cups of coffee. At a focal point, everything—even a cup of coffee—has a special meaning.

“Drinking a cup of coffee in Turkey has a very special significance,” Conrad Hilton wrote in *Be My Guest*. “It was explained to me the first time I was offered a demitasse of the strong local brew. ‘After you drink a cup of coffee with me,’ said my host, ‘that commits you to friendship for thirty years.’”

While the novelty faded, the sense of prestige remained over the years. In time, the Hilton Istanbul became the place for the Turkish elite to meet and marry. In the summer of 1972, a record 21 couples got married at Hilton Istanbul—21 weddings, that is, in a single *week*.

Aydın Doğan recalls visiting the hotel as a student. “In those years even having a cup of tea at Hilton was a privilege.” After getting engaged, he promised his fiancée that they'd hold their wedding there, but family obligations rerouted their plans to a wedding in Gümüşhane.

Fate was kind to Doğan. He founded Doğan Holding, one of Turkey's largest conglomerates that has vast stakes in that country's energy, advertising, and media industries (including *Milliyet*), and he became a billionaire after it went public.

In 2005, the Turkish-based Doğan Group purchased the hotel for \$255 million.

Imagine your husband coming home and saying, "You know that wedding celebration we were going to have at the Hilton? Well I came up with a way of apologizing for not being able to make that happen at the time."

Success feeds on itself. Once a place becomes focal, it's likely to stay that way. This justifies some extra effort to bring the would-be focal point into collective recognition. Hilton lined up an all-star cast of first visitors and an elaborate suite of activities that may look like overkill, but not when you think of it as a bid to establish the location as focal.

Can the same strategy be used minus the starlets and luggage? It would be worth considering for a general manager of a hotel or restaurant. What kinds of events do we actively recruit? Which ones do we go all out for in terms of preparations? The right events would probably feature a diverse set of people in a community coming together for an emotional event. Toy drives around holiday time, featuring gift wrapping. An end-of-season dinner for an amateur football league. A waffle-making contest at the city fall festival, sponsored by Hampton by Hilton.

Game theorist Schelling was fascinated with how people cooperate without communication, but in the real world, the letter we get asking us to cooperate contains a slightly larger ask. Instead of "meet tomorrow," we get a letter saying: "let's meet here. Help me set up shop. We'll be good neighbors, build the community so visitors come. If we can work together, economic goodies await."

But how do we know if people are going to do what they say they will do? It's easy to stay committed when things go well, less so when things take a turn for the worse. In the real world, we have information that helps us decide if we should cooperate: we have information about someone else's reputation.

If we're surrounded by cooperators, the best strategy is to form a team and play ball together. But if we're surrounded by people who prioritize their own interests, we need to protect ourselves as well. Schelling would have considered the task of revitalizing a downtrodden area as a cooperation dilemma of this kind, where talk is relatively cheap and untrustworthy. We want to believe the promises—*Let us meet here, set up shop, be good neighbors, build the community so visitors come. If we can work together, economic goodies await.* But how do we know people are going to do what they say they will do?

Communication never tells the whole story. Your buyer says, "The check is in the mail." Your colleagues say, "You confront the boss, and we'll be right there backing you up!" Your date says, "I am completely over my ex."

How does this look in practice? Let's take a lesson from one of the most remarkable transformations in the history of how big cities develop, which happens to feature Hilton in a very prominent role.

Buenos Aires

Staying committed in tough times is how a Hilton hotel helped one of the most derelict neighborhoods in Buenos Aires become one of its most preferred.

Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, lies on the shore of Río de la Plata, just 150 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. International cargo ships could get close—but the river's shallow waters made it impossible for them to actually reach the shore. Over the years, the city made this possible by building a 115-foot quay in 1802, which was extended to 650 feet in 1855. Boats were also moored offshore and greeted by barges that collected cargo and passengers. Finally, the city constructed Puerto Madero, which created a narrow but deep waterway with docks—a lane essentially allowing cargo ships to parallel park. A row of brick warehouses lined the cityside, followed by the narrow waterway. On the newly constructed riverside, Puerto Madero, was a harbor; behind it were hundreds of acres of grass fields.

When the docks opened in 1897, they were hailed as a landmark of engineering. But within a decade, international cargo ships began outgrowing the width of the docks, rendering them useless. The area around Puerto Madero was no longer needed; over the years, businesses drifted away, and locals trickled away from using the coastline by the grass fields.

It was less than a kilometer away from the Presidential Palace, but years of decay and neglect degraded the entire area into an eyesore: garbage floated in the water; warehouses were emptied and covered with graffiti. Dozens of attempts to revitalize the area failed over the years. Finally, in late 1989, the Argentine federal government and the Buenos Aires local city government signed an agreement to revitalize the neighborhood.

Local developer Alberto Gonzalez purchased some of that vacant, grass-covered land on the riverside of Puerto Madero, by docks 3 and 4. Gonzalez was a man who knew the importance of focal points. Once a TV producer and content distributor, he had envisioned a sports stadium or convention center on top of his land, but after running the projections, opted for a hotel with a large meeting space.

"They looked at the brands that were not present in the city of Buenos Aires at the time, hotel brands. Hilton was the evident one," says Tom Potter, Hilton vice president for the Caribbean and Latin America. After beginning conversations with Hilton in 1998, Gonzalez recruited the iconic Argentine architect, Mario Roberto Álvarez. Álvarez's contributions to the area skyline also include the IBM building (the corporation's Latin American headquarters) and the Teatro General San Martín.

