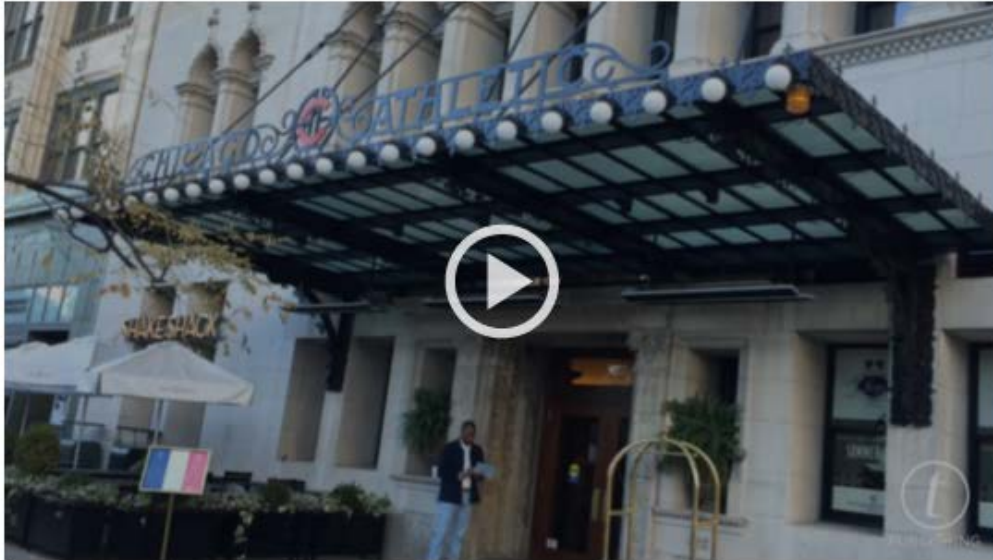


Commune Hotels: Where core values don't have to be boring+



Top Workplace: Commune Hotels and Resorts. (Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz / Chicago Tribune)

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Chicago Tribune

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No. 5 among midsize companies in the Chicago Tribune's list of #TopWorkplaces is @CommuneHotels

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Amid the leather couches and engraved dark woods and roaring fireplaces in the Chicago Athletic Association's stately lobby, you might hear Jane Kalenga laughing loudly or, on occasion, see her dancing with guests as she checks them in.

Kalenga, a front desk agent, said she feels encouraged to be herself at work, which was not the case in previous hospitality jobs, where she felt more scripted.

"They want us to have fun, to celebrate individuality," she said.

With "celebrate individuality," Kalenga is referring to the first of 10 core values that Commune Hotels and Resorts impresses upon employees across its 50-plus properties.

Commune, which in Chicago operates the Thompson Hotel in the Gold Coast, Hotel Lincoln in Lincoln Park and the newly renovated Chicago Athletic Association downtown, ranked fifth among midsize companies in the Tribune's list of Top Workplaces, as measured by Exton, Pa.-based consultancy WorkplaceDynamics. Commune has about 350 employees at its three Chicago hotels.

Touting a company's core values can be a sure way to lose your audience.

But at Commune, employees mention the values in conversation. Some managers carry smartphone cases adorned with the list of 10 or wear bracelets imprinted with individual values.



Commune in Chicago operates the Thompson Hotel in the Gold Coast, Hotel Lincoln in Lincoln Park and the Chicago Athletic Association downtown

San Francisco-based Commune Hotels was formed in 2011, when John Pritzker, son of Hyatt Hotels co-founder Jay Pritzker, merged the swanky Thompson Hotels and playful Joie de Vivre boutique hotel brands. It has since added two more brands, tommie and Alila, which also have distinct personalities but are connected by the core employee values.

The values, developed three years ago with staff input, all aim to make someone's day. They include "laugh often," "be humble" and the cheeky "follow your angel, ignore your devil ... most of the time."

Hires are put through an all-day orientation that teaches them how to put the values into practice. At Hotel Lincoln, for example, employees "celebrate individuality" by wearing their favorite band T-shirts to work during Lollapalooza weekend.

