

## GRANDUCA AUSTIN BECOMES A LEADING HOTEL OF THE WORLD



When Granduca set about creating an 'Italian Palace' worthy of becoming a Leading Hotel of the World, it had to go beyond traditional definitions of luxury to create an experience that was as luxurious as its surroundings...

### The challenge

Theresa Amaya, Director of Human Resources for Granduca Austin explains, "The idea for Granduca Austin came about when Houston developer Georgio Borlenghi was visiting his son Alex, who was attending Texas University and realised the Austin climate and atmosphere were perfectly suited to the development of a luxury hotel reminiscent of an Italian Palazzo."

She adds, "After initially looking for a downtown site, the lack of open space and greenery encouraged Georgio and Alex to develop 38 acres of lush greenery and rolling hills on the west side of the city. The resulting 'Italian Palace' is steeped in the family's history and Italian heritage, including many beautiful furnishings and pieces of art from the Borlenghi family home. Even so, we knew the beautiful surroundings would count for nothing if the staff didn't create an experience for guests that was as special as the surroundings."

**"We wanted to create an exceptionally unique service experience for guests."**

## The approach

The Borlenghis' vision was always to create a hotel worthy of attaining one of the highest hallmarks of exceptional luxury, in the form of a ranking as one of the Leading Hotels of the World. "But when it came to finding the right people, there was no other hotel in Austin at the level we were aspiring to, so we knew we would have to find people with a heart for hospitality and develop them to make guests feel special," explains Theresa.

She adds, "The bar was set very high and we knew we needed help, so approached Hunter Roberts, the people development experts responsible for creating the emotional intelligence criteria for Leading Quality Assessment. We wanted Hunter Roberts to clarify our vision for the hotel, in terms of what that meant for the people working there, and develop staff to bring that essence to life, creating an exceptionally unique service experience for guests."

## The solution

Hunter Roberts had a proven three-step process for creating exceptional levels of unique luxury service. The first was to clarify the **Brand Essence** of the hotel, its vision and mission. "We knew we wanted to evoke the charm of a private Tuscan villa, but what did that mean in practice?" says Theresa. "After the newly created leadership team spent the day being guided by Hunter Roberts to really think about what sort of hotel we wanted to be, we were soon able to agree that our vision was to: *offer an exquisite luxury hotel and culinary experience in an Italian inspired setting, passionately delivered through warm, engaging, personalised service.*"

She adds, "The emphasis on being Italian 'inspired' and 'warm' was important, but it was also crucial not to come across as fake or pretend in anyway. Instead the essence workshop helped us to focus in on the idea that we wanted to provide guests with a really authentic experience by allowing the natural warmth of our Texan employees to shine through in a way that was still respectful and graciously befitting of the hotel's heritage."

The next step was to start bring the Brand Essence to life by thinking about the **Brand Expression**, everything from the uniforms we wanted staff to wear and whether they should hold their hands formally behind their backs, or relaxed at their sides, to how staff should greet guests and how much conversation they should enter into. "Hunter Roberts brought our department heads together to work out the detail by guiding them through a workshop on how to bring the brand values to life at each and every customer touch-point," says Theresa.

She adds, "It would have been easy to then try and tell our newly recruited staff what we expected from them, but Hunter Roberts instead went through the same process of getting them to think about what sort of hotel they wanted to work for and ways that they could personally bring the Brand Essence and Expression to life, from the words they were using to their body language. All of which really engaged staff to create the **Brand Experience.**"

Critical to training customer-facing employees was also encouraging them to think about how they could deliver the standards required by the rigorous Leading Quality Assessment criteria, in a way that was not only respectful of the brand, but also the unique needs of each and every guest: from a busy businessman desiring a particularly efficient service, to a family celebrating a special event and wanting an extra-attentive approach. "To embed their learning, Hunter Roberts spent three weeks before the hotel opened, coaching, observing and retraining staff to deliver a consistently personalised experience to an incredibly high level," says Theresa.

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## The results

“The opening was a huge success and we received amazing feedback on Medallia, in person and on TripAdvisor and Yelp, with guests rebooking as they had such a fantastic experience,” says Theresa. “Despite being less than a year old, we’re already scoring consistently higher ratings than nearby ‘luxury’ hotels that have been in the market for over 15 years. Recent comments left by our guests include: ‘Awesome service and attention to detail by all the staff,’ ‘This hotel is wonderful – everything is 5\*+ service’ and ‘Wow, customer service is out of this world!’”

She concludes, “Thanks to all the training and coaching provided by Hunter Roberts, our staff are meeting the emotional needs of our guests. We attained some of the highest Leading Quality Assessment scores possible, enabling us to successfully achieve our goal to become a Leading Hotel of the World. None of that would have been possible without Susy and her team. Their friendly and professional approach makes them a pleasure to work with.”