

# TEAM PLAYER —*Washington*

## Preface

Despite his position as the president and COO of Ritz-Carlton, one of the world's top hotel groups, Herve Humler's ability to motivate all around him regardless of role is a modern-day inspiration.

WRITER  
*Ed Stocker*

PHOTOGRAPHER  
*Jonathan Hanson*

It's just after 09.00 and staff are gathered in a circle on the ninth floor of Ritz-Carlton's global HQ, a few eyeing an as-yet-unopened box of doughnuts at a nearby table. Employees meet every weekday morning in the brand's tower block located in Chevy Chase, a suburb just beyond the fringes of Washington DC. It's a chance to check in with others and share news about the hospitality group's 88 properties dotted around the globe. The snacks aren't bad either.

More often than not – when he's in town, at least – the meetings are marshalled by company president and COO Herve Humler. Today he arrives a few minutes after the rest of the group, dressed in a pinstripe suit, his hair smoothed into a side parting. He starts to fire off statistics about Bulgari Hotels (part of Marriott International, which owns Ritz-Carlton) before reading a letter he received from a guest. He's authoritative and up to speed, but also prepared to joke with his inner circle, provoking claps and chuckles.

"I think I'm the luckiest president in the world," Humler tells MONOCLE afterwards. "Why? Because everything has been so well positioned." From a small outfit when it was founded in 1983, the company grew with the purchase of the Ritz-Carlton Boston and the rights to the name along with it (the Ritz brand dating back to the start of the 20th century).

Today Ritz-Carlton has establishments spanning everywhere from the Cayman Islands to Kazakhstan with plans to expand further into Asia. The group is adding to its 10 hotels in China in the next few years, a country where it already has some 7,000 employees.

Humler makes it clear that he's a hands-on manager, explaining that he's on a plane every other week. Even when he's not travelling he checks in most days with his teams in North and South America, Asia, Europe and the Caribbean.

Just beside the doorway as you come into his office is an unmissable and slightly terrifying ceremonial sword hanging from the wall ("A gift from His Excellency of Bahrain"). It's one of the many presents Humler receives on the meet-and-greets he does as part of his job. "My wife keeps on telling me 'don't bring anything more home,'" he says, laughing.

Humler has spent his career in the hospitality industry, working for Hyatt and InterContinental among other companies, before joining Ritz-Carlton as a founding member 32 years ago. Despite spending more than three decades in the US, Humler still has the thickest of French accents (he sprinkles his speech with the French "*Alors*" when he wants to make a point). Not that communication with his staff seems to be an issue. For Humler, having an open channel with managers, waiters, kitchen staff and cleaners is part of "creating that excellence".

Indeed it was Humler who was instrumental in promoting the daily line-up meetings when he was general manager in San Francisco over 20 years ago as a way to connect with all his staff. He realised that he simply didn't have enough time to catch up individually with everyone he needed to. "So I said we have to meet [together]," he says. "Five or 10 minutes only; a huddle like you see in an American football game. You talk about the play of the day, the company, what is important." Today he makes sure that he gets people together as a first priority when he visits a hotel; and "it's not about having a pep talk". While HQ meets once a day in the morning, the hotels around the world

have three daily get-togethers seven days a week.

A key part of heading up Ritz-Carlton is ensuring that brand values trickle down to staff: part of that process is honing the right language. Humler refers to his staff as "ladies and gentlemen", a nod to the company's motto that "We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen". The daily meetings – and Humler's global travel – ensure everyone is well versed in the motto, as well as the brand's three steps of service, credo and values that essentially come down to being personable and efficient.

Humler says he wants to be an approachable boss who people can talk to when they have a problem. So if any of his staff tell him they have been given an offer at a rival brand he says he'll try to make them stay but if they really want to go, he won't stop them. "Take it! I love you but take it!" he says in his typical effusive style. "Go for a few years and find out how other firms work and then come back!" Often they do just that.

Despite having all his key staff members around him in Chevy Chase, Humler is aware that it's the people down the line at Ritz-Carlton that are just as important; the work the company does would be impossible without them. "The fundamental idea in leadership is treating everyone the same," he says. "You have to be fair and firm but in this job you also have to have compassion."

Part of being able to understand all his staff, he says, is the fact that he spent three months in the kitchen washing dishes, learnt how to make beds and also worked for a short time in finance ("although I had a tendency to spend too much money"). It allowed him to have a grip on every corner of the business.

The challenge for the future is making sure Ritz-Carlton mixes its expansion with staying relevant in a luxury-travel industry that is in a constant state of flux. Brand consistency is also an issue: the Dallas Ritz-Carlton is rather different from Kyoto. Humler remains driven to improve because resting on your laurels in his business can be dangerous. "We always have to be better next time," he says. "Glory is fleeting." — (M)

## The rules

**01 What time do you like to be at your desk?**  
Between 06.30 and 07.00 so I can still reach the Asia team.

**02 Where's the best place to prepare for leadership: an MBA school or on the job?**  
On the job. John Timmerman at Gallup says one in 10 leaders are born that way; two more get there through being taught and the rest is competency.

**03 What's your management style?**  
Make sure people can talk to you and create an atmosphere where people can do their job.

**04 Are tough decisions best taken by one person?**  
You don't pass it down to a subordinate; they're going to be involved but it's you who has to take care of it.

**05 Do you want to be liked or respected?**  
It's 50/50 but it starts with respect. If people respect you they'll like you.

**06 What does your support team look like?**  
I have an executive committee of eight people.

**07 What technology do you carry on a trip?**  
An iPad and a BlackBerry because I love to use a keypad. I also have an iPhone.

**08 Do you read management books?**  
Not really; I used to but they all say the same thing.

**09 Do you run in the morning? Wine with lunch? Socialise with your team after work?**  
I have a treadmill, bicycle and weight machine at home. I have wine at lunch in Europe but never in the US. I have lunch with my team and we travel together.

**10 What would your key management advice be?**  
Follow your instincts and share your knowledge with people.

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