A GROUP OF HOTELS IN INDIA TAKES A BIG LEAP FOR ABILITY BY EMPLOYING — AND ESTABLISHING AN INCLUSIVE, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY WORK CULTURE FOR — STAFF MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES

TEXT & PHOTOS: SHIVANI MOHAN

Devender Singh, 28, cheerful and ever-smiling, has a sparkle in his eyes as he mans the front desk of Lemon Tree Premier Hotel, Aerocity, New Delhi. He is athletic, left-handed and dreams of heading a hotel like the one he works in, some day.

Azad, 24, tall and well-built, is one of the most positive and gregarious team members working in the coffee shop of
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EMPLOYING CHANGE

Disabled people die almost 10 years earlier in India than in other countries, partly for lack of opportunities.

The group collaborated with Arun Rao of the Deaf Way Foundation and Meera Bhatia of Sai Swayam, to design their teaching, sensitisation and feedback curriculum including workplace safety practices – like giving whistles to all EWD employees to attract attention and help in an emergency.

Speaking of the synthesis process, Rahul says, “Sensitisation of employees has been the most intense part of the exercise. Today, our general managers and department heads are taught Indian sign language. Now we’re also teaching it to colleagues at the corporate office. One of our chief operating officers said our meetings will be shorter and more effective if we speak in sign language!”

What is the one quality they look for while selecting EWDs? “Attitude,” says Rahul, going on to talk about his executive assistant, Shubham, who is 100 per cent visually impaired, very bright, and an MBA. He is a big fan of Salman Khan movies, wears an ear-stud and goes to the gym every day.

Nikhil Sharma, Assistant Vice President, Operations, who has more hands-on experience with EWDs says, “After initial teething problems, we realised they wanted a sense of community. We try to have 8-10 EWDs in any unit so they don’t feel alienated. Then they start interacting better with the “abled” staff who also need to be sensitised to their needs. Then it’s an absolute delight to watch them blossom and grow.”

Nikhil adds, “It is not just a source of employment we are creating in their life, but hopefully changing their whole life. Do you know disabled people die almost 10 years earlier in India than in other countries? It is because they are ostracised socially, lack opportunities and are discriminated against by their closest kith and kin. With an income, they get a sense of pride and accomplishment.”

Today, he says, all their employees are richer in terms of experience and learning, interacting with EWDs. The group has believed in adapting and facilitating EWDs in every way. Nikhil related an interesting incident: “Once we noticed that they all used Chinese mobile phones. We soon found out it was for video calling. They all call each other and probably chat more than us! So we put up computers in the hotel’s back areas, so that they can communicate through skype with their colleagues!”

The SHIs, such as Azad, carry a card with them that they provide guests and request them to scribble their food orders on – a simple solution to a not-so-complex problem. For incorporating orthopedically challenged staff, the hotels widened the doorways everywhere so that wheel-chairs could pass through easily. Other than these little personalised touches, all the staff share the same locker rooms, and follow the same set of rules.

Rahul Pandit and his team of dynamic young directors do not want to sit on their achievements and laurels just yet. The group has ambitious plans, including a new hotel in Gurgaon which will be staffed almost entirely by EWDs. With a look of great hope in his eyes, Rahul says, “We are confident of accomplishing this unique endeavour and becoming the first hotel to be manned by close to 100 per cent EWDs and socio-economically marginalised individuals.”

What has been the guests’ reaction? “Our guests are delighted by the service levels by EWDs at our hotels. I think this initiative engenders a sense of pride, which in its own small manner is Lemon Tree’s contribution to nation building. We are regularly motivated by guest feedback and get repeat customers due to this, on our internal feedback forms or on social media forums like TripAdvisor.” The group sources EWDs from various NGOs besides the Vocational Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled People, run by the Ministry of Labour & Employment, Government of India. EWDs are recruited, trained and evaluated using specific processes created for them. Besides SHI employees, they are also recruiting the Orthopedically Handicapped (OH) now. Rahul sums up, “We are an equal opportunity employer. All colleagues are treated at par; there is no disparity in salaries.”

FACE OF AMBITION: Maya Kumari works in housekeeping and aspires to rise in the ranks at Lemon Tree

LEADING THE INITIATIVE: Rahul Pandit, President and Executive Director, Lemon Tree Hotels

Project Sankalp perhaps emerged from the inherent ‘do things differently’ ethos of the Lemon Tree group.

LEADING THE INITIATIVE: Rahul Pandit, President and Executive Director, Lemon Tree Hotels