

Human Resource Empowerment as a Strategy to Achieve Quality Service Delivery in Tourism in Rwanda. A Case of Rwanda Development Board (RDB)

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Abstract

The hospitality industry is considered globally as one of the biggest employer of human resource. Empowerment is considered as a mechanism organizations or managers can use to delegate power to the lower staff to be able to take decisions in their daily activities. Rwanda has identified the tourism and hospitality industry as one of its key economic pillars to enable the economy to achieve its development goals as well as propel the nation to the next economic level. The purpose of this paper was to determine how human resource empowerment can be used as a strategy to achieve quality service delivery in the tourism industry. The materials and methodology section used the descriptive study design and utilized primary and secondary data to achieve valid and reliable findings while the sampling technique used was purposive sampling. The key results indicated that the majority of the respondents agreed that empowerment plays a key role in improving service delivery in the tourism industry especially the frontline staff. However, the main challenges highlighted were the unprofessional frontline staff and interference of the owners of the hotels in operation activities which affects quality service delivery. In conclusion, delivery of quality service in the tourism sector can be improved if managers and staff are empowered. The research recommendation was that managers and owners should be trained and also encourages the lower ranked staff to be involved in decision making process to avoid disappointing clients.

Keywords: *Empowerment; Human resource; Quality service delivery strategy*

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Introduction

Empowerment is a management philosophy that allows work people to take on responsibilities that were once the prerogative of management (Boella, 2000). Similarly, Baum (2006) suggested that empowerment is a concept that originally comes from the notion that the individual can take charge of decisions within his or her own life, has, arguably, been hijacked by those more interested in its application as an organizational tool. Also Manor (2004) and Pigg (2002) argued that empowerment is a participating mechanism that provides persons, groups, families and societies to have power

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and control on their own destiny and increase their level of control (Prati and Zani, 2013), and contributes particularly to individuals for the following issues [1-5]. A positive perception for self-confidence and competence; Ability to control his/her own life; Skill in working with others and emotions that make them think he/she is effective in social life and finally as an approach to affect decision making mechanisms in social life.

Rwanda and the Government of Rwanda has created a pristine and gorgeous image of the country and the tourists are flocking. But until services as basic as the food industry improve, and as long as employees in any company sit or stand around idle while people seek their services. There is nothing unique about the underlying cause of poor service delivery in Rwanda. As elsewhere the root causes of poor service delivery and customer care are, organizations: policies practices and procedures are not clearly aligned with the main output. Good service delivery is essential in all economies and even more critical in service-led economies. Rwanda has an ambition to become a service-led economy, Due to associated benefits, the Government of Rwanda has emphasized quality service delivery as a strategy to satisfy the high end tourists targeted, yet research demonstrates that service delivery in Rwanda is generally poor Also tourism resources , services and assets have encountered serious challenges in service delivery and management. The challenge are attributed to lack of timely service delivery, lack of expertise, unprofessionalism and skills, raising potential concerns for tourism growth. Thus, poor service delivery in Rwanda endangers the realization of Vision 2020 and this also makes service delivery in Rwanda to be the poorest in the East African region. Not only that, attempts to address poor service delivery in Rwanda have focused on the symptoms not the underlying root causes. Many organizations in Rwanda, in both the public and the private sectors, are not focused on their number one priority which is service delivery. In the same way policies, practices and procedures are not aligned with consumer satisfaction and yet Rwandas Vision of Customer Service Delivery is to offer world class service through Rwandan Customer Service Implementation Plan [2,6-11].

In addition, Abbott and Lwakabamba [2] further suggested that poor service delivery in Rwanda endangers the realization of Vision 2020. Rwanda aims to become a service economy but there is little evidence that organizations are focused on delivering good service to customers. Customer service delivery is generally poor and seen as the poorest in the region. However, the degree of poor service delivery is greater than elsewhere and there are contextual challenges. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of competition, a lack of qualified and experienced employees at all levels in organization, general dissatisfaction amongst employees, lack of 'ownership' of responsibility for service delivery, and a lack of awareness amongst consumers of the quality of service delivery they are entitled to. There is little evidence that service sector organizations understand what they need to do to improve customer service delivery, although there is some recognition that they need to do so. Service providers do not have policies, practices and procedures in place clearly aligned to ensuring that they deliver excellent service, and there is a tendency for employees not to take responsibility for delivering a good service. Managers 'blame' front-line-staff and front-line-staff 'blame' poor and inattentive delivery on the attitude of customers towards them. The objectives of this study were; to investigate the mechanisms used by RDB to improve quality service delivery in tourism in Rwanda; to identify the factors that influence quality service delivery in tourism in Rwanda; to investigate the factors that limit the implementation of quality service delivery in tourism in Rwanda and solutions to the limitations.

