

Leading a New Era Podcast Episode 6: Nick Yarnell

David: Welcome back to Leading a New Era, the podcast from IHG that opens the doors on the world's most iconic hotels and to the inspiring people who lead them. I'm your host, David Littlewood from the Talent Acquisition Team here at IHG.

Eunice: And I'm Eunice Clements-Tweedie, VP of Global Talent Acquisition and Business Partnering, also here at IHG. Hi David, how are you?

David: I'm very well, Eunice. How are you?

Eunice: I'm superb, thank you.

David: Yeah? In each episode, we sit down with a general manager from our luxury and lifestyle portfolio to explore their leadership journey. The bold moves, the defining moments and the stories that have shaped their impact today. In our final episode of the first season, we're joined by Nick Yarnell, general manager at the brand-new Six Senses in London, a highly anticipated opening that brings a brand-new signature wellness and sustainability focus to the UK for the first time in the reborn Whiteleys building in Bayswater. With 37 years of experience across eight countries and four continents, Nick's journey has taken him from iconic city hotels to island retreats. He's fiercely intentional in the way that he leads and is guided by the belief that luxury isn't about excess, but about emotional connection, intuitive service, and making people feel seen. He brings a sense of perspective, humanity and calm confidence into everything that he does. Nick, welcome to Leading a New Era.

Nick: Thank you very much for having me. Delighted to be here.

David: First of all, congratulations on leading this refurb of this iconic property and bringing Six Senses to London for the first time. How are you and the team feeling about it?

Nick: Well, we're feeling great. I mean, it's an exciting adventure we're on. Opening hotels is never, you know, super simple, but I've been here now a couple of years, and this building is grade two listed in Bayswater. It's a million square feet, so it's a big baby and we're only one, sort of not even a third of this whole thing. So, you've got residential, retail, and now we're finally getting a sense that you can see the light at the end of the tunnel as we're working seven days a week on site and even overnight. So, it's coming. We've got an incredible spa; wonderful private members club. It'll be the first one that we do of that globally and 109 room hotel, 14 branded apartments. So, we're part of the sort of regeneration of Queensway. So, there's a sort of steering committee, including Westminster Council, and all the seven

landowners basically of the entire Queensway are getting together and we're the anchor of that. So, everyone's really excited to see how it develops.

David: Yes incredible. Yeah, I think I came to visit you maybe six months ago and it was very much still under construction. I was surprised by how many colleagues you had already functioning and working, and I imagine they're getting quite excited.

Nick: So, I think we're 30 now and by the time we open doors, we'll be at 270, 280. It's exciting. Openings are always, yeah, it doesn't matter how much you plan and meticulously, there's always a lot of uncertainty. I tell everybody as they join is like, you need to be obviously ready for a bit of hard work, no question, but you need a lot of patience and you need a pretty good sense of humour too, because there's a lot of things that will be coming down the pike that will surprise and delight us.

David: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, the plans look incredible.

Nick: Interior design was done by one of our preferred partners out of New York and they're great. They really understand Six Senses and our values. And, you know, so when they started out, they were sort of digging in the archives of Westminster Council and understanding how the building functioned, what it looked like. And, you know, so we're really trying to connect to the past into that era, sort of late Victorian sort of art deco kind of feel, very tall ceilings, but fabrics and colours from around the world, lots of plants, biophilia figures heavily in the design, which is great for us because it pumps oxygen into the space, which, you know, naturally makes people feel good when you walk into a space it sort of just calms you down.

David: We're going to do a little warmup, which is our first segment, which is called the Early Check-In, which is a round of this or that, that myself and Eunice are going to throw your way. I'll let you kick off, shall I?

Eunice: Okay. Historic architecture or sleek new building?

Nick: Historic architecture, yes.

Eunice: [Inaudible 00:04:48].

Nick: Yeah.

David: Sunrise yoga or night-time spa?

Nick: Oh, sunrise yoga, no question.

Eunice: Suit and tie? I think I know the answer. Or barefoot meetings.

Nick: This is an easy one. Yeah, barefoot meetings.

Eunice: Barefoot meetings, of course, you're Six Senses.

Nick: 100%, yeah. I walk barefoot in the park all the time.

Eunice: Do you?

Nick: People look at me a bit strange.

Eunice: It's very grounding.

Nick: Oh yeah.

Eunice: Yeah.

Nick: It's really important.

David: Books or podcasts?

Nick: Recently, more books, but that's a hard one.

Eunice: Okay, fair enough.

Nick: I listen to a lot of podcasts.

Eunice: Okay, a perfect welcome drink or a perfect pillow?

Nick: Oh, pillow.

Eunice: Pillow?

Nick: Pillow. Pillows are so important. In fact, my wife and I are hilarious, we'll go and, you know, when we are going to visit a hotel, we'll often bring our own pillows.

