

Sudesh Jhunjhnuwala, Sudima Hotels & Resorts *Walk the Talk*

Founder and CEO of Sudima Hotels Sudesh Jhunjhnuwala has a very simple employment policy – look for the best people regardless of culture, colour, caste, creed, gender, sexual orientation, age or physical ability.

As a result, the more than 400 staff employed in hotels in Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua and Christchurch feel valued and respected, and able to make the most of career opportunities at all levels of the organisation.

Hospitality graduate Tessa Pitney is visually impaired and spent six months looking for a job before she was employed by Sudima.

“What I love about Sudima [management] is their attitude,” says Tessa. “When I had my first interview, my visual impairment was not an issue. They hired me because they thought I was the best person for the job.”

Tessa needed assistive technology to function in her role as office administrator, but rather than wait for external funding to come in, Sudesh purchased the equipment immediately.

In an industry where management has traditionally been dominated by men, Sudesh has made an effort to foster the talent of the women in his team. Maree Welgus has been appointed hotel manager in the new high-end Christchurch hotel, due to open in 2019.

About her appointment, Sudesh says, “If we recruit externally, most applicants for the hotel manager positions are men. So we trained and mentored the very best female executive assistant manager and asked her to be patient while the right opportunity came up.”

A young leaders’ focus group was formed two years ago with the same goal of fostering talent and giving employees the chance to grow. Three young leaders from each hotel meet quarterly to determine how the hotel group can improve and innovate. Environment and Social Advocate Vedika Jhunjhnuwala says the meetings coincide with the hotel managers’ quarterly reviews and the group is privy to those meetings and financial results. “The greater objective is to foster young leadership and give them opportunities to excel and learn,” she says.

Video Link:

<https://vimeo.com/286976205>



With more than 66 percent of staff identifying with a background other than New Zealand European, cultural diversity is respected and celebrated. As the hotel group grew, Sudesh recognised a need to instigate a nationwide Diversity Team. A wide variety of cultural festivals are celebrated at the hotels during the year, but a major initiative is the staff award night held each year.

Vedika says Sudesh is continually aware of the achievements of staff and quick to recognise and reward initiative.

“At the annual staff awards, everyone is recognised for their contribution. Highly anticipated are the staff performances, aimed at sharing cultural backgrounds through dance and song. Competitions and demonstrations take place all day. At the gala awards ceremony, there are multiple awards, including long-service. All accommodation, food and beverages are provided. Staff fly to whichever hotel is hosting the awards and Sudesh hires temporary staff so that as many of the team as possible can attend. There are \$10,000 worth of gifts and prizes. Staff share knowledge, friendship and cultural backgrounds.”

Seeing a need for representation from Maori at a management level in hospitality, in 2014 Sudesh launched a fully-funded, tertiary scholarship for young Maori of Ngati Whakaue descent. The scholarship includes work experience at Sudima Hotels.

Awatere Douglas, the first graduate, says, "I am a family and iwi-oriented young man, so I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity this has provided me to represent my iwi, to make my friends and family proud, and make a name for myself."

Staff report that Sudesh has given them personal support during particularly challenging times. An employee from Christchurch was worried about his job when he developed multiple sclerosis. Sudesh promised him he would always have a job with Sudima and his responsibilities were shifted to accommodate his health needs. The employee and his wife were flown to Auckland so he could fulfill a long-held dream of watching the Warriors play at Mt Smart stadium, and were looked after as VIPs.

The commitment to diversity and inclusion has clear business benefits. Staff turnover at Sudima Hotels is half the national average. There has also been a discernible shift in access-needs guests taking their business to Sudima Hotels. As two of only three gold-rated accessible hotels in New Zealand, Sudima Auckland Airport and Sudima Christchurch Airport continue to be the Be.Leadership programme venues of choice.

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TOOLS OR RESOURCES TO MAKE
YOUR WORKPLACE MORE INCLUSIVE

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