Benefits of Empowering

Front-line employees can be seen as the most important employees in the hospitality industry since they are the ones who actually encounter customers. This is the main reason why service-oriented lodging enterprises should encourage employee empowerment. Studies of Lashley (1999) and Jha & Nair (2008) showed that especially the front-line employees play a crucial role in terms of employee empowerment in the hospitality industry since these employees are generally accepted to deal with customer problems and requests in a courteous manner. Bowen & Lawyer (1992) claimed that empowering front-line employees can attribute guest satisfaction by creating self-esteem for employees and Klidas et al. (2007) emphasized that empowerment would result in meeting or exceeding guests' expectations during the service. Lashley (1996) noted that empowering front-line staff would also enable them to do good work and to take responsibility for their own performance. In this respect, for the hotel industry, employee empowerment should be accepted as the process of decentralizing decision making by giving necessary autonomy to front-line employees. In other words front-line employees' immediate decisions to serve customers are the main basis for empowerment in hotel industry. In this manner, front-line employees will feel that they are happier with their jobs and fulfill the job requirements willingly, have high self-esteem - which is generally low in the industry, meet higher standards of service with prompt response and more autonomy. These will in the end create high job performance levels of front-line employees which is a necessity in service-oriented organizations (Klidas et al., 2007).

Koçel (2011) evaluates staff empowerment concept as the process of participation to decisions, and extension of delegation and motivation. As an important concept of management area, he defines empowerment as the process to increase decision powers of employees and develop them through helping each other, sharing, education and team work. It is stated that since it has a broader meaning, it differs from motivation, accession period and delegation concepts. Staff empowerment is used in providing power, authority and energy for the staff, and considered as an obligatory term imposed to organization executives by global competition (Çavuş, 2008). Staff empowerment is deemed as a process which allows people to develop their current status and increase their personal, interpersonal and political powers [1,12-18].

Employee engagement in management assists in increasing the quality, efficiency and organizational competitiveness [3]. Brown and Harvey (2006) define employee empowerment as a process of giving staffs or employees the authority or power to make decisions about their own job. According to Gill (2011), employee empowerment refers to the meaningful job of employees, their feelings of competence, autonomy, and contribution to the decision making or applications of leadership. The employee empowerment concept actually certifies the employees with necessary power to employ plan and judgment in their work, participate in their work related decision-making, and authorizes them to respond quickly to the needs and concerns of the customers [3,19-27]. Blanchard *et al.* [4] argues (in Ongori 2009) that empowerment refers not only to have power or authority to make decision and act, but also to have higher level of responsibility and accountability. Demirci and Erbas (2010) calls employee empowerment a unique style of management where managers confer about various work related issues and activities with the employees of the organization. Randolph (1995) perhaps offers the simplest definition of employee empowerment, and views employee empowerment as a process of transferring power from the employer to the employees. This transformation of power benefits organizations in many forms. According to Gronroos [5,28], employee empowerment ensures more direct and quicker response to customer requirements, assists in service recovery and makes the employees satisfied. Researchers explain employee empowerment from different viewpoint.

Employee satisfaction, also known as job satisfaction, is a positive emotional state that demonstrates the perceived relationship between the expectation of an employee from his job and his perceived offerings of the job (Locke 1976).