Gonzalez, Álvarez, and Hilton—a power trio in the Argentine real estate development world. What could possibly go wrong?

Everything.

In the tail end of 1998, a tremor erupted in Argentina's historically turbulent economy. Things went south.

After committing to opening the hotel in January 2000, Gonzalez went bankrupt in 1999. The economy got worse. He'd also committed to throwing an unforgettable party to usher in the



millennium on December 31, 1999, where he envisioned 600 guests covering the hotel's opulent lobby and ground floor.

But the economy wouldn't cooperate.

"It became pretty complex at the time, actually," says Potter. One of the project's key contractors, a German construction company, went bankrupt before finishing the water tank. "That delayed the completion of the contract and all the property."

Contractors and utility companies still needed to add infrastructure to the grassy area; drains, sewers, electricity, and telephone lines were all in limbo. "Everything was only done within the year of construction 1999. It was right before the hotel was actually opened."

Even the road in front of the Hilton was paved just three months before the opening. Without the backbone of Gonzalez, Álvarez, and Hilton working in unison, the entire operation could have easily fallen apart. But Gonzalez got his party.

The Hilton Buenos Aires was the first commercial building in Puerto Madero when it

opened in March 2000.

"Initially, business was not ideal because of the economic environment in Argentina at the time," says Potter. In July 2001, unemployment was 14.7 percent. Just when there seemed to be a lull, things got *worse*.

That month, Standard and Poor's cut the entire country's credit rating to B-. Unemployment increased.

Fear that pesos would soon be worthless caused an Argentine bank run in November that year, further eroding economic stability.

By mid-December 2001, the country's unemployment rate hit 20 percent. Argentines rioted in the streets less than a quarter mile away at the Presidential Palace.

Despite occasional signs that things would stabilize—or at least, not get worse—the event that began as a financial tremor turned into a four-year economic depression. Local wage cuts and limits on bank account withdrawals made it harder for locals to put money back into their own economy.

It's possible that a boutique hotel, or a brand with shallower pockets, wouldn't have been able to withstand paying its staff during that early, slow period.

A known, international hotel brand is a secure bridge to the outside world, a sign of a steady influx of money and moneyed foreigners arriving from lands with healthier economies. Even in a crisis, it can offer enough stability to keep the lights on for an entire neighborhood

during construction. If it's strong enough, it can even reverse decline and foster economic development in the middle of a crisis.

And the Hilton name was strong enough to do just that; both Schelling and Conrad would be proud.

"Within about six months, other properties gradually started developing," recalls Potter. The Argentine Petroleum Company YPF began construction on its landmark building right across the road from the Hilton. Two embassies even relocated there.

"Very rapidly, this became a center for opportunities and development for Buenos Aires, because there were large open pieces of land." If land is the real estate developers' canvas, then large parcels of land located a quarter mile from the Presidential Palace in a cosmopolitan capital are once-in-a-lifetime, utopian-level canvases. So it's obvious that other businesses and developers would eventually set up shop there.

But here, it's worth pointing out that *those parcels had been available for decades*.

It took a special focal point to get the ball rolling. "Within about two years, probably 25 percent of Puerto Madero was being fully developed," Potter estimates.

Today, Puerto Madero is a thriving hub in Buenos Aires for international businesses, expats, and locals with a taste for contemporary architecture. Any graffiti in Puerto Madero today would most likely belong to Banksy. In less than two decades, it's grown from a grassland by some abandoned docks to its slightly sexier status as the city's wealthiest neighborhood where football (soccer) superstar Lionel Messi calls home when he's in town.

The Costanera Sur Ecological Reserve sits behind the still-growing row of modern skyscrapers. It's the city's largest and most biodiverse green space, a natural playground measuring over 865 acres.

The developer Alberto Gonzalez died a year after the Hilton opened, "but just after he left a final legacy," says Potter. Following an analysis that a lack of public access could stifle Puerto Madero's revitalization efforts, Gonzalez decided to solve that problem in a spectacular fashion. As a present to the city, he hired the world-renowned Spanish architect and structural engineer Santiago Calatrava to design a new pedestrian bridge connecting Puerto Madero to the rest of the city.

Calatrava designed El Puente de la Mujer, the Women's Bridge, to represent a couple dancing tango. (That it can swivel to allow ships to pass in minutes also makes it an engineering marvel.)

The bridge is now one of the most-photographed landmarks in Buenos Aires, a perfect symbol connecting the city's storied past to its new era of revitalization and growth.

"Today it's one of the icons of the city," says Potter.

Sadly, Gonzalez died while the bridge was being installed.

When weighing his options for how to attract more attention to the area, Gonzalez ultimately chose the larger investment—a bridge, not a billboard; infrastructure, not marketing. Revitalizing an area as large as Puerto Madero requires a sizeable infusion of capital to counteract decades of neglect. Getting a return on your investment depends on how much an area ultimately improves. Putting money on the table in front of everyone made it easier for others to contribute to the pot by decreasing the perceived risk. They don't want to lose their investment, either.

Hilton was the lucky beneficiary of Gonzalez's brilliant vision. But the Hilton name was a huge resource that added credibility to the commitment, giving additional value to that collective pot. Key actors with credible histories and reputations for upholding commitments make it easier for others to join in the cause and coordinate successfully. Simply defecting on 1 percent of our commitments can make the observers more reluctant to play ball. A reputation for making credible commitments, on the other hand, makes it easier for everyone to play.

