

## Focus on customer service nurtured success of Four Seasons

A focus on customer service is at the centre of the success of Four Seasons Hotels, according to **Isadore Sharp**, Chairman and CEO of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, who spoke at the Rotman School on April 11 as part of the *Rotman Integrative Thinking Seminar* series.

Sharp described the history and global expansion of the company since its inception in 1961. He named four decisions as key to the success of Four Seasons, which is consistently ranked among the world's top luxury hotel chains, operating 55 properties in 25 countries, with 25 more in development.

Decision number one, he says, was to establish a single-purpose goal: to be the best hotel wherever it set up. "We set out to redefine luxury as service, and to provide a support system at our hotels to replace the one left behind at home or at the office." The company upgraded Five Star standards by installing the quietest plumbing, the softest towels, and – a first back in the sixties – shampoo in its bathrooms. Four Seasons then expanded the use of rooms for business with well-lit desks, two-line jacks for phone and computer work, and amenities such as irons, bathrobes and shoeshine service.

Number two was to develop and put into writing a company credo that focused on service. "The credo spelled out company goals, beliefs and values, and we advised all staff to keep the credo in mind, making sure every decision squared with company values." Some senior people scoffed at this initiative, he said, which worried him. "If we were seen as only caring about profits and prestige rather than our customers and employees, there would be no belief in our values, and we would be communicating across a trust gap."

Number three was to enforce the credo, which he called the Golden Rule and cornerstone of Four Seasons' corporate culture. "We aimed to treat others as we would want to be treated ourselves. Enforcing our credo was the hardest part, and senior managers who couldn't or wouldn't live by it were weeded out within a few years. That was painful, but it had to be done."

Number four was to shift investment away from hotel ownership and towards management expertise, freeing up assets to be used for hiring, training and motivating employees – everyone from dishwashers to bellhops to managers to cleaning staff.

"Our vision evolved, and before long we created a reputation for outstanding customer service. The Four Seasons name itself has become a far greater asset than any bricks and mortar we could ever own."

Integrative thinkers like Isadore Sharp view more features of a given problem as salient to its resolution, says Dean Roger Martin. "They consider non-linear causality and relationships between the variables under consideration. They work to see the 'big picture', while concentrating on its elements individually. They learn to shape and order what others see as a chaotic landscape."

Integrative thinkers inspire novel solutions and find unique ways to succeed in their area of expertise, says the Dean. "Teaching students to think in this innovative manner is one of our key goals at the Rotman School. By bringing successful integrative thinkers like Isadore Sharp, **Richard Currie**, **Michael Lee-Chin** and **Moses Znaimer** to Rotman to speak in this series, we hope to illuminate some of the keys to their unique ways of thinking and inspire our students to greatness of their own."