Service is an act or representation that one party ushers to another, basically intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything, and its production may or may not be related to a physical product [6,29]. Service quality refers to the result from customer judgments between their desired service and their perceptions about the service (Oliver 1977). In another word, service quality is the perceived quality as a mode of attitude in which Tangibles refer to the appearances of physical facilities, personnel, equipment and communication materials [6]. Reliability indicates the ability of employees to perform consistently and accurately [7]. Responsiveness is the willingness to assist customers and offer quick service [6]. Assurance is the realization and courtesy of workers and their capability to express confidence and trust [6]. Empathy refers to caring and individualized attention to customers [6]. Saif and Saleh (2013) view employee empowerment as one of the foremost rudiments for continuous improvement of the quality of products and services. The study of Timothy and Abubaker (2013) endorse affirmative and significant impact of employee empowerment on service quality (Tsaour *et al.* 2004), and reveals employee empowerment improves service quality. Large enterprises like Federal Express and U.S. Air empowered their employees to satisfy customers by further their service quality (Zemke, Schaaf 1989). Numerous studies found significant relationship between employee empowerment and service quality.

Baum (2006), argues that empowerment as a key toll of any management makes employees confident in decision making. For instance, customer's complaints need immediate positive solutions. Therefore if employees can decide wisely before running to managers it is more important and potential to the company. In hospitality industry, especially front-line employees spend most of their time directly with customers and their attitudes can easily influence customer satisfaction and their perception of services (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Hurley, 1998). Keeping this information in mind, finding out what may possibly lead these employees to increased job performance turns out to be a central issue for the hospitality industry as job performance will also lead to high levels of customer satisfaction.

Strategies for empowering

Responding to the constant changing trend of global business atmosphere is perhaps the most substantial concern for both the people and the organizations. In order to react to the changes and diverse requirements of customers and stakeholders, employees are to face numerous challenges in steering their performance. Employees frequently struggle to seize and restrain their managerial authority [8,30] to encounter those challenges. One of the core challenges for enterprises in this epoch of globalization is to provide prompt responses to the customers to make them satisfied, and to increase productivity. Nonetheless, poor organizational arrangements like Lack of authority to make work-related decisions, limited access of information, and lack of control on job, vague and meaningless responsibility, and improper reward system often make the jobs difficult for the employees and reduce the quality of service, which ultimately lead to customer dissatisfaction. So as to make the customers satisfied and enhance organizational performance, organizations need to give employees enough authority and support. The tenacious movement of the human relations steered the experts to integrate various strategies that can deliver the greatest performance in their human resources [9,31-34].

Karakoc and Yilmaz (2009) specified that these strategies involve a set of diverse forms e.g. industrial democracy, employee participation and managerial compliance. Internal settings like organizational structure and employee participation are the key determinants of an organization, which affects employee performance. Endless debates have emerged in how the performance of an organization, and the satisfaction level of its employees and customers can be improved. Brown and Harvey (2006) state employee empowerment, comparatively a new technique, which makes the

employees proactive and self-sufficient helps in mounting the performance of employees and organizations. Employee empowerment is very crucial for the survival and success of an organization, and it gives employees a sense of feelings that they are the core assets to the organizational success, creates commitment and a sense of belonging, builds trust, promotes effective communication, and increases organizational effectiveness and employee wellbeing (Ongori 2009). Experts upturn huge controversy in their studies and opinions whether employee empowerment supports or injures an organization. Karakoc and Yilmaz (2009) views employee empowerment as one of the most effective means of allowing employees at every level to utilize their creative thinking and abilities to improve the quality of their work and the performance of the organization. The study of Ugboro and Obeng (2000) endorses significant correlation between employee empowerment and customer satisfaction or employee job satisfaction. Opponent suggests (Locke *et al.* 1986) employee empowerment essentially in many cases downsizes productivity and lowers employee satisfaction. Mills and Ungson (2003) move a step further and advocate employee empowerment produces an agency problem and may cause complete disaster for the organizations.

According to Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, (2006), organizations use different strategies' in empowering their staffs depending on the nature of the works. For example, in hospitality and tourism industries, many senior managers believe that, people want to do good work and they can do so if given opportunity and to get the opportunity is to be empowered. For instance Service master, Marriott and Dayton Hudson, are one of the companies the Senior managers believe this and they have all decided to empower their staff through committing themselves to do the following;

Invest in training people as a main resource than on machines. This is very true because managers have to understand that, although technology is developing and changing every day to the extent that human being works are replaced by machines still the human resource is the main resource to depend on. Therefore, in order to improve the quality of service delivered people need to have skills on the machines and they must be up to date according to how the technology changes. For instance currently in many hospitality and tourism industry there is use of OPERA system mostly in the front office. And as the technology change always in case there is another system which can be more useful than OPERA the company can still invest in training its employees. Trained staff can be given authority in different daily business operations. Use of technology to support contact personnel rather than to monitor or replace them, consider the recruitment and training of contact personnel as critical to the firm's success and to link compensation to performance for employees at all levels.

