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Leading in positive

Federico J. González Tejera

“Leadership is measured by your team's results”

Federico J. González Tejera | CEO of Radisson Hotel Group and Chief Executive of Louvre Hotels Group

Federico J. González Tejera is the CEO of Radisson Hotel Group, with more than 1,300 hotels in operation and under development and with a presence in almost 100 countries around the world, which gives employment to more than 75,000 employees. He has also been the Chief Executive of Louvre Hotels Group since May 2023, where he is conducting the third transformation process of his career, after NH and RHG.

Both companies form part of the Jin Jiang Group, the second largest hotel group in the world by number of rooms. As the leader of two of the most important hotel companies in the world, his vision, his solid experience and his undeniable ability to lead and drive change have made him one of the most respected executives internationally.

González Tejera has experience at several international corporations, having discharged various different responsibilities in several countries, including a spell at Walt Disney (France). In 2012 he joined the NH Hotel Group as its global leader, rolling out the largest transformation plan in the history of the company and taking the hotel chain to its best international position.

Federico is a born leader and a transformation guru; he also stands out for his ability to motivate the professionals who work with him on his teams and fosters pride in belonging to the Group. In addition, he has a special interest in ensuring that the strategic plan prepared at headquarters is adapted internally so that the people who work in the hotels feel committed in the same way and reflect the spirit of the group to all of its customers.

During your career you have held a number of prominent positions, you have worked in various countries and you have extensive experience in the hotel industry. In your experience, what qualities should a good leader have?

When I started working, at Procter & Gamble, they already had a leadership model that was defined as the five "e"s: *engage, explore, explain, elaborate and evaluate;* and those five words are still possibly the ones that are in my head when talk turns to the elements of leadership. But, last week I read a definition of leadership that really caught my attention. It was this: "when someone who works for you does more than they would without you, when they think more than they would think without you, when they question more than they would question without you, and when they achieve more than they would achieve without you, you are a good leader".

In the end, in my opinion, leadership is defined by those five words and by the ability to create a vision, to truly empower the organisation to make a commitment and then execute. The real measure of leadership is the results of the people you work with. It doesn't matter if your leader is charismatic or not; what really matters are the behaviours that your presence or actions generate. So, more than the "cosmetic" part, it is the what that matters.

How do you manage teams with different business cultures?

When you are working in a multicultural environment, it is essential to pay close attention to errors of communication and content. Many problems that arise at the beginning or during periods of transformation or management are often due to misunderstandings of what is said. For example, when I went to Sweden and said "Hey, what we need to do is...", the Swedes got annoyed, not because the idea wasn't good, but because they didn't like a leader telling them directly what they should do. For them, a leader should make suggestions, saying something like "you should consider". This is an example where the content of the message does not change, but the way it is said can cause misunderstandings and problems.

The essence of the matter is that the key is tolerance and empathy. Empathy is something that you need to be trained in, because it is not easy. It's not just about understanding and smiling at someone who says something you don't like or that you consider wrong; you need to understand why. There are many cultural concepts underpinning people's beliefs. Something you might see as a mistake is not really a mistake, but simply a different way of looking at the problem. That is why tolerance is essential, because, by working with other cultures, you learn that there is no single solution to problems.

"The key to working with multicultural teams is tolerance and empathy"

There is a definition of culture that I really like: culture is the way in which a society solves its problems. How we Spaniards solve problems is different from the way the Swedes or the Portuguese do it. Therefore, what may be an affront to you may be normal for them.

The hotel industry, as a fundamental cornerstone of the economy and tourism, has faced unprecedented challenges in recent years, marked by the global pandemic, increasing climate concerns, geopolitical conflicts, etc. These circumstances have forced us to profoundly re-evaluate and constantly adapt operational and sustainability strategies within the industry. In view of this backdrop of change and adaptation, what do you consider to be the most significant challenge for the hotel industry globally and, more specifically, in Spain in the coming years?

At global level, there are always good years and bad years, and there are always regions of the world in conflict. It's rare for there to be a prolonged period when we only hear good news. Although the impact of COVID has been profound and has left a large wound, we must get used to the fact that any year can bring different types of events. At present, China is growing more slowly, the United States is doing well but with a certain lack of balance, and in Europe there is confusion about who makes the decisions and who is in charge, in addition to major military conflicts with latent risks. These risks will always exist. Tourism will always be subject to these fluctuations, and will benefit in good years when the economy is doing well.

There is a global challenge regarding tourism's footprint on the environment, and individual governments, not just the European Union or the institutions, need to take more responsibility for this issue. I would like to invite the Government of Spain to take the lead by making the country the first where the carbon footprint for visitors is zero. What should we do at hotels, in restaurants and other places to make sure tourists do not generate an additional carbon footprint? In Spain, we should take a long-term view.

