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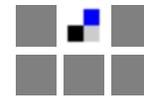
Are Your Hotel's Employees Safe?

Several high profile incidents are causing hoteliers to reassess just how safe their properties are for both guests and staff. Is yours?

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Long after all the details have been weighed and the case has been settled over the alleged assault of a Manhattan hotel housekeeper by the former head of the International Monetary Fund, hoteliers will still be seeing question marks: How safe is my hotel? What obligations do I have to my staff and to my guests? When does a hotel's caution and diligence border on paranoia?

The high-profile case against Dominique Strauss-Kahn has prompted hotel owners and executives to look inward – down their hallways, into their rooms, and through the policies and practices they have in place to protect the people who cross the hotel's threshold every day.



They're also mulling their safety record. Like any other employer, hotels are no strangers to workplace violence. But keeping perspective on the issue is critical to ensuring an appropriate, effective strategy against such incidents.

"From time to time you do have instances like this, but they are few and far between," said Joseph McInerney, president and chief executive officer of the American Hotel & Lodging Association, referring to the Strauss-Kahn case. "Incidents, when they happen like this, are a little out of proportion, especially with someone in such a high level position, and it becomes a big notoriety. Hotel companies are aware of the problems out there and all are taking a look at their policies and procedures."

In short, the New York case has been transformed into a hotel wake-up call of a very different sort. But experts say that preparedness – as assessment and formalized employee preparedness training - can keep the more serious alarm call from going off.

"I am not a huge believer in fear, uncertainty and doubt, but you have to be realistic," said Tom McElroy, managing member of the Hospitality Security Consulting Group LLC. "You should prepare for the worst-case scenario. What is the very worst case that could go wrong? You have the awareness. The emphasis should be on training, training, and retraining on those types of things."

Housekeepers, for instance, need to know, among other things, whether to leave a guest room door open, or lock it behind them when they enter a room – and to determine whether the room is still occupied. There are no easy answers. "Every GM or executive housekeeper is going to look at this differently," he said. Likewise, kitchen and food-service workers, cleaning up after a banquet, are sometimes left vulnerable. They leave a back door open. Or

are working alone at a late hour.

"When it gets to that point, there is a duty on the GM's part to provide a safe and secure work environment," McElroy said.

GMs also need to know that ejecting or refusing a problem guest, while an option, is not necessarily a preferred route. "A guest could get defensive and contact the CEO and now you have a real problem," he said. CRM scores could be affected and corporate headquarters could get involved. An issue of damaged reputation could also end up with the guest seeking a legal remedy.

"A hotelier really has to be smart about how they do business, it starts at the top and goes all the way down to that housekeeper or steward who has interactions with guests," with training present at all levels of hotel operations, McElroy said.

It pays to view preparation for such incidents no differently than preparation for natural disasters, said Mark Beattie, director of distributive learning at Gonzaga University in Washington State, and an author and industry veteran. "Do an assessment much as you would for earthquake preparation, hurricane, floods in Memphis. You need to have a good old Boy Scout sense of 'Be Prepared.' And we need to do that on our own personal level."

Do a security survey and train your employees, he said. Training could include such low-cost options as CPR lessons from the local fire department and security tips from the local police. "You needn't go to the extent of martial arts training, but there are women's groups that train women in rape prevention, I have seen those at the local YWCA a couple of times a year," he said.

Hotels should also assess their grounds. "A workplace is aware of their physical plant. They know where a security camera might be best located and has a heightened level of responsibility for the plant and the people who occupy it. So how do you make the employee an active participant in both their safety and the safety of their guests? It is everyone's responsibility ... The criminal mind seeks opportunity," said Beattie.

A GM should also look realistically at the balance between staffing economically and staffing safely. "A lot of our industry relies too much on that solo worker in hotels and restaurants. It keeps costs down but – at what cost?"

And when, despite all good intentions, disaster or crime seems to have apparently struck, a hotel needs to be prepared again – this time for recovery work, he said. "If a housekeeper walks into a room where someone committed suicide, that is traumatic," he said, as one example. "You need to know who is your go-to person for mental health counseling to be available."

Security consultant Richard Sem said the most effective anti-violence programs have four components, beginning with prevention. "That is your cameras, the locks, the lighting, those sorts of measures, as well as training your staff as a preventive measure ... on how they can recognize a particularly risky situation or how to de-escalate a situation."

The second part, he said, is mitigation. "I always preach the power of numbers," he said. "In situations where you think you are under some risk, send two people up. Little things like that can go a long way."

Finding a secure area to run to – or putting a property in lockdown – constitutes the third component, he said. "That's response. Find a safe place, a shelter." And finally, Sem said, there needs to be a recovery plan, a way to help the people and the hotel, bounce back, especially if the media descend upon the hotel.

"If you have violence in your hotel it is going to be all over the news, and it is going to hurt your business and your reputation moreso than having a fire or flood or snowstorm," he said. "But part of this is just being able to say you took these preventive measures and trained people."

"Bad things can happen anywhere and there is no way you can prevent it completely. Even in the best of places. But you can always say `we did do all these good things,'" and yes, that certainly helps."

McElroy said mandated tighter safety criteria for hotels might make a difference, modeled closely after the spirit of the National Fire Protection Act, which sets requirements for sprinklers, smoke alarms and a fire emergency plan. Why not apply such language to closed-circuit TV systems, electronic locks on doors and sufficient lighting, he asked. He acknowledged it would be costly, and particularly tough for small hotel owners, and "hoteliers would be mad at me for saying this but I don't think it would be such a bad thing. Look at the decrease in hotel fire deaths that have occurred since hotels were outfitted with fire suppression systems."

He said he realized such legislation would be extreme, if not unrealistic. "The government doesn't need to come in and tell the hospitality industry how to run their business. No. But I think they can set minimum standards, they really can. It's the cost of doing business."

"And it is, after all, better to be vigilant on the front end."

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Bio: Caryn Eve Murray is a freelance writer and an assistant editor on the news desk at Newsday on Long Island. During her tenure as a business writer for New York Newsday, she covered the city's small business community for which she won the Distinguished Business Reporting Award of Excellence from the New York Newspaper Publishers Association. She has also been a feature columnist and writer and has ... [more](#)