A People-First Approach to Talent Development in Hospitality

Best HRM Solutions in V4 Countries project

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1. What this case is about

At a hospitality organisation in Poland, the HR Director redesigned how talent is identified, developed, and promoted. Rather than looking outside for new managers, the organisation made a deliberate strategic shift: invest in the people already working there.

The approach rests on three principles:

- identifying potential through daily observation rather than formal assessment alone,
- building a transparent, equal-opportunity internal promotion mechanism,
- pairing growing employees with managerial support and gradually increasing responsibility.

˝We changed the talent acquisition and development process so that internal promotion became the default — not the exception. As a result, people felt seen, motivation rose, and the organisation grew leaders who already understood and embodied its culture.”

2. The context of the case

The hospitality industry runs on people. Every guest interaction — at the reception desk, in the restaurant, in housekeeping, or in the kitchen — is shaped by the person delivering it. This makes culture and fit critically important: someone hired from outside may bring technical skills, but learning the unwritten rules of how a specific hotel operates takes considerable time.

The HR Director interviewed for this case recognised this early. The organisation had been filling managerial vacancies primarily through external hiring. The result was predictable: longer onboarding, slower cultural alignment, and a quiet frustration among existing employees who saw no clear path forward. The decision to change direction — to build a structured internal talent pipeline — was both a business response and a statement of values.

3. From where to where?

3.1. The starting point

Before the shift, talent management was largely reactive. When a managerial role opened, the organisation looked outside. Internal employees were rarely considered in a systematic way, and there was no structured process for identifying, preparing, or promoting them.

The symptoms were visible:

- Few internal promotions took place; most leadership roles were filled externally.
- Employee motivation was low — people did not see a realistic career path within the organisation.
- New managers hired from outside required significant time to adapt to the hotel's specific culture and operational logic.
- The organisation lost institutional knowledge every time a high-potential employee left for better opportunities elsewhere.

3.2. The drivers of change

The hospitality industry has a unique work culture. Decisions, team dynamics, and guest relationships are all shaped by deeply embedded norms that take time to internalise. When a manager comes from outside, even a capable one, there is an inevitable adjustment period during which misalignments occur.

Two realisations drove the shift:

- Internal talent, when promoted, makes decisions aligned with existing cultural values because they have lived them — not just read about them in an onboarding document.
- Developing people from within is not only more culturally effective, it also saves time, reduces turnover, and builds the kind of loyalty that cannot be bought through a recruitment package.

The HR Director did not wait for a crisis to act. The change was driven by conviction: a belief that the right thing to do — for people and for the organisation — was to look inward first.

3.3. The solution in one sentence

˝We created a transparent, equal-opportunity internal promotion mechanism that makes developing and advancing existing talent the default path — not the backup plan.˝

4. Cornerstones of the system

4.1. Seeing people, not just job titles

The foundation of the approach is a shift in perspective: HR and managers look at employees not through the lens of their current role, but through the lens of their relationships, energy, attitude, and potential. In hospitality, this often means paying attention to how someone handles a difficult guest situation, how they support a

colleague under pressure, or how they take ownership of a problem without being asked.

Talent identification here is not a once-a-year HR exercise. It happens continuously, through daily observation and genuine managerial presence on the floor.

4.2. Gradual responsibility, not sudden promotion

One of the most important design principles of the system is the deliberate, step-by-step increase of responsibility. Rather than waiting until someone is "ready" by some formal measure and then promoting them, the organisation stretches people gradually: a small project to lead, a shift to run independently, a moment to represent the team.

This approach serves two purposes. It builds real capability in a safe environment where mistakes are learning opportunities. And it reveals, more accurately than any assessment centre, whether someone actually wants more responsibility — because not everyone does, and that is equally valid.

4.3. Non-financial recognition as a development signal

A meaningful part of the system is how the organisation acknowledges growing employees before any formal promotion occurs. Visibility, trust, and increased ownership are powerful motivators — particularly in an industry where pay differentiation is limited. Being given a meaningful project, being asked to mentor a new colleague, or being included in a management conversation signals to an employee: we see you, we believe in you, and we are investing in your future here.

4.4. Managerial support and mentoring

None of this works without managers who are genuinely committed to developing their teams. The HR Director supported managers with practical, straightforward guidance: how to have a development conversation, how to assign stretch responsibilities without overwhelming someone, how to give useful feedback. Supporting team development became an explicit expectation of the leadership role — not an optional extra.

4.5. Transparency and equal opportunity

For the system to be trusted, it had to be seen as fair. The internal promotion mechanism was designed to be transparent: employees could understand what development looked like, what a promotion path involved, and what was expected of them. This removed the sense that advancement depended on being liked by the right person, and replaced it with a clearer, more equitable logic.

