

Coast Better Off for McKenzie's Vision

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One of the challenges leaders face is how to keep their finger on the pulse of the organization. I have found that entrepreneurs typically hit a point in their growth curve where they are no longer "hands on" with all of the projects, and they have to learn to delegate effectively. This can lead to anxiety and cause some entrepreneurs to become frustrated with their lack of visibility into what is going on. Similarly, CEO's and other executive leaders are often several layers removed from the front line employees that are "hands on" with the customers. As I sit in strategic planning meetings with executives, it is obvious to me those who have lost touch with the voice of the customer and the needs of their front line team.

Duncan McKenzie, President and General Manager of the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Biloxi, is a seasoned executive and understands how important it is to have clear visibility into the issues of the organization. McKenzie has 37 years of experience in the gaming and hospitality industry. He is a native of Romeo, Michigan, and he graduated from Michigan State University. His first job out of college was with a Hilton hotel in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina as a bar porter. This experience led to a job as an accounts payable clerk at a Hilton in Atlanta. Duncan went on to be a leader within the Hilton organization over a career that spanned almost thirty years. In his early thirties, he was serving as controller for the largest Hilton property, and he decided to make a career transition out of accounting and into Hilton's general management and gaming division. His career with Hilton required him to move around a good bit, and he and his family have lived in numerous locations including Dallas, Atlanta, New Orleans, Kansas City, and Las Vegas. His career led him to being President and General Manager of the Grand Casino Properties on the Gulf Coast, and in January of 2008, Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Biloxi hired him as President and General Manager.

The gaming business is very competitive and is intensely service oriented. The Hard Rock has over 850 employees, so Duncan makes sure that he stays in touch with the needs of his employees and the customers. He has implemented a focus group program that he has used successfully in his career to gather front line data and feedback. In these focus groups, he invites 12-15 employees from various parts of the organization to serve quarterly and meet with him to discuss the needs of the organization. They publish the results of these meetings internally so they can keep everyone aligned. He also has annual anonymous surveys done with employees so they can provide valuable feedback. Duncan emphasized an important point when soliciting input, "I encourage people to provide constructive feedback. I want people to bring solutions to the table, and not just problems."

Given his extensive experience in leading large organizations, I also wanted to know what he believed were key attributes of great leaders. We discussed the need to be "fair." This is a subtle, but important point. When employees believe that their leader is an arbitrary decision maker who plays favorites, then it destroys the morale of the organization. Duncan noted, "I believe it is important to be a good listener." Great leaders listen, gather data, and make the hard decisions. That is their job. Poor leaders waiver and waffle on decisions. As a friend of mine says, "you can't swallow the whistle, you have to make the call." Duncan also believes it is important for a leader to be involved in the community. He serves in numerous leadership positions, as does his wife. After living in many places, Duncan noted, "we love it here in Mississippi and it is our adopted home now."

Family is very important to him, and he has one daughter in dental school at UMMC in Jackson and another at USM.

The hard work and focus of Duncan and his team has paid off. The Hard Rock Biloxi has been named the top performing location within the Hard Rock system. The Hard Rock has a strong brand, and his team is working hard to bring an eclectic mix of diverse entertainment to Mississippi. As the Gulf Coast continues its recovery, I know that the community is enriched from having leaders like Duncan actively involved in making a difference.

Quick Facts:

Duncan McKenzie, President and General Manager of the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino.

First Job: “When I was in junior high, I was a counselor and life guard at a day camp.”

Favorite Movie: Forrest Gump

Proudest Moment as a Leader: “I was humbled and honored to be the recipient of the Pat Santucci ‘Spirit of the Gulf Coast’ Award by the Mississippi Gulf Coast Chamber of Commerce.

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