It's easier to invest when you know that others aren't going to back out: they have something riding on it, too. In the middle of a turbulent economic downturn requiring the cooperation of a litany of investors and developers, anyone could back out on the basis of one little flinch.

While overcoming those beginning hurdles required resilience and fortitude, successfully riding out each new difficulty made it easier for others to back the project—and, by extension, the revitalization of Puerto Madero—by continually relaying a very specific signal: *we're not going anywhere*.

The revitalization of Puerto Madero points out the value of Hilton's reputation for following through: the brand can be a pioneer where it wants others to follow.

Cleveland/York, Pennsylvania

Social psychologists refer to two key dimensions when discussing reputation: warmth (the benevolence of someone's intentions) and competence (their ability to follow through on those intentions). Seeing how people have behaved toward others in the past suggests how they'll behave in the future, influencing how easily we reciprocate goodwill.

Brands—especially international brands—are commonly assumed to have competence. Simply being a known entity in business signals competence: that a company knows the ropes well enough to be in businesses at all. They have been in business a long time. They likely know how to stay in business. Brands with long histories have already demonstrated the ability to keep the lights on in turbulent, economic times.

However, how the community responds to a call to build something together (“if we can work together, goodies await!”) depends largely on that second key element of reputation: warmth. Even if we believe someone is competent enough to help grow, *can* grow the overall pie, we still may wonder how that pie is going to be split, and a reputation for warmth helps people believe that it will be split fairly.

Extending an olive branch to the community's wealthiest members might get you a donation, but an extended olive branch with no clear profit motive earns what can't be purchased: goodwill.

The Hilton Cleveland Downtown set an unusual priority in hiring even before it opened in 2016: they gave preference to locals, even favoring an inexperienced local over an outsider with hospitality experience. To find these new team members, they called upon an agency called Towards Employment.

Towards Employment is a Cleveland-based non-profit devoted to helping people struggling to find work because of past mistakes or a lack of opportunities. When the hotel opened, many of these local team members who had never worked in the industry before were lifted out of stints at homeless shelters.

The hotel industry is one that features many jobs where an employee who is willing to work hard actually has a fighting chance when vying for a job against another, more experienced candidate. Keeping the guests happy is usually considered the top priority. Even without a long work history, a willingness to learn, coupled with a strong work ethic, can transform a novice bellhop or housekeeper into a fully proficient one in a short period of time.

Some might object to hiring these people. But hearing the Hilton Cleveland Downtown's General Manager Teri Agosta discuss the hires doesn't make the choice sound risky at all; it just sounds smart.

"We have found that, once we give our Team Members a second chance, they are grateful. Their work ethic and productivity are so much higher. We are absolutely changing lives, that is what we do. And to see [the level of enthusiasm they bring to their jobs] is heart-warming. It is contagious," she adds. Hilton's dramatically generous action generated genuine enthusiasm, and was eagerly reciprocated by the formerly jobless residents who were given first dibs at the jobs.

Hiring untrained team members meant that Hilton had to spend more time training them to bring their competence up to speed. But think of the trade-off: it's difficult, even impossible, to fake genuine warmth. (Numerous studies show that people are surprisingly accurate at spotting fake smiles.) Warmth is the key component of reputation that can't be faked—it's extending genuine goodwill toward others. And it can start from the ground up.

While it seems risky to open a hotel in a major international hub that already has plenty of hotels, that risk is somewhat offset by the reliable demand of a hub—it's like buying blue-chip stock. What about buying stock for a different kind of company: say, a small business without tons of foot traffic that has no plans to expand.

Today, York, Pennsylvania, is a town of just over 40,000; its population peaked in 1950. Its economy may have peaked even earlier: it's the former home of the Pullman motorcar company, a Model-T era line of luxury cars.

Over the past few years, small urban revitalization efforts have started transforming pockets of downtown York. Given the Rust Belt community's small population, a single factory, office building, or store closing downtown can start a ripple effect in either direction.

The Yorktowne Hotel opened in 1925 but sat vacant for years. Nearby property developments—breweries and restaurants—have popped up over the past few years. Despite York's new art galleries, cafés, and bike share program, it's the large, unused buildings that provide the biggest challenge to urban revitalization projects, especially in communities of this size that have lower ceilings on profitability. It can be hard for outside companies to invest when a huge unknown variable sits nearby, since today's large, vacant building can easily become next year's graffiti haven.

In May 2018, the York County Industrial Development Authority announced that the property would reopen as a part of Hilton's Tapestry Collection in 2020. In addition to injecting the area with a new focal point, the deal also creates a relationship with York College hospitality school. Renovations and contracting alone will pump \$30 million into the local economy.

"Hilton in your downtown—that's a prestige factor," says Kevin Schreiber, who serves as the President and CEO of the York County Economic Alliance.

Repeatedly demonstrating both goodwill for the community and a basic sense of business competence makes it easier for others to trust Hilton to keep its doors open—even when it seems like someone else is quickly shutting the doors around us.

Abuja

Even those familiar with geography who have seen a world map a million times probably don't get the real picture. Maps translate our three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional image, an effect most commonly achieved by using the Mercator projection, which was developed in 1569. The image that most of us have when we envision the world achieves its 3D-to-2D distortion by increasing the size of shapes as they get farther away from the equator. As a result, many people underestimate the enormity of Africa. If the globes we use were more accurate, we could see that the United States, China, India, Mexico, France, Spain, Japan, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Nepal, Bangladesh *and* Greece would all fit comfortably inside.

Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa; every sixth African is Nigerian.

In 1976, the Nigerian government voted to move the capital out of Lagos, which was so congested that it took hours to travel a few miles. Moving the capital would finally give Nigeria the chance to have a *neutral* capital, a city emerging from a blank canvas that belonged to no one, and therefore to every Nigerian. The most neutral location in Nigeria would be centrally located but wouldn't belong to any one region or group.

The central, sparsely populated Abuja fit the bill; the decision to move the capital there was finalized in 1991.

"Hilton has always been a pioneer to be the first international hotel in the major capital, whether that's in Asia . . . et cetera," says Andreas Jersaback, now the general manager at Conrad Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus. Jersaback was recruited for the task force to open Hilton Abuja, where he served on its pre-opening team.

Being the first international hotel in a capital usually means that the local infrastructure has reached a level of importance and security that warrants attention from international tourists and business travelers. But with Abuja, the story was reversed. Here, government officials had decided, "See this undeveloped area that's as far as possible from the rest of the country's infrastructure? *Let's move the capital there.*"

Top officials in the Nigerian government had recently visited the Noga Hilton Hotel in Geneva, Switzerland, and decided that they wanted a similar hotel to host heads of state in the country's new capital. The owner, Mr. Nessim Gaon, agreed to build it. And they began.



Hilton kept its commitment to being the first international hotel in the newly created capital of Abuja, despite its lack of infrastructure.

"We had our own sewage plant. We had eight electric power generators. For the construction of the hotel, the hotel built a carpenter factory . . . in Kaduna, which was the next village, for all the lacquered woodwork," says Jersaback. Hilton committed to being the first to open

in the area despite requiring additional work to jumpstart the infrastructure, like building a factory in a neighboring village.

Second, Hilton committed to welcoming diplomats by constructing the hotel with numerous presidential suites, rather than simply building as many rooms as possible to maximize revenue. "We had 50 presidential suites, 160 junior suites, and 40 royal suites built in view of all this future government business."

Then came the final commitment, which turned out to be the craziest of all. The Nigerian government requested that the hotel host the Economic Community of West African States summit, ECOWAS, before the hotel's official opening date.

The hotel was at least a year away from completion. ECOWAS was in two months. Hilton agreed.

The president of Nigeria promptly invited 14 West African heads of state to a two-week summit at the Hilton Abuja.

The Hilton team was committed.

Along with dozens of other team members from 17 Hiltons across the world (Munich and Paris, Brazil and Zurich), Jersaback arrived in London, where the task force was debriefed. Within days, the group was flown to Lagos—no international flights went into the capital—before their convoy made it to Abuja.

"We have to bear in mind that there was basically no qualified staff available in Abuja," says Jersaback. Hundreds of locals clamored at the hotel gate after the task force put out a call for new team members. Because none of them had any previous experience, the hiring process was more haphazard than the norm.

They described how the hiring director would go out of the gates and just point to people. "You, you, you, and you, come." Then once inside, the people would be assigned to their station, "You're going to be a waiter. You're going to be a barman. You're going to be a maid. You go to the cafeteria."

Whatever the Europeans had been planning on using as a training manual was quickly thrown out. Before they could learn how to properly uncork a Chablis, the new hires had to learn how to carry a tray holding three glasses of wine without spilling it. Before they could do that, they had to learn how to carry a tray. Actually, they had to learn about the rules of glassware.

Three weeks before serving heads of state, some of the new team members were introduced to formal cutlery and glassware for the first time in their lives. Some of the team members showed up without socks, since the only ones they owned, which they had worn to work the previous day, had yet to dry. Promotions and specific assignments were given based on the length of individual learning curves.

Elsewhere, *the entire hotel was still being constructed.*

Nature provided some of the initial infrastructure.

“We didn't need a sanitation plant, as vultures were gathering to take care of the garbage,” joked Curt R. Strand, former president of Hilton International Hotels. Team members shot pictures of dozens of vultures hanging out outside the hotel.

“When we first came, [it] was a construction site,” says Jersaback. “We had four weeks' time from basically going to the hotel, which had nothing, which was just an empty shell, to, as I said, unpack, unload, and prepare. We had maybe three weeks' time and then the fourth week was then the actual conference.”

Trucks would deliver hundreds of boxes of sheets, for example. They needed to be unloaded. They needed to be counted. They needed to be organized. They needed to be delivered to each of the hotel's 700 rooms. 700 beds would have to be made. All of the new team members would have to learn how to make a bed.

Mattresses, cutlery, glassware, towels, wine, food, air-conditioning systems, marble—absolutely everything required to finish constructing a five-star hotel in the middle of nowhere.

Toward the end, team members on the task force were working twenty hours a day leading up to the summit to get the hotel and new team members up to speed to prepare for the 800 upcoming guests.

Less than two months after the initial request to have the hotel ready, and one month after the first team members arrived, a construction site was transformed into a fully functioning hotel, with more than 1,000 new team members ready to serve over 800 guests at the conference. Heads of state included.

Hilton hosted ECOWAS.