Eunice: Do you? (Laughter)

David: Nice. Forest walk or ocean swim?

Nick: Ocean swim, just.

Eunice: A solo retreat or group travel?

Nick: Solo retreat. I've done some Vipassana 10-day silent retreats, and I love being in nature on my own. That's how I reconnect and recharge my batteries. So, yeah, definitely.

David: Cool. Leading with data or leading with intuition?

Nick: These are good. Both are so important. I'm going to say intuition.

David: Yeah, trust the gut.

Nick: Yeah. I mean, both are critical, you can't be an effective leader without doing both. But yeah, I think a lot of people sometimes are not in tune with what their gut is telling them and what their intuition is saying, and certainly in Six Senses, we talk a lot about that.

David: Lovely. Guest impacts or team transformation?

Nick: Oh, team transformation. Both are exciting, and obviously the core of hotelling is to have happy guests return, right? But ultimately, the core of everything flows from having a happy team, and happy teams are teams that feel like, you know, they're engaged and growing and improving and doing good work. So, I would say that's the core of everything. If you get that right, then in theory, your guest experience is going to be phenomenal.

David: Yeah, you're moving in the right direction.

Nick: Yeah, yeah.

Eunice: Okay. Switching gears. A global mindset or local roots?

Nick: Oh, local roots.

Eunice: Local roots?

Nick: Oh, yeah. And this is something that Six Senses talks about quite a lot. You need to have both. Obviously, you need to have both. But we talk about connection and reconnection a lot in Six Senses. So, in Six Senses, we say, you know, we're hoping to create spaces where people can reconnect with themselves, each other, and the world around them. That's kind of our tagline, if you will, so. And that starts with, you know, knowing where you are, connecting with the place that you're in. And I think there's a lot of joy in that, truthfully. You know, when we were in Portugal, we spent a long time understanding what that particular culture feels like. And so, we hired a lot of local people. We're very proud of that.

David: A 5:00 AM start or midnight brainstorm?

Nick: 5:00 AM. 5:00 AM, 5:00 AM. Yeah, I'm happy to...

David: Early bird.

Nick: I'm an early bird.

Eunice: Early bird. Art curation or scent selection for your hotel?

Nick: Art curation.

Eunice: Oh, okay. Visual over scent.

Nick: Yeah, I mean, obviously, but the art curation is incredibly important and part of the Six Senses story. So again, we want local artists who are doing great work, who believe in, you know, sustainability and maybe in wellness.

David: Oh, lovely.

Eunice: That's fantastic.

David: And then the final one. Travel to recharge or travel to learn?

Nick: Recharge, I think. Yeah. I mean, again, these are great questions because obviously, you know, part of the joy of, I think, a hotel career is that you get to live in, you know, many different places. When you live somewhere, it's different to travel. I think you end up learning much more about the culture if you're living in a place than if you're just travelling. But, yeah, when I'm travelling, I'm spending a lot of time learning. So, that's what I find fun. So, I'll go and visit museums and, yeah, and get out and about and speak to people, yeah.

David: We're going to be moving into the Room To Grow section, talking about your career journey, Nick. What kind of drew you to the world of hospitality?

Nick: The truth is I only got to stay in probably one or two fancy hotels when I was growing up. But I remember the first one was when I was about 12 or 13, and I was invited by a wealthy American friend of mine. Because I knew that at that point, I was going to give a go on an international hoteling career and to try and see if I **could** become one day a GM. And I thought, what better way to start than by learning the craft or the trade. So, I started in the kitchens and, you know, did as many of the sort of entry level positions as I possibly could for the first four years of my career. So, I was a barman and a waiter and worked in accounts and various odd jobs. I loved being a barman. That was great fun. That was probably one of the best jobs I did and just climbed the ladder up eventually to being front of house manager. And that was a great experience. And, so yeah, that was kind of my introduction to hoteling and spent a lot of time sort of travelling the world, did many, many interesting locations before eventually, you know, my third company really, which was Six Senses and joined them in 2014 in Portugal in Douro Valley, where we opened the hotel there. So, yeah.

David: That's a lovely segue to my next question. And you mentioned that one of your biggest learning curves was your time at Douro Valley and turning or transforming a bankrupt hotel into something that is really extraordinary. What did that experience teach you about risk and resilience and thinking like a founder?