Factors that Limit Empowerment of Frontline Staff

Researchers and scholars though have different views and opinions in empowering employees and its consequences, enterprises start realizing that employee empowerment can make difference between their success and failure in the long run (Brown, Harvey 2006). Many organizations consider that empowering their employees will eventually direct to higher profitability and greater customer satisfaction (Sternberg 1992). Organizations can be more effective in the contemporary competitive market by improving service quality (Zeithaml *et al.* 2006). However, employees cannot act properly and make the customers delighted if they lack sufficient information and clear role clarification to deliver superior service (Melhem 2004). Employees in various organizations perceive insufficient autonomy and authority to make decision so as to respond quickly to customers, and thus organizations fail to retain customers as a consequence. Lack of information, authority and autonomy in the one hand not only interrupt prompt services but also lower employee satisfaction. Employee empowerment on the other hand leads to higher job satisfaction and fosters quick delivery of service to the customers

(Fulford, Enz 1995). Empowerment delegate's authority to an organizations' lowest level in order to make competent decisions (Conger, Kanungo 1988; Thomas, Velthouse 1990), and increases intrinsic motivation of the employees and upturn individual performance (Spreitzer 1995). Employee empowerment involves the necessary background of providing tools, and training, encouraging and motivating the employees of an organization for ensuring sustainable performance. It facilitates the construction of a complete quality setting that benefits an organization to produce quality products and services (Kahre *et al.* 2011) [32-38].

Although empowerment gives the employees authority and makes them confident to deliver their best and thus service quality increases, employees in different organizations seldom enjoy autonomy and power necessary to perform certain tasks, which cause severe consequences for the enterprizes (Coulthard 2014; Wojcik 1999). Employees desiderate sense of belongingness and attachment to the organizations due to lack of empowerment including insignificant authority, noninvolvement in organizational decision making, meaningless job, poor salary structure and low status (Ahmed 2013; Dawson 1989), which greatly influence overall satisfaction of the employees and their offered services. Empowerment does not mean power itself; it is simply a process by which power is only imparted for a drive or to an end. The key to empowerment is the delegation of authority in lower levels and engaging all employees in decision-making, which leads to improve the sense of pride, self-esteem and responsibility of the employees (Brown and Harvey 2006).

Ghosh (2013) argues employee empowerment emerges from four different perspectives: social, psychological, growth and organizational. Kahre *et al.* (2011) describes employee empowerment from psychological and employment climate perspectives. Bekker and Crous (1998) state three perspectives of employee empowerment namely organizational, individual, and training and development. According to Lee and Koh (2001), and Zeglat *et al.* (2014), psychological and structural/ relational empowerments are the most common forms of employee empowerment. Thomas and Velthouse (1990), and Spreitzer (1995) pay much attention on the psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment refers to a set of motivational consciousness constituted by work setting, and reflects the active orientation of an employee to his or her job role (Spreitzer 1995). Psychological empowerment is the extended motivation of intrinsic task constructed on the basis of four perceptions: meaning, competence, self-determination and impact that reflect the orientation of an individual to his work activities (Thomas, Velthouse 1990). Impact indicates the extent of influence of an employee on end results in the organizational work mechanism (Vacharakiat 2008) [33-38].

Materials and methods

The study research design was descriptive and used both qualitative which involved respondents' opinions and quantitative that involved statistical data obtained from field. The study also used primary data which comprised of data that was obtained directly from respondents and secondary data that involved getting data from the already existing literature such as books, documents or reports from RDB offices to get clear understanding of the findings. The study area was Rwanda Development Board near parliament building in Gasabo district half-hours drive from Kigali city. The target population was 60 RDB staff that included marketing staff, tourism staff and conservation staff. A sample is a portion or part of the total population that one gets data from and represents the total population. The sample was obtained through purposive sampling particularly workers from the departments mentioned using Slovin's formula; $n = N/(1+Ne^2)$. Where N is the target population (60), n refers to the sample and e is the estimated error which was 5% or 0.05. The study used the self-administered questionnaire with closed and open ended questions to obtain data from the respondents. The pre-testing of

the questionnaire was done early in time to verify the validity of the questionnaire to avoid errors in the data that was to be collected. Analysis of data involved deriving meaning from the findings by editing, coding , processing and in this study the used statistical methods as well as the computer packages such as excel to obtain frequencies, graphs and percentages.