From a positive point of view, countries, specifically Spain, can redefine tourism more broadly. At present, we define tourism based on whether hotels are full and how many visitors arrive. However, we could sell Spain as a more diverse destination: for people who come to live permanently, to telework, to be treated in hospitals, to study or to create companies. This ecosystem would mean that, if any of its elements were to fail at any time, the others could balance it out. A broader perspective can make us stronger and protect us from other changes that may affect tourism.

In the competitive and ever evolving landscape of the industry you operate in, each brand is trying to distinguish itself from the others through a unique combination of services, experiences and values that define its proposal to the customer. In this regard, Radisson has positioned itself as one of the most widely recognised brands with its own hospitality philosophy. Which are the factors that distinguish Radisson from other hotel groups?

At Radisson, the efforts we have made are focused firstly on each of our brands. Each brand clearly understands the benefits and experience it should offer. in addition, we have defined brand standards that are closely related to those benefits. We measure quality on a consistent basis and seek to balance it out with our pricing levels. Furthermore, there is something that consumers value highly, and that is the consistent delivery of a service. As a worldwide chain, we must ensure that whether you visit our hotel in Bilbao or whether you choose Radisson in Milan, the experience is just as good. We cannot fail. If our international consistency fails at any time, we lose credibility and customers abandon us.

In addition, we are totally obsessed about consumers and also about the owner of the hotel. In the field of global chains, there are some that are only franchises. In our case, between 25% and 30% of the hotels are rented or owned by us, which allows us to operate them directly, and another 20% are under management. This keeps us closer to our customers every day and forces us to ensure that even in our hotels, customers are satisfied. We live the experience in a more direct way, which allows us to offer a better service and more value added to franchisees, and a better experience to consumers.

“There is a global challenge regarding tourism's footprint on the environment, and individual governments need to take more responsibility for this issue”

Radisson has demonstrated an exceptional commitment to nurturing talent, a decision that has not only enriched the hotel experience, but has also created a diverse workplace ecosystem. What skills and qualities do you consider essential to being part of the Radisson team?

The first characteristic is honesty. We want our people, within the company's values, to feel able to speak clearly and say what they think, even if they have different opinions. Also, people must be passionate about what they do. We serve the consumer and it is essential that our people enjoy their work. It is very important that everyone understands the company's mission and acts honestly, expresses themselves sincerely, and enjoys their work. I firmly believe that with these characteristics, if you are curious, have leadership skills, take the initiative and work hard, you can be part of the team anywhere around the world.

“If you are curious, have leadership skills, have initiative and work hard, I believe you can be on teams anywhere around the world”

Technological capabilities and digitalisation have become fundamental allies for economic and social development. Hospitality industry professionals must understand the latest trends in artificial intelligence because it can significantly impact the way they operate and serve guests. How do you think artificial intelligence and robotics will transform the hotel experience in the next ten years?
One of the many of the things that artificial intelligence and technology allow us to do is put more money where it is needed. If I have an administration department or back office in a hotel that requires five people, I would prefer to free up that time and set those five people to improving the service or even increasing the hotel's margin. This would allow me to earn more money and invest more in the hotel, thus creating more jobs. So, in the end, if you look at the history of humanity, in many cases it is about improving efficiency and reusing that efficiency to achieve more growth, which results in further development of the people in the countries in which you operate and you work, and offers more opportunities for professional and personal development. If we look at the technological developments of the last 20 years, it is not that the margins have increased significantly, but that they are reused so that we can continue to grow and create more jobs. Therefore, if they are applied well and understood well, they can be positive.

What advice would you give to future generations? What personal and technical qualities must future employees of a company that operates at global level and in an environment in constant flux have?
I would advise them to focus on three fundamental aspects: the "what", the "where" and the "how".

Firstly, it is crucial that they discover their “gift”. We all have an innate talent, although many of us have not been taught to identify it. The education system should help us find it, but often this does not happen. Despite continuing in my personal search, I am convinced that each of us has a special ability. Working on something that uses our talent makes work a pleasure.

Secondly, the "where" is just as important. They should look for a company, an environment or a job where people are valued and talent development is encouraged. Finding a place like this will allow them to grow professionally and improve their career.

Lastly, the "how" refers to the attitude with which they approach their professional development. They should keep up their levels of curiosity and nourish their leadership capacity. Adaptability and concern for the well-being and development of others are essential, since they all have a positive impact. And, of course, it is essential to enjoy the process.

If they can focus on these three aspects—the “what”, the “where”, and the “how”— they will have a greater chance of success in both their careers and their lives.

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