

Protecting Culture In A Crisis

In this article from Chief People Officer at luxury hotel management company, Dorchester Collection, Eugenio Pirri explains how they placed their culture, values and brand ethos at the heart of their COVID-19 response across the globe.

I'm sure I am not alone in saying that no amount of continuity planning, or scenario training, could have prepared us for the past six months. A global pandemic of this scale. A world united in crisis. Standing together clapping for our key workers. Grieving together as the global death toll reached hundreds of thousands. It was, and still is, a challenge like no other that I have faced in my career.

While this was by no means Dorchester Collection's first foray into a crisis, and although we had many crisis management processes in place, this was something altogether different. First, the pandemic hit each of our hotels at different times; creating immediate uncertainty for those who were impacted first in our Italian hotels and a wider ripple of anxiety for those in France, the United Kingdom and America, who could see the virus steadily making its way towards them.

Second, there was no singular global response to the virus. Italy saw one of the toughest lockdowns, with the UK following a similar stance. Our American hotels, however, remained open with a small number of guests using them as their lockdown home. Each country's Government put in place different guidelines, rules and support packages which businesses and individuals could pull upon in these times of uncertainty.

Finally, being remote became, and for many still, the new normal – whether that was for those still working, or those who weren't but were in lockdown away from family and friends.

This combination meant that, almost overnight, a new culture and a new perspective was created. One that we needed to understand and quickly align to our values; ensuring we continued to prosper as an organisation. Previous learnings from handling a crisis, meant that we knew we had to focus on our people first, and then create a response which was in keeping with our brand and culture.

Protecting Our Culture

We are clear on what we wish to achieve as an organisation. It is our overarching vision to be treasured by guests, cherished by employees and celebrated worldwide.

Our values of passion, personality, respect, working together and creativity, underpin all that we do to ensure this vision is realised across the organisation.

Protecting this culture, our core, our DNA, is our priority, regardless of crisis. For us, our response, and now our return to operation, has never been about COVID-19. Instead it remains to be about our vision – how, with a COVID-19 backdrop, can we create an experience which ensures we will continue to be loved by our guests, enables our people to feel valued and, as an organisation, will be held up as exemplary in the luxury market across the world.

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For our people, we needed them to feel safe, secure and informed. We immediately removed the most serious concern by committing to protect the roles and salaries of all 4,000 employees across the world. Keeping them informed was critical, and what this crisis brought forth, like no other, was the critical role of employee communications (more on this later).

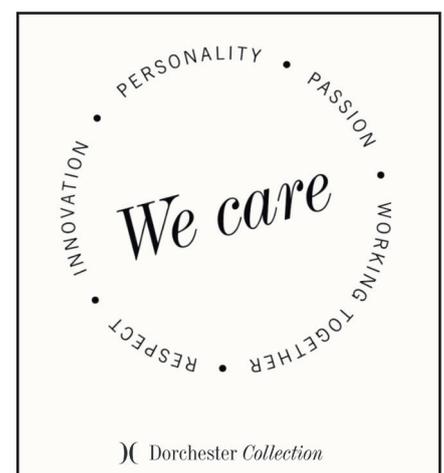
To ensure we remained treasured by our guests, we had to understand the implications of the pandemic on the experience. We too needed to ensure that when our hotels re-opened, or opened to more guests, that they felt safe, but that the

experience they know and pay for, was in no way downgraded because of the virus.

To achieve this, we took each of our nine identified emotional needs of our guests and explored them to find alternate ways to connect with the individual. As a result, we adapted our core standards, our hygiene approaches and our housekeeping methods to enable us to adhere with the requirements set by each country relating to COVID-19, yet in a way which worked for world-class luxury service.

The most significant decision was that, unless mandated by law, we would not have any front of house signage or markings to enforce social distancing and hygiene requirements. Instead, in keeping with our culture and brand, we would adopt a people-led approach whereby our employees would support our guests through verbal interactions and body language so that guests would know, understand and adhere to the protocols. Our people become their guides, helping our guests to move seamlessly within the hotels, while minimising the risk of transmission. Of course, in some locations our team have no choice but to wear gloves and masks. Again, we have considered how this can best be delivered in our style and have adopted an approach where white gloves are used, and a face covering has been developed which is in line with our uniform.

When it comes to cleanliness, we already score the highest in global audits for the luxury market. Our guests know that we are clean. Instead of adopting signage to reinforce this, we are demonstrating this visually by having our people continually cleaning all public areas of the property. Back of house there will be signage to our employees to reinforce our expectations of their personal hygiene, however, for our guests, it is the picture which will paint a thousand words.



Connecting Through Communication

According to a 2020 study by Edelman, employer-led communications are the most credible source of information for employees: critical for transparency, engagement, stability and, most importantly creating trust. In the climate the world has found itself in, with most organisations having to either make remote working the way of life or furlough hundreds of employees, ensuring that we remained connected to our people was crucial.

