

Riding the rails to success with Rocky Mountaineer

Orientation for new employees at **Rocky Mountaineer** is pretty special—it includes an all-expenses-paid luxury train excursion through the majestic Rocky Mountains of British Columbia and Alberta.

“Whether you are a new accounts payable clerk or a vice-president, our immediate priority is to get you aboard one of our trains,” says Randy Powell, president and CEO of the international award-winning tourism train operator.

“We want sparkplugs who are looking for much more than money—people looking to make a difference.”

— Randy Powell, President and CEO

Explains Powell: “Everyone in the company needs to experience first-hand what we offer our guests and see their reactions. Even staff who don’t typically deal directly with our guests play a significant part in our continuing improvement efforts. And we can’t be the absolute best unless everyone is intimate with our product.”

Employee input on how to make things better is solicited regularly at quarterly employee town halls at the company’s Vancouver head office or in more informal “Coffee with Randy” sessions. “I want to encourage ideas and suggestions from everyone,” Powell says. “If we’re going to win as a company, we want to hear a lot of voices and we want everyone pulling oars in the same direction.”

To achieve those objectives, Rocky Mountaineer has made a huge commitment to professional development. “We have great people that we want to invest in,” says Powell, who authorized \$1 million to establish a formal Leadership Development academic credit program at the University of British Columbia’s Sauder School of Business. Powell and his senior team worked with Sauder professors to create a targeted business syllabus for skills development and leadership building.

The educational training, consisting of two one-week intensive sessions at the university, is open to managers and directors as well as vice-presidents. “We want as many people as possible to benefit,” says Powell.

While the tuition and program expenses total some \$500,000 annually, Powell says “that’s cheap” for what Rocky Mountaineer gets in return. “Not only does it enhance our skill level,” he says, “but it builds connectivity across the organization. It pays for itself many times over.”

Angelina Gibson is one of Rocky Mountaineer’s Sauder students. “I feel honoured that my employer wants to make such a major investment in me and others,” says Gibson, a senior manager for destinations, meaning she is responsible for the high-level care and feeding of visitors before and after they board a Rocky Mountaineer train. “This company provides you with a real opportunity to grow and develop.”

In addition to its formal training, Gibson says another Sauder program benefit is bringing together people from different departments and locations. “You get a chance to form relationships with other people that strengthens the overall team,” she adds.

Gibson started with Rocky Mountaineer more than two decades ago as a host



STAFF AT THE LUXURY ROCKY MOUNTAINEER PRIDE THEMSELVES ON SERVICE



on one of the trains. Taking advantage of varied training programs offered or financed by the company, she earned a promotion as train manager and has held other senior positions as well.

But Gibson attributes her fulfilling career to something that can’t be taught. “You have to be passionate about what you do,” she says. “We are committed to delivering life-changing experiences.”

For his part, Powell works hard to hire only such people. “We don’t want the employee type who is satisfied with a 9-to-5 job to pay off the mortgage,” he says. “We want sparkplugs who are

looking for much more than money—people looking to make a difference.”

Adds Powell: “You can teach hard skills, but not passion. As long as the person is functionally capable, I will take someone wildly passionate over an MBA from a top school.”

And after they are hired, they get a special perk. Every year, they receive another free train trip. This time, they can bring along a friend or a partner, or hand off the benefit to family or friends. [SME](#)



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