Afterward, the hotel closed for two months to finish construction, reopening with 70 percent of the original staff intact. Like Buenos Aires, the occupancy rate was less than optimal for the first few months, but Abuja was taking shape as the capital. Three weeks after officially opening, the property was hosting 400 lunches and 600 dinners. Tracks were replaced by paved roads. Schools were built. Businesses were opening.

Conrad Hilton repeatedly said that you never feel 100 percent ready to open a hotel—you just do—but this extreme case was only made possible by the extraordinary efforts of Hilton team members who gathered from around the world. Survivors and veterans of this intense opening emerged with a distinctive badge of honor: saying you were a part of the Abuja start up team earns you immediate respect and is probably good for a drink or two as team members pump you for stories.

Most people think of workers as an organization's *employees*, and because that's what readers are familiar with, we have referred to workers using this term.

But when discussing this lexical decision with Hilton, they would gently correct us: they're not Hilton employees. They're *team members*.

It turns out that language matters, perhaps more than you think.

The Value of Together

A group of researchers at Stanford University set out to understand the benefits of being a part of a team or group. Clearly, social interaction is valuable: a hug from a teammate or a high five goes a long way toward reinvigorating our depleted selves. But these researchers were interested in examining a more provocative claim: they suspected that merely *thinking* of ourselves as members of a team has positive effects. Even without the high fives or the advice or the smiles, people seem to place some value on belonging to a group. But how subtle can the idea of membership be for us to reap any rewards?

The researchers brought students into the lab and gave them what looked like a task from childhood: the instructions were to color a map without using the same color on any two adjacent sections, and without using more than four colors for the entire map. Like parallel parking, the task looked straightforward and innocuous but turned out to be impossible.

Participating students showed up to the lab, and after a few brief hellos with the other participants, each subject was taken to a separate room to work on the puzzle. Everyone was given the same work (an unsolvable task) in the same setting (working alone in a room).

To test the psychological impact of team membership, the experimenters gave half of the participants the lightest, most delicate possible hints that they were members of a team. Subjects in this "together" condition received two tiny cues hinting that they weren't really alone. First, participants in the together condition heard that the study was examining "how people work on puzzles together," while the rest of the participants in an "individual" condition simply heard that the study's objective was to see "how people work on puzzles."

The second cue: two and a half minutes after starting the task, an experimenter entered the room with a piece of paper that contained a tip about solving the puzzle. Participants in the together condition received a tip that was addressed "to" them and "from" another participant; the individual participants simply got a piece of paper that was labeled "for" them.

Participants given two tiny cues of togetherness reported that the task was more interesting. But the most important finding was not about subjective opinions. It was about commitment, despite being caught in an impossible task. The individual participants worked on the map for just over eleven minutes, while those in the together condition worked for seventeen minutes—a full 48 percent longer.

Further iterations of the study found that subjects given together cues felt less taxed afterward and reported less fatigue. Importantly, however, they weren't less fatigued because they were slacking off, together motivated them to work even harder.

Feeling like we're working with others counteracts depletion by giving us the feeling that we have another pool of resources to tap into: other people. Small, simple cues that we're not working alone act as a boost-providing buffer against depletion that allows us to do more, engage deeply, and keep going.

Chris Silcock, Chef Ruffy Sulaiman, Dianna Vaughan, and Jacques D’Rovencourt have never been Hilton employees, because Hilton doesn’t refer to those on its payroll as employees: they’re *team members*. The simple phrase “team members” may do more than even savvy Hilton managers realize. To see how powerful it can be, read the story below about how great of a commitment team members can show.

Sri Lanka

In the 1980s and ‘90s, the Hilton Colombo’s weekly dance party known as the Blue Elephant was the Sri Lankan capital’s place to be.

Kapila Mohotti started working at the hotel as a trainee steward when he was nineteen. He felt a pull toward the Blue Elephant, and asked its resident music-maker, DJ Bunty to teach him the ropes. Practicing before and after his shifts eventually paid off when Mohotti was asked to DJ the Blue Elephant for a night. After Bunty left, Hilton Colombo’s general manager, Gamini Fernando, asked Mohotti if he was interested in becoming the Blue Elephant’s new resident DJ.

“I felt like everything was falling into place,” Mohotti says.

The Blue Elephant was the country’s first international night club; it attracted the socialites and locals who wanted to feel like socialites, drinking with their friends and taking a spin on the dance floor that was somehow always packed until dawn.

The hotel’s current general manager, Manesh Fernando, remembers this era fondly. “This hotel was an oasis in the city.”

With a drink in their hand, spinning on the dance floor, Sri Lankans had a chance to forget what was happening just outside: their country was in the middle of a brutal civil war.

“When you’re inside the war . . . you learn to have a short memory. You learn to handle things. You can’t do one year, two years, three-year planning. When you say ‘bye bye’ to people at that time, you really mean ‘bye’. . . because you’re not sure whether you’re going to come back,” says Fernando.

“People really, *really* used to party at the nightclub.”

The Blue Elephant had a good run for a nightclub, but times change and so do local tastes. Its doors finally closed on April 21, 2007, after nearly twenty years of providing Sri Lankans with champagne, music, a large dance floor, and—most importantly—a place where they didn’t have to think about the difficulties of a war-torn country that’s a magnet for natural disasters.

Sri Lanka’s capital, Colombo, has a population of 700,000; you can see downtown on foot in a day. Federal buildings and major office headquarters are clustered in the Colombo City Centre. In good times, Hilton’s centrality to these places is a boon; in bad times, it’s a target.