On an intranet site, the company shares stories of employees living the values, not just at work but in their personal lives. When an employee donated a kidney for a friend's transplant, his story illustrated the values "be thoughtful" and "live with the heart of an innkeeper," which means you serve, support and take care of others, not because it's your job but because it's who you are.

Data:



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"All of these values you can take home, and you will be a better person if you follow them," said Chad Jackson, director of operations for catering and conference services at the Thompson Chicago.

Jackson had the idea to put the values on smartphone cases and silicone wristbands, encouraging managers to wear a different wristband each month and, at their monthly leadership meetings, discuss how they lived that value. An example he offers for "celebrate individuality" is the Thompson Hotel float

at Chicago's Pride Parade, on which three same-sex couples married as the float made its way through city streets, he said.

The staff has lineups before every shift to share such stories, helping create an environment where employees are inspired to make an emotional connection with guests, said Steve Shern, general manager of Thompson Chicago.

He describes a concierge who created a surprise Build-A-Bear stuffed animal for a girl visiting Chicago for the first time with her father, and a front desk employee who is an artist and hand-makes cards for guests as mementos of their stay.

"That is more powerful than any loyalty program," Shern said.

Cultivating that environment starts with the right hires.

"We can teach almost anything in our business, but we can't teach your personality or your attitude," Shern said. "After that we're looking for people who are willing to learn."

Competition for talent is stiff as new hotel rooms flood the market, said Serin Lisa Nonzee, people services director at Thompson Chicago. The company offers a referral fee of \$250 to nudge employees to recommend like-minded friends, and a manager-in-training program that rotates employees through different departments and offers management skills coaching.

A selling point at the company, which next year plans to open seven hotels in the U.S. and Mexico and six in Asia, is that employees see potential to move up and try new ideas.

Morgan Bailey, who left Hotel Lincoln to become hotel manager at the Chicago Athletic Association, which opened in May, said she enjoys tapping into the online "best practice portal," where managers can learn what other properties are doing and get ideas of their own. "It's cool to be in an entrepreneurial space like that," she said.

Kalenga said she feels "finally home" at the CAA, where management took the time to learn who she is and what she offers.

"They always like to praise us, but they don't realize that it's because of them we want to better ourselves," Kalenga said. (Another core value: "continuously improve.")

Patrick Hatton, the general manager of the CAA,

said he walked out of Kalenga's interview "feeling energized, I wanted to go find the right people to surround Jane."

The CAA opened short-staffed so it could see how the team worked together before filling the gaps. Hatton estimates that at least 40 percent of the staff hasn't worked in hotels before, bringing diverse perspectives that lead to smarter decisions and create a fun dynamic that keeps people engaged.

Turnover in the first five months has been 12.6 percent, which Hatton said is unheard of. Average post-opening turnover rates tend to be more than 50 percent, he said.

Hatton traces happy employees to the company leadership.

Commune CEO Niki Leondakis, previously president and COO of Kimpton Hotels before joining Commune in 2012, hosts quarterly Twitter live chats during which she takes questions from employees throughout the company, and she takes more questions at quarterly online town halls simulcast in English, Spanish and Chinese. Her genuine caring permeates the organization, Hatton said.

Gabriel Garcia Jr., a food runner at the CAA's rooftop restaurant Cindy's, feels that care from Hatton, who typically visits twice during a shift to say hello and see how he can help.

"You don't see him as a boss, you see him as a friend," he said.

Garcia Jr., who started working in kitchens when he was 13 as a dishwasher and aspires to open his own bar and grill, explained his passion for restaurant work: "Guests are in our house, trying our food and paying our bills, so you want to be sure that you give them 100 percent satisfaction."

Sounds like a man with the heart of an innkeeper.

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Basics: Commune Hotels and Resorts

Ownership: Private.

Website: communehotels.com

Founded: 2011 (with merger of Joie de Vivre Hospitality, founded in 1987, and Thompson Hotels, founded in 2001).

Chicagoland locations: 3.

Chicagoland employees: 350.

From the survey:

"We strongly focus on 'Make Someone's Day,' where we are very focused on helping others, going out of our way for others, and surprising each other with acts of kindness. Making others feel good encourages them to pass it on, creating a really friendly and caring work environment."

"I have a wonderful team that cares about each other."