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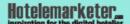
How Hotel GMs Must Evolve to Lead in the AI Era

Future GM

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Jitendra Jain (JJ), hotelier and founder of Hotelmarketer.com, says the real challenge of the AI era is not technology but culture – and that tomorrow's General Manager must evolve from "captain" to "Chief Orchestrator." He explains how GMs can bridge the gap between messy legacy systems and AI's promise by using small, practical "edge AI" wins, making psychological safety a key KPI, replacing rigid scripts with prompt playbooks, and using automation to free up time for more human, high touch guest moments.

While the industry obsesses over algorithms, I believe the real battle of the next decade is cultural. Tomorrow's standout General Manager won't be defined by their ability to code, but by their ability to conduct a hotel where legacy systems, anxious teams, and AI's promise finally play in sync.

If you scroll through LinkedIn today, you might believe we're already living in a futuristic hotel utopia of biometric check-ins, hyper-personalized journeys, and predictive revenue tools that never sleep.

But when I walk into the back office of most hotels, I see something else entirely.

I see legacy systems that barely speak to each other. I see data sitting in silos because connecting it costs too much. And most of all, I see teams who are tired, wary of the latest shiny initiative, and quietly anxious that the robots are coming for their jobs.

This is the **Digital Gap**. On one side is the exponential promise of AI. On the other, the gritty, human reality of hotel operations. If we're serious about bridging that gap, we need a new kind of leadership.

FROM CAPTAIN TO CONDUCTOR

For decades, the GM was the ship's captain. They knew every detail, pitched in during chaos, and held the operation together.

I think that role is evolving. In the AI era, the standout GM will be less a captain and more a conductor. Let's call them the **Chief Orchestrator**.

A Chief Orchestrator doesn't need to play every instrument. Their job is to make the sections work together - systems, people, processes - so the hotel delivers a consistent, human guest experience while quietly benefiting from intelligent tech in the background.

And the good news? This isn't some far-off 2030 fantasy. It's already starting now.

1 START WITH IMPERFECT INSTRUMENTS

Let's be honest. Most hotels don't have perfect tech stacks. And that's okay.

The biggest myth I see in our industry is that AI adoption needs everything to be integrated and cloud-native. If we wait for that, we'll miss years of opportunity.

I'm a big believer in "Edge AI". Not in the technical sense - but as a mindset: smart, local, high-impact tools that sit *on top of* the mess and still create value.

One real example: A front desk agent dealing with a guest whose anniversary stay didn't go to plan. Instead of spending 20 minutes drafting a careful apology email at the end of a long shift, the agent used a secure AI assistant to draft the message in 60 seconds. It wasn't generic. It reflected the context, the emotion, and the appropriate tone. The agent made a few tweaks. The supervisor reviewed it. The message went out that night.

This didn't require new infrastructure. The underlying systems didn't change. But the experience did. For the guest, and the employee.

The Orchestrator GM looks for these wins. They ask: *Where are we bleeding time or energy? What can we layer on now to make things better, not perfect?*

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS A METRIC

The real barrier to AI in hotels isn't code. It's fear.

Everywhere I go, I see it. A reservations manager wondering if voice bots will take over. A marketer nervous about generative tools. A long-tenured concierge quietly thinking, "I've made it through OTAs and the rise of digital concierges… but this?"

When people are afraid, they retreat. They hoard knowledge. They stick rigidly to SOPs. And they quietly resist change.

That's why I think **psychological safety** will be the hidden KPI of AI transformation. A team that feels safe will learn, share, and experiment. A team that doesn't, won't.

If I were running a hotel today, I'd look at three simple signals:

- Are teams given time to try tools and share learnings?
- Are new ideas tested and celebrated, even when they flop?
- Can any associate say, "I tried this AI tool today" without fear of sounding silly or obsolete?

The Orchestrator GM doesn't need to teach neural networks. But they do need to shift the story - from automation to **augmentation**. From "this tool replaces you" to "this tool helps you reclaim time to do what humans do best."

Culture, not capability, is the first unlock.

3 FROM SOPS TO PROMPT PLAYBOOKS

We love SOPs in hospitality. I get it. They bring consistency. They reduce risk. They scale quality.

But they also assume a world that's predictable.

What happens when a guest asks for something unusual? Or when the situation doesn't fit the script?

In an AI-enabled hotel, I believe SOPs will still be there - as rails. But inside those rails, we'll empower staff to be more dynamic, using **prompt playbooks**.

Here's what I mean. Instead of memorizing five recovery responses, staff use an AI framework that helps them:

- Summarize what went wrong.
- Understand what the guest actually values.
- Suggest 2–3 response options that align with brand tone and policy.
- Draft the message in a way that feels personal, not robotic.

The result? Faster, more relevant, and still brand-safe.

The GM's role here is critical. They don't throw out the SOPs. They expand the toolbox - and encourage judgment, creativity, and contextual thinking.

That's a shift. But it's one I believe most teams are ready for, if we show them how.

4 THE HIGH-TOUCH PARADOX

Here's something I've come to believe: the more digital travel gets, the more valuable humanity becomes.

Booking, billing, even planning - increasingly handled by apps and AI. So where does the hotel stand out? In the moments that *can't* be outsourced.

A guest arrives from a 12-hour flight, grumpy and sore. A team member anticipates what they need and offers it without being asked. That's not data. That's care.

But here's the catch: you can't deliver that level of human presence if your team is buried in admin.

I expect to see more hotels using AI to handle the quiet admin grind - summarizing shift logs, flagging unresolved issues, and drafting responses to routine guest questions. Even modest deployments can win back hours every week for frontline teams.

The real leadership test is what happens next. The Orchestrator GM doesn't just absorb the time into leaner staffing models. They reinvest it into the lobby. More greeting. More eye contact. More proactive support for families who need a little extra care.

To me, this is the **High-Touch Paradox**: AI creates more capacity for human warmth - but only if we choose to use it that way.

WHAT GMS CAN ALREADY DO THIS YEAR

None of this requires a five-year roadmap. If I were a GM today, here's where I'd start:

1 IDENTIFY THREE PAIN POINTS TO AUGMENT.

What's eating your team's time? Long reports? Translation? Shift logs? Start with one. Add a safe, simple AI tool that solves *just that*.

2 CREATE AN AI SANDBOX.

Pick 2–3 tools. Let teams test them, share what works, what doesn't. Protect the experimenters. Celebrate the curious.

3 BUILD A MINI PROMPT LIBRARY.

Start with real-world cases: a late check-in complaint, a special occasion mishap, a group booking gone sideways. Create a few prompts that guide staff to handle it well, without rigid scripts. (If you'd like a ready-made set of prompts, I've put together "100 Practical AI Prompts for Busy Hoteliers" that you can adapt).

These are cultural moves, not technical ones. And they make a difference.

MY FINAL THOUGHTS

AI isn't a distant future for hotels. It's here. But its impact won't come from the tools alone.

It will come from how we lead.

The GM who helps their team feel confident - not scared. The GM who looks for small frictions to solve. The GM who creates space for creativity, not just compliance.

That's the **Chief Orchestrator**. And I think that role will define the next decade of hospitality leadership.

Not because it's flashy.

But because it's human.