Hilton Colombo opened its doors in 1987, four years after the country’s civil war began. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, a separatist group also known as the Tamil Tigers, began an armed conflict with the country’s government in 1983.

On January 31, 1996, the LTTE detonated 440 pounds of explosives near the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, killing 91 people.

The next year, LTTE struck again, targeting the thirty-nine-story, three-day-old World Trade Centre that’s connected to Hilton Colombo.

At the time, the hotel's current general manager, Gamini Fernando, was a management trainee working the night shift. He left the hotel at 3:00 a.m. At 7:00 a.m., while Fernando was asleep at home, the massive bomb—1,000 pounds of explosives in the back of a truck, hidden under bags of rice—exploded.



"Then my staff woke me up and said, there was a big blast in the middle of the city," Fernando remembers. The bomb went off in the parking lot of the Galadari Hotel, shattering windows across buildings downtown and even outside the City Centre. It also destroyed the facades of downtown's international hotel giants: the Galadari, the InterContinental, and the Hilton.

"When I came back, it was all a disaster zone . . . the hotel was in shambles. On one side, there was not a single glass window," says Fernando. Thirty-six foreigners were taken to the hospital; damage ran in the tens of millions of dollars.

Fernando quickly gathered team members to make an announcement: "We will never close, and we will somehow open this hotel really fast." Like D'Rovencourt would do in Houston twenty years later, Fernando never questioned *if* the hotel would stay open. He was simply committed to keeping it open.

Then, the general manager made a second proclamation. "'Don't worry about your pay.' That brought everyone together," says Fernando. In Sri Lanka, part of hospitality workers' salaries is composed of the 10 percent service charge. Knowing that their salaries wouldn't take a nosedive from the inevitable drop in tourism made it easier to keep going. The hotel owners borrowed \$2 million from Hilton to return to normal as soon as possible.

Commitment is a two-way street. Hearing that Hilton was committed to staying open had a specific effect on the staff, Fernando remembers: "We all went into action like an army."

"The urgent thing in hand was to clean up the place . . . we all got gloves and we got buckets to remove all the glass, which was all over the hotel." As they were collecting the glass by hand, they wore helmets and other head coverings to protect against chunks of concrete and glass that would rain down at random times.

Reminders of a shared identity and togetherness help when times are rough, increasing our resilience. Responding to a shared crisis can highlight the shared fate of team members, making groups feel even more connected.

A strong sense of commitment creates a positive upward spiral: knowing we're in it for the long haul makes it easier to do the very things that lead to a better future. Seeing that progress made possible by your extra efforts, in turn, is invigorating; committing makes it easier to stay committed. Hearing that managers were keeping the lights on—and their salaries livable—galvanized the employees to get to work cleaning up the hotel.

Next, a group of engineers from the regional team flew in from Singapore to assess damage to the building and declared the structure to be intact. Knowing that the hotel was committed to staying open made management ask how, not *if*; Fernando and the building's chief engineer decided to protect the hotel's interior by quickly covering it with plywood.

The Galadari hotel next door suffered a similar amount of damage but wavered in their commitment to staying open. According to Fernando, they didn't cover the openings where the bomb had blown out the windows—its managers doubted whether to keep the hotel open at all because of disappointing returns. When foreigners look at the hotel, they tend to put their own point of view as guests in the foreground, with the hotel workers in the background. But locals view a hotel differently, as a place for potential employment, weddings, and the occasional cocktail hour; they're in the foreground, and the guests are in the background. When the foreign owners began doubting if the civil war would ever end, they wondered if tourism would return to normal. If they weren't coming, there was little point in staying.

Things got worse for the Galadari when Colombo was hit by a monsoon after the bomb.

"The storm came and damaged the hotel more than the bomb, I think, because all the water ruined everything inside of the hotel," says Fernando.

After the monsoon, the Galadari closed; the Hilton Colombo resumed its operations within weeks.

By then, the civil war had claimed 50,000 lives and was taking a massive toll on international tourism. For a while, Hilton was Colombo's only international hotel, making it the automatic go-to for foreigners doing business.

Other hotels overlooked how valuable their presence is for local residents, and their closures made Hilton even more of a focal point for locals. Even during a civil war, the residents of Colombo had no choice but to stay. They are truly committed to a location.

"There was no contemplation of closing the place. It's our little world, and Hilton has to operate," says Fernando. When leaving wasn't an option, team members and locals had no choice but to make the most of the situation. They stayed close to each other and developed such a sense of loyalty that they willingly sacrificed for the team. (There were team members who drove over twenty kilometers in risky conditions—through a war zone—to get to work every day).

Years passed and the civil war showed no signs of dying down.

At one point "the whole city was asked to go into dark mode so the aircraft couldn't see where they were supposed to bomb," says Fernando. He adds, "[I] never even wanted to see us closing the hotel in the middle of air raids." The hotel's management decided to cover all the hotel's windows with blackout curtains, aesthetically pleasing from the inside and outside but unopenable, hermetically sealed against leaks of light.

In 2008, a suicide bomber killed nine people—seven of them police—after detonating the bomb at a police checkpoint outside the hotel, damaging some windows. William Costley, the general manager at the time (who now serves as vice president of operations for the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey), like his predecessor, never considered closing the hotel.

By this time, the hotel had built a reputation for staying open and keeping everyone safe; keeping the lights on was simply what was done.