'We Care' is our internal message to our people, and this was our starting point. Within the first three days of COVID-19 impacting our business, our first newsletter – Legends@home – was launched; setting the scene and explaining to people how we would keep them informed. Two days later, phone trees were established in our hotels; making a commitment that every single one of our employees would be spoken to each week. It was not only vital that we stayed in touch for engagement, but for mental wellbeing. We wanted our people to know we were there, and would be there, throughout.

It was also our role as guardians of the people, to ensure that our teams stayed connected to us as an organisation – our culture, our vision, our values. If we were to ask them to come back into the workplace, we wanted them to feel valued while they were at home so they returned knowing that we would keep them safe and support them with the transition to operating.

Initially our communications centred on the operational response to COVID-19, however, once this was clear, our focus was on motivation and mental well-being.

I remember speaking with a colleague and her words reminded me that while we were all in the same crisis, everyone was experiencing it differently. For her, she was in lockdown, alone, in a studio flat. Others were with family or friends. Some lived in city centres where it was almost impossible to exercise or enjoy fresh air. At that moment I realised that each of our people were in a different situation. Therefore, creating consistency through communications, enabling our people to connect through various means, while promoting ways to motivate, get exercise, or do something good for your community, became the ultimate objective. We had to identify and understand our workforce and adapt our communications style so that each person, regardless of their situation, felt as connected to us, and as valued by us, as the next person.

To deliver this, the people and culture team led centrally. We set the standards around employee communications and how it should be delivered. Guidelines around the amount, the types of communication,

the balance between informative and fun. We also asked our hotels to carry out an agreed amount of corporate responsibility within the community; using our skills and knowledge to support those around us who were dealing with the pandemic first-hand.

Our hotels took those standards and, evoking our value of creativity, they delivered in a way which would land with their people locally. Daily coffee chats with general managers. Weekly training plans where people could share skills or sign up to free language courses. Videos from across the workforce helping to motivate others with exercise or cooking.

Our people launched partnerships with local schools, hospitals and churches to provide food and care packages to those in need. In Italy, teams agreed to donate a proportion of their salary to the COVID-19 relief fund. We shared our stories on Instagram throughout the world, showcasing what it was like to be a

hospitality organisation in a pandemic which had the potential to decimate our sector.

Conclusion

When you are faced with a pandemic, it's very easy to lose sight of who you are as an employer and as a brand. Concerns around financials and revenue can cause you to let go of the values which have built you as an organisation and enabled your success. However, placing the crisis at the centre is a dangerous position to be in. For us, if we did not lead with our guests and employees, with COVID-19 as a backdrop, then we would not be staying true to our vision. And we would not have survived and be in the position of strength we find ourselves in now ahead of wider re-opening. Therefore, my ultimate advice is be brave. Don't let a good crisis go to waste. Look at things differently. Take stock and uncover the priorities. Though most importantly, stay true to who you are – the opportunity will then come to you.



EUGENIO PIRRI

Chief people and culture officer & global diversity champion

A multi-award winning industry leader, Eugenio Pirri has dedicated his 30-year career to ensuring that people are the cornerstone of every business decision. An ardent advocate for diversity and inclusion across all aspects of operation, Pirri has pioneered several pivotal initiatives for Dorchester Collection, including the We Care philosophy.

As the company's global diversity champion, Pirri works closely with Stonewall and other organisations to ensure that he maintains a workplace that's truly inclusive.

Born in Canada to Italian parents, Pirri first began his career in his local McDonald's restaurant in Quesnel, BC. His leadership talent was quickly realised when he became restaurant manager at only 16 years of age.

Pirri went on to study Tourism & Hospitality, as well as Employment Law and Human Rights in Vancouver before holding several managerial positions within the hospitality trade. In his previous position as regional HR director of Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, Pirri was responsible for implementing an aligned corporate HR strategy across all its European properties. Joining Dorchester Collection in 2011 as vice president, people and organisational development, Pirri committed himself to reshaping the company culture, grounded in a holistic approach to employee and guest engagement within all constituents of the business. He was appointed chief people and culture officer in 2017 where he continues to direct all aspects of human resources, including learning and development, employee & guest engagement, and corporate responsibility. Pirri was also instrumental in the formation of the Dorchester Collection Academy, a unique training venue offering bespoke learning programmes for businesses and aspirational brands.

An esteemed industry leader, Pirri has garnered many awards during his career and is frequently recognised for his invaluable contributions to the industry. He and his team have achieved numerous accolades, including Distinction in Talent Management by the HR Distinction Awards, Excellence in Employee Engagement from HR in Hospitality and Employee Engagement Company of the Year by the Employee Engagement Awards. Most notably, Pirri has been recognised on the HR most influential practitioner list by HR magazine for the past five consecutive years.

Pirri is also the author of a successful book, "Be a People Leader: A Sustainable Framework for Achieving Your Full Leadership Potential", in which he shares his strategy for successful people management in the workplace.