5. The implementation story — how the system came together

1. **Focus on people already in the hotel**: The first deliberate step was redirecting attention. Before looking outside for candidates, the question became: who do we already have? Managers were encouraged to think about their teams differently — not only in terms of current performance, but in terms of potential and trajectory.
2. **Daily observation as the starting point:** Talent identification was embedded into everyday work rather than isolated in a formal process. HR and managers paid close attention to attitude, initiative, how people handled difficult situations, and how they worked with colleagues. This made the process continuous and grounded in reality.
3. **Individual approach to each employee:** There was no single template for development. Each employee's journey was shaped by their strengths, interests, and readiness. Some needed more time and encouragement; others were ready to take on more sooner. The HR Director adjusted the approach accordingly — listening, observing, and adapting.
4. **Step-by-step increase of responsibility:** Employees were given progressively more demanding tasks and situations to navigate. Each step was an opportunity to grow and also to signal whether they wanted more. This gradual approach reduced the risk of promoting someone too quickly and then watching them struggle without adequate support.
5. **Manager and mentor support:** Identified talent was paired with managers and, where appropriate, more experienced colleagues acting as mentors. This was not a formal mentoring programme with documentation and scheduled sessions — it was a practical, relationship-based support system embedded in the daily work environment.

Getting managers and employees on board

The HR Director communicated the idea clearly and repeatedly, speaking openly about why internal promotions matter — both for the hotel and for the individuals involved. The message to managers was practical: internal promotions save time, reduce turnover, and build stronger, more cohesive teams. The message to employees was equally direct: there are real career opportunities here, and we want you to grow with us.

Resistance from managers was addressed through listening. When concerns were raised, the HR Director adjusted the process based on feedback rather than insisting on a fixed model. Quick wins — visible, small promotions and expanded responsibilities — demonstrated early on that the process genuinely worked and was not just a policy statement.

6. Results and evidence — what truly shifted

The changes were both measurable and deeply human:

- Internal promotions increased noticeably. Roles that had previously been filled externally were now filled by people who had been developing within the organisation.
- Employee motivation improved. People who had felt invisible began to see a genuine path forward. Engagement rose as a result.
- Cultural continuity strengthened. Promoted managers already understood the hotel's values, rhythms, and guest expectations — reducing the friction that typically accompanies external hires.
- Retention improved. Employees with ambition no longer needed to leave to find growth opportunities.

One story captures the spirit of the approach well: an employee who began in an operational role was consistently given small additional responsibilities and active support from their manager. Over time, through patient development rather than forced acceleration, they were promoted to a higher leadership role. They brought with them not only skills, but years of institutional knowledge, relationships, and genuine commitment to the organisation's culture.

What surprised the HR Director most: many employees had significant leadership potential that had simply never been activated. Once they were given trust and real responsibility, they rose to it.

7. What can we learn from this case as HR leaders?

Three key lessons stand out:

- Development takes time and patience. Sustainable talent pipelines are not built in a quarter. The willingness to invest in people over a longer horizon — without demanding immediate results — is what makes the difference.
- Not everyone wants to be promoted, and that is perfectly fine. A strong talent programme creates space for people to discover what they genuinely want, rather than pushing everyone onto a management track. Respecting this makes the system more honest and more humane.
- Managers need support, not pressure. Asking managers to develop their teams is asking them to do something they may not have been explicitly trained for. Practical guidance, clear expectations, and genuine backing from HR makes this possible.

Two typical pitfalls

1. Promoting people too quickly: Accelerating development beyond what someone is ready for — however well-intentioned — sets them up to struggle. The gradual approach exists precisely to prevent this.

2. Lack of clear communication: If employees do not understand how development and promotion work, the system loses credibility. Transparency is not a nice-to-have; it is the foundation of trust.

Trade-off and surprise

The accepted trade-off was time. Slower, more deliberate development means that results are not visible in weeks. The organisation accepted that patience was the price of sustainability. The surprise — and the reward — was discovering how much leadership potential had been sitting untapped, waiting only for someone to notice it and believe in it.

8. If you would like to take something from this best practice...

Minimum viable version (which can be launched as early as tomorrow)

1. Identify employees with potential by observing daily work and attitude — not by running a formal assessment. Look for initiative, how someone handles difficulty, and how they support their colleagues.
2. Have honest conversations with managers and employees about development and promotion opportunities. Make it clear that internal growth is a priority, not a platitude.
3. Give selected employees more responsibility in small, manageable steps. A project to lead, a shift to own, a problem to solve. Watch what happens.

If you were starting now: in 3 steps

1. Decide that internal talent development is a strategic priority — not a fallback when external recruitment fails. This decision needs to come from the top and be visible in everyday decisions.
2. Build manager capability for development conversations. Most managers were not trained to develop people; they were trained to manage tasks. Simple, practical guidance changes this.
3. Create visibility and fairness. Make the development and promotion logic transparent so that every employee understands what growth looks like and feels it is genuinely within reach.

Minimum requirements

- A clear project owner (HR Director or equivalent) with genuine organisational backing.

- Managers who understand that developing their team is part of their role, with HR support to do it well.
- Clear, simple rules for development and promotion that are communicated openly and applied consistently.
- Time and patience — built into expectations from the start.

What not to overcomplicate

- Formal procedures and extensive documentation. The most powerful development happens in conversations and daily interactions, not in paperwork.
- Too many rules and steps. A complex system signals distrust. Keep the logic simple enough that any manager can explain it to any employee.
- Long, structured training programmes as the default. Practical, on-the-job development — real responsibility, real feedback — is more effective and more meaningful than classroom hours.