Results

The results indicated that in order to empower staff in the hospitality industry Rwanda Development Board RDB) uses different strategies to achieve that objective. The findings revealed that the majority of the participants (22%) agreed that RDB monitors the activities of the companies to ensure that they implement the empowering aspect in their staff in order to offer better service to the customers. In addition the second biggest number of participants (19%) suggested that the RDB carries out trainings on skills required for the staff to perform better in service delivery. While professionalization which was ranked by 17% of the participants was pointed out as another strategy used to empower the staff in the industry whereas 15% of participants agreed that policies have been formulated and implemented in order for the managers and hotel owners to empower staff in order to provide better service to the customers. Finally some of the participants said RDB also classifies hotels (11%) in order to different those with better service through empowerment and licenses institutions with empowerment programmes to train in hospitality programmes. This is indicated in Figure 1 below.

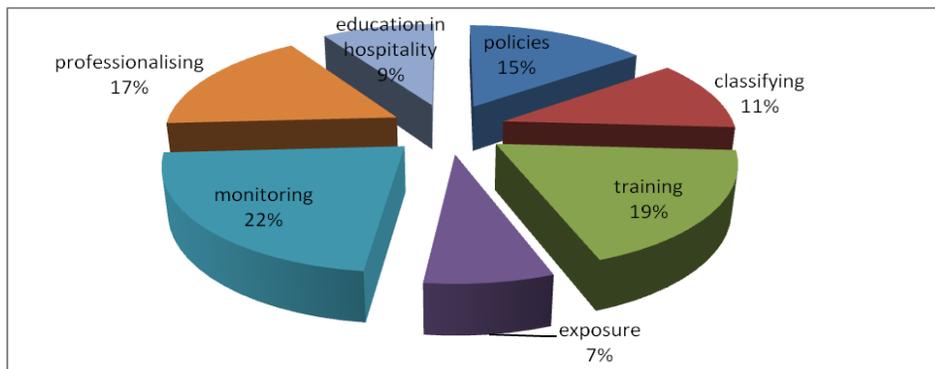


Figure1: Respondents rated Key strategies used to empower the staff

Benefits of empowering customers

The findings suggested that empowerment brings about benefits both to the company and the staff. The biggest percentage of participants 15% agreed that empowerment of staff leads to increased income generation because staff enjoy to make business while 13% agreed that it motivated staff to perform better and satisfy customers and thus leading to increase in number of customers. Further some participants suggested that empowerment improves the image of the company as rated by 11% and the smallest percentage 8% argued that it brought about accountability on the part of the staff to ensure things work smoothly as indicated in Figure 2 below.