“Life goes on,” says Fernando. “This hotel was the place that people came to and forgot all their issues, forgot all the negativity. It was the place which was pumping the positivity into the city.” It was the one place where life had a semblance of security, where people could reliably form positive memories.

Even the day when the suicide bomber damaged windows on one side of the hotel, life went on.

Civil war doesn’t eliminate people’s desire to get married or throw parties. That day, on the other side of the hotel, a wedding went on as planned.

Remember the snarky *Vogue* writer upset by the businessman eating breakfast in his oasis? In some cases, that oasis may be a life-saving shelter.

Being able to feel safe in a civil war is nothing short of sacred. And keeping that sacred duty has been on the mind of current General Manager Manesh Fernando, ever since he was a management trainee and saw his own General Manager Gamini Fernando, pacing in the lobby in shorts, just before going on stage to tell the team members: “We will never close and we will somehow open this hotel really fast.”

Just hearing the words “*We will never close*” got the team motivated enough to find the answer to “somehow”; commitment facilitates commitment.

Why would it even matter if tourism took a temporary dip? Tourists are just one side of the coin; locals crave the light and warmth of hospitality, too.

Knowing that the lights were on, and that other team members needed them, made it easier to stay. Of the 700 team members currently working at Hilton Colombo, 200 have been on the team since the first bomb went off in 1996.

Conrad Hilton’s vision was simple: to be a reliable source of hospitality to his guests. But he couldn’t possibly have predicted how committing to this vision—to fill the earth with the light and warmth of hospitality—would take on entirely different meanings throughout the world over 100 years.

Hilton hotels can broaden travelers’ worlds and build communities simply by committing to the company’s primary purpose of being hospitable. Being hospitable provides an oasis that keeps its lights on while anchored to a place. Committing to being an anchor—with doors open for both locals and guests—builds a reputation for reliability that makes it increasingly easier for others to commit.

Modern contracts are written so that people are not responsible for their contractual duties in the case of an “act of God.” Here’s a generic act of God clause:

The Escrow Agent shall not be responsible for any failure or delay in the performance of its obligations under this Agreement arising out of or caused, directly or indirectly, by circumstances beyond its reasonable control, including without limitation, acts of God, earthquakes, fires, floods, wars, civil or military disturbances, sabotage, epidemics, riots, accidents, labor disputes, acts of civil or military authority, or governmental actions.

It would be understandable if any of these situations disrupted service—the very purpose of this clause legally allows people to abandon their contracts in dire situations beyond their control. But the language of this contract echoes a list of the hardships endured by team members in places like Colombo, Cairo and Japan.

Fires? Yup.

Floods? Yes.

Wars, civil or military disturbances, sabotage? *Check and mate.*

No one would fault an employee for clocking out early during any of these situations, but this is the time when Hilton employees manage to rally the *most*. Team members consistently commit to the team, in turn enabling Hilton to keep its commitments to the communities it serves.

In Buenos Aires, the ever-worsening economic crisis led to the bankruptcy of key investors and contractors prior to the hotel's completion. As the crisis developed into a full-blown depression, the hotel remained committed to opening on time and keeping the lights on. Committing to paying team members a stable wage kept the lights on in tough times. When Hilton was the only commercial building in a neighborhood, it was such a signal of stability that it spurred development in the surrounding area, transforming it from acres of grasslands and abandoned buildings to the wealthiest neighborhood in Buenos Aires—in the middle of a depression.

In Cairo, the Arab Spring revolution began near the Nile Hilton, and that hotel supported pro-democratic protesters. Someone commented, "It's no accident that these events unfolded near the Hilton because it's always been at the heart of the city." And it was at the heart of the city because, like Buenos Aires, it provided a focal point that the city grew toward.

In Japan, team members survived the apparent wrath of a whole gaggle of the gods themselves, enduring an earthquake, a tsunami, and a nuclear power plant meltdown.

It's easy to commit to a location in good times. Demonstrating commitment in locations in rough times? Not as much.

Conrad Hilton probably couldn't have imagined his hotel in a city being bombed multiple times over a decade. But he would have been proud to have his name associated with the Colombo hotel because the team members embodied his vision of hospitality at its best.

On November 5, 1954, Hilton addressed the American Hotel Association convention in New York City. He told the following version of an ancient story:

Once upon a time, darkness and cold filled the world. Then one day, Prometheus decided to steal fire from the gods and bring it to Earth. Lines of men, women and children waited, stretched from the highest mountaintop to the ends of the earth, ready to receive the flame—and pass it on. Suddenly came a flash of lightning, and the first torch of the nearest man was

afire. Quickly the flame passed from hand to hand. From one flame came ten, from a hundred came a thousand, from city to city, country to country, until light and warmth filled the Earth. That is the story of our industry. As hotel men and women, it is our responsibility to fill the Earth with the light and warmth of hospitality.

“Filling the Earth with the light and warmth of hospitality.” Today, in little ways and big, Hilton is pursuing that vision, creating the Hilton Effect for guests, and team members, and communities:

- A guest goes abroad on a business trip for the first time to convince a customer who speaks a different language to buy her goods. She’s already dreading complex negotiation, but she gets excited to see her favorite breakfast foods from home on the buffet. It’s going to be a long day, but she’ll at least have a good breakfast. Her mom would be proud.
- A young *team member* from Abuja, Nigeria, is managing banquets at the Embassy Suites in Houston, Texas. He is called into his manager’s office and asked whether he would like to be night manager for a while. “It’s a tough job,” he is told, “but you’ll learn so much.”
- A bellhop from Cleveland shows a family to their room—they feel re-energized by his enthusiasm and how much he knows about the history of the hotel. Before he got this job, he was unemployed for five years.

