

## Sleep Well Youth Hostel

During the M2M study visit in Mechelen in October 2008, the project team was taken to meet the director of the Sleep Well Youth Hostel in Brussels.

Sleep Well Hotel is a youth hostel in the centre of Brussels. It has 243 beds and 25 employees from many different cultural backgrounds and on all levels in the organisation. The fact that there are employees from different nationalities working at Sleep Well was not a strategy from the beginning, but it has become the youth hostel's and its director's strategy. This is very much the result of the director's own, personal experience.

The director, Christian, has an immigrant background himself. He was born in Belgium from Congolese parents. He and his family lived in Congo for 7 years. When Christian wanted to study at the university he returned to Belgium. He had to pay a rather high fee to attend university since he was a foreigner and not a Belgian citizen (foreign students were obliged to pay to go to a Belgian university). His parents who at that time lived in Congo lost their fortune and he had to start working to finance his university studies and this was when he realised that he was different, a foreigner and coloured. He was lucky and started working for a Belgian widow who took interest in him and helped by lending him the 600 euros needed to pay study fees. When he finished his studies he was offered work with more responsibility in the Belgian lady's family firm.

After some time this firm was closed down and Christian had to look for work in other places. He was lucky again, for he was asked to come to an interview at the first place he applied for work, at Sleep Well. He was interviewed four times before he got the job, something that made him understand that it was difficult for a foreigner to find a job in Belgium. But he was glad to get a job. Some of his fellow students from Congo did not find proper work although they were some of the best students of their year. His advice is therefore: take the job you are offered, even if you have a university diploma. And try to use "the little door" to get where you want to be. The biggest challenge is getting your first job. If you are a good worker with a talent and a potential for more demanding positions, the manager will finally see you and your potential.

Christian became an assistant director and finally the director of Sleep Well, but it was impossible for him to forget his own history and experience. This goes for the problems he met in his youth but also for the fact that he estimates that he has been very lucky to meet people who were able and willing to help him along. As a manager he sees people's competences, not the colour of their skin.

He asks one of the employees working in the kitchen to stay in the room with us, and he tells her story with input from her. She was sent to work at the youth hostel by the employment office. She did not earn much working at the hotel, but she got the practice she needed to apply for work. Although she had no profession, he saw that her work performance was very good and wanted to give her a chance and especially so because the person responsible for the kitchen service did not perform very well in his job. He persuaded her to attend evening courses so she could start working as a cook in the youth hostel kitchen. In the beginning she did mistakes and he had to support her. Because of her insecurity she did not communicate very well with the rest of staff sometimes. Christian tolerated her mistakes since they were part of her learning process, but at the same time he was quite clear that he could not tolerate mistakes that would have serious consequences for the youth hostel in the long run. He explained that the fact that he had been given valuable help when he was a student was the reason that

he wanted to give help to other people. At the same time, he has to make demands as to all employees' work performance.

In his own words: "I can give people opportunities, but I can't give them advantages."

He wants to give others the chance to prove themselves just as he was himself given this chance. But then his employees also have to grasp the chance, show responsibility and to make the best out of the possibilities they are given. At the same time he has to be conscious about keeping a balance since he can easily be accused of hiring "foreigners" because he has immigrant background himself. He has not been directly accused of doing this, but he knows the suspicion may easily arise. He was very clear about the fact that a manager must avoid giving immigrants possibilities only in order to be a nice person. His moral is that it is important not to create barriers, not to favour certain groups but to give equal opportunities to all. At the same time he is running a business and all employees have to perform in their jobs. If he hires someone, it is because he thinks this person has a potential and is able to do a good job, he and the youth hostel cannot afford to hire people just because there are coloured. The economic reality of Belgium also means that there are many jobs that native Belgians do not want to do, for example being a housemaid.

When asked how his Belgian employees reacted to the fact that many immigrants worked at the hotel he said that there were no problems. He concluded by saying that a manager's attitudes is of crucial importance at the work place, and that he can change people's attitudes by making his attitudes clear and by showing that he himself is competent in his job. When he and a couple of the employees that were present were asked if they felt confident to seek for a job in other organisation, the answer was that they did not really consider it since they were happy in their present jobs but also because this would mean having to start all over again and having to prove themselves again. It is in the eyes of the other that they feel "other" and in Sleepwell they do not feel others any longer. The supporting climate keeps them satisfied workers.

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