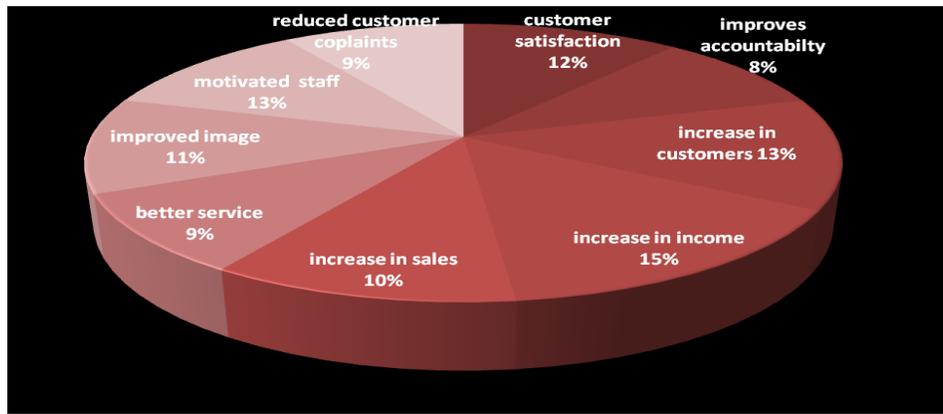


Figure 2: Benefits of empowering staffing the hospitality industry

Respondents’ views ranked limitations to quality service delivery

Apart from the benefits mentioned by the participants above, the findings also revealed that there were limitations to the quality of service delivered. The results showed that majority of participants 13% argued that quality service delivery was affected by the unprofessional staff who affect the service offered. The second highest number 11% pointed out that the problem stems from the uneducated owners of businesses who do not see the benefit of qualified and skilled staff and so end up employing the cheap unqualified staff. Not only that also the poor monitoring methods of RDB as mentioned by 11% of participants also plays an influential role in quality of service delivered to customers. While poor technology and unmotivated staff each rated at 9% percent as the other factors that influence quality of service and the smallest number of participants 7% agreed that time taken to deliver the service is also important and affects quality if it takes long to deliver the service as indicated in Figure 3 below.

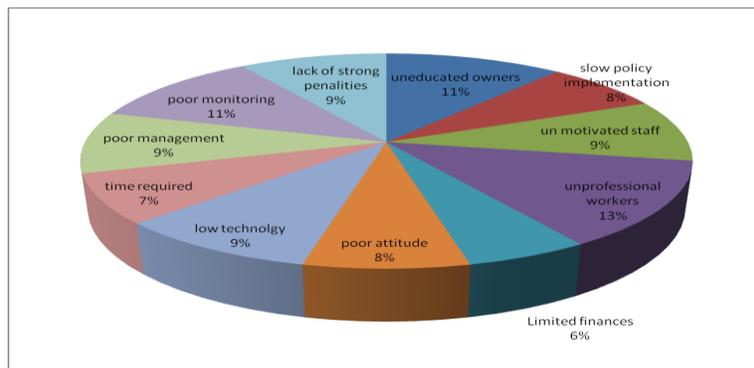


Figure 3: The factors influencing the quality of service delivered.

Suggested Solutions as ranked by participants

In connection to the above challenges the participants were asked to suggest their opinions on the solutions that can be used to reduce on the limiting factors and the biggest number 17% suggested that motivating staff was one way of reducing on the poor quality service. Also 17% of the participants suggested that eliminating unprofessionalism among staff in the hospitality industry also plays a key role on quality of service offered to customers. Another solution mentioned was for RDB to strengthen the policies so that implantation of these policies is done well to improve service delivery. In addition to that staff training, acquiring suitable equipment and work supervision all suggested by 11% of participants as the factors

that can improve on the service delivered to customers. Finally the smallest number that was 9% argued that on job training and new technology can be used to improve the service delivered as shown in Figure 4 below.

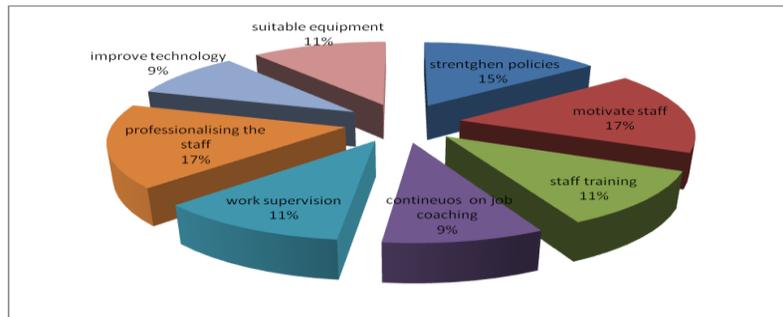


Figure 4: Suggested measures to the challenges faced in hospitality industry

Conclusion

It can be concluded that staff empowerment is a very vital component of managing employees in service industry especially in hospitality. Empowerment has its benefits as revealed by the findings and if well-handled improves the quality of service and generates more income. However, it is concluded that lack of empowerment will bring down business and may affect the future of the business. Empowerment has its own negatives and managers have to be keen to note of the weakness instead work on factors that influence positively the empowerment process as well as implement the measures to strengthen empowerment especially among the frontline staff.

Recommendations

- It can therefore be recommended that RDB comes up with strategies that can be used to ensure staff empowerment in hospitality industry is properly implemented.
- It is recommended that all stake holders in the hospitality industry appreciate and embrace staff empowerment as the cheapest way to improve service and grow business
- It can also be recommended that managers in the hospitality industry implement and monitor the empowered staff to ensure they are practicing it in an appropriate way.

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