Return of the Blue Elephant

In 2018, the Blue Elephant announced it would reopen for a retro party on August 10th and 11th, more than ten years after it closed.

DJ Kapila returned for the night, though it’s more accurate to say that he *stayed*. Kapila Mohotti is now the hotel’s head of food and beverage, and has been working at Hilton Colombo for over thirty years.

“People were asking for us to open it again because of all the memories,” says General Manager Fernando.

The announcement of the reunion retro party at the Blue Elephant created some buzz on social media. People waxed nostalgic and poetic about their past nights there, and speculated about how many old friends would show up, a decade later, to honor a club that existed for a while in a downtown hotel, providing some light and warmth to people in a country where acts of God were a recurring feature of life.



When you don’t know how long the good will last, you learn how to savor the present.

At the retro party, the line to get in was full of smiling faces, with more than a few people squeezed into clothes that had been living in the back of their closet for years. The bar was slammed with requests. So was the DJ. “It was packed,” said Fernando.

The DJ cranked the Whitney Houston anthem, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." The music was loud and the drinks were cold in a hotel that had never closed its doors, that had always provided light and warmth even in dark, dark hours.

And they danced.

AFTERWORD TO THE HILTON EFFECT

By CHRISTOPHER J NASSETTA, President & CEO, Hilton

Like so many of the Team Members that Chip and Karla met while researching The Hilton Effect, I got my start in the hospitality industry at a very early age. My dad encouraged me to work during my summers in high school in a Washington D.C. hotel's engineering department. In fact, I plunged so many toilets one summer that my parting gift was a plunger spray-painted gold. Despite that dubious honor, I fell in love with the industry, and never looked back.

But it wasn't until I joined Hilton as CEO a decade ago that I came to fully grasp what Conrad Hilton understood so many years before me – that the potential for travel to empower people rests on a hospitality company's ability to enable travelers to be their best selves. Conrad himself cracked the code in the opening of his first hotel in Cisco, Texas, when he determined that the trick to making guests happy was establishing an esprit de corps among his employees – a team culture that encouraged them to innovate in the moment to enrich their guests' experience.

Today, as Chip and Karla themselves discovered, our 400,000 Team Members remain true to our heritage across all 5,400 Hilton hotels in 106 countries and territories, and counting. Answering Conrad's call, more than 10 million Team Members have filled the earth with the light and warmth of hospitality since our founding, serving more than 3 billion travelers. Hilton has also driven \$1 trillion in economic impact over the last 100 years in the communities we serve across the globe.

We inspire our guests to explore, dream, reunite with loved ones, take action, connect with cultures, do things they never thought they would do – changing their world and ours.

In a time that seems characterized by so much anxiety and discord, the unifying power of travel has never been needed more than it is today. That's the trick of travel: It expands our view of the world while at the same time drawing us closer to diverse peoples around the globe.

As I often say, we are in a Golden Age of travel. Emerging middle classes in places like India and China are fueling a global thirst for exploration and adventure, opening up more and more destinations to new cultures and ideas. In 2017, we had 4 billion air travelers. In just 20 years, that number will double.

That is why I am so grateful – as we celebrate our centennial – that we're using Hilton's century of experience in creating meaningful human connections to pioneer an exciting new era for hospitality. As we hit the century mark, Hilton has never been more dynamic.

We are paving the way in new travel destinations, opening hundreds of hotels across nearly 50 countries and territories in our anniversary year alone.

We are enabling millions of middle-class families in China to travel with more comfort and assurance as we introduce affordable, high-quality hotels across the country.

We continue leading the way in creating new travel frontiers across Africa, with a commitment to open 100 new hotels by 2022 through our Hilton Africa Growth Initiative.

We are catering to the evolving needs and preferences of the new generations of travelers by adding smart new brands to our portfolio of 14 best-in-class brands, and continuing industry-first innovations like the first truly-mobile centric hotel experience with the invention of Connected Room.

Every day, we challenge ourselves to honor the pioneering spirit that our founder infused in his creation of the world's first global hospitality company.

When I read Chip and Karla's research, I am humbled to be part of this story they call "The Hilton Effect." I truly believe that the world is a better place because Hilton was born 100 years ago, and if we do our jobs right – the world will be a better place because Hilton is in it for the next 100 years.



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Chip Heath is a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business. His research has been published in top academic journals in psychology, economics, organizations, and management science. In addition, he has written four books with his brother, Dan. Their newest book, *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact*, was published in late 2017 and spent three months on the New York Times bestseller list. Their previous three books –*Decisive*, *Switch*, and *Made to Stick*--have all been Wall Street Journal and New York Times bestsellers and two of them reached #1. Their books have been translated into 33 languages including Thai, Arabic, and Lithuanian.

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Karla Starr has written for *O*, *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, *Popular Science*, *the Guardian*, and *the Los Angeles Times*, and appeared on *CBS Sunday Morning* as an expert on luck. The recipient of a Best Science/Health award from the Society of Professional Journalists, she lives in New York. Her first book, *Can You Learn to Be Lucky? Why Some People Seem to Win More Often Than Others*, was published by Penguin in 2018.

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