Nick: Yeah, that's a great question. So, you know, when you open a hotel, there's a lot of unknowns. When you open doors and, you know, you've got to expect that some of the things you thought would be popular, but maybe not so much, and other things where you didn't think it was that special, turns out people really, really loved it. So, that's one aspect of it. You have to stay very nimble and be prepared to pivot as things emerge. The big challenge for us was to, you know, sort of say Six Senses brand, I mean we have our origin story in the Indian Ocean, no shoes, no news, kind of Robinson Crusoe islands with mushroom huts and vegetarian restaurants and an unusual approach to hoteling. And so, how to transform those values into a European context and stay relevant. So, we looked around and I think I mentioned earlier, one of the beautiful things, we had a forest garden that was part of the hotel

there, and it was in need of some love, truthfully. It had virtually been abandoned when we arrived there and the soil was so eroded, you could stick your hand all the way up to your shoulder into the soil and trees were falling over, it was dangerous. And, you know, we thought, okay, well, there's something here because there was a lovely origin story of that forest, which in a nutshell, the family who built the house in the 19th century, the father of the family convinced his family to go up there only if they could have a forest, because the sort of noble families of Lisbon during the hot summers would escape to a place called Sintra, where they had these incredible forest gardens that were attached to these palaces. And so, he dug up some, you know, perfectly viable vineyard to plant this incredible forest and went around the world, literally spent two- or three-years collecting seeds. It was an amazing story. So, you have these exotic trees from Brazil and around the world, palm trees [inaudible 00:12:33] it goes on. Well, we thought, how do we bring this to, you know, to life and how do we sort of encourage our guests to engage with the forest? And so, one of the things we thought of was, you know, tree climbing. You know when you are kids, everyone loves to climb trees. We had a lot of amazing big trees and we thought, how do we bring this into a luxury hotel context? So, that took a little while to figure it out, but we have an activity that they still do today where we can get people 10 metres up a tree and you ring a bell. And I even got some very well-known journalists who are not young to get up there and do it. So, that was one kind of surprising, unusual thing that we did. Portugal, what's the – the national art form is tile painting. And I thought, gosh, you know, wouldn't it be fun if we could, you know, rather than do pottery or something else like that, you know, when you're thinking about the guest experience, we really wanted something that was, you know, talking to the creativity and artistic ability of people. And, you know, you often have in hotels, you have little easels, painting classes are quite common. We thought, wouldn't it be cool if we found a way to introduce that? So, I spent about a year trying to find the right artist and believe it or not, eventually found her working for a theatre company in Manchester, would you believe?

Eunice: Oh, my goodness.

Nick: Helena. And so, I sort of wooed her down and we created a little studio for her and, you know, and she's still there. So, teaching people how to do azulejo painting, and you can do it with kids who've never done it before using stencils and then you bake it in the kiln and 24 hours later, they've got this incredible kind of memento, souvenir, whatever, to also, you know, artists. So, she travels the world and restores these azulejo panels in churches around the world as well as teaching people in the hotel. So, again, a lovely story and it's an activity that we put it on the activity schedule, you know, it's free to our guests. There's a couple of examples, there's many others. So, there's a lot of things that are included in the experience that hopefully will give people an opportunity to, you know, move and have some

wonderful exercise and yoga and, but also to do some workshops and maybe learn a thing or two about sustainability along the way and we do that in a fun way, you know. So, we think about human happiness from a holistic perspective. So, in the evening, there'll be wine tasting where we really hope people will kind of, you know, be nudged to sort of talk to each other and engage and just nothing makes me happier than after a wine tasting seeing, you know, two couples who didn't know each other go off and have dinner together and by the end of their stay, they're actually good friends. You know, that's another...carefully engineering these sort of, you know, spontaneous opportunities for people to connect with each other is also fun. So, yeah, I could go on but, and we've got a few of these kinds of things lined up for London as well. So, that's also going to be very exciting to see.

Eunice: The uniqueness that is within Six Senses is really apparent when you visit, and I've met the colleague that you were speaking about and she's phenomenally creative and for our listeners as well, the Douro Valley is in Portugal, super easy to get to. So, I'd highly encourage anyone looking for a unique experience to head on out there.

David: Yeah, so it's a beautiful hotel. I was actually...almost went to Douro Valley but circumstances dictated that I couldn't, and then I had to ask Eunice to go which didn't take-...

Eunice: Such hardship. So, it took me a split second to say yes.

David: It didn't take too much convincing to be honest, but...also, I just wanted to ask you, Nick, as well, you described your leadership as something that takes positive reinforcement and a good sense of humour as well. What advice do you give to your rising stars when or if they feel like they've hit a wall?

Nick: One of the things that we do for young managers in my hotel is I will hopefully very early on run them through a leadership training programme. It's the sort of Six Senses leadership module, and it's something that I helped write and you know, I think it's pretty good, and it sort of gives you a little bit of a...not so much a roadmap but think of it like a framework and, you know, provided you're working within that framework, you're going to have a good chance to succeed. So, it sort of maps out some of the behaviours that we think leaders should, you know, what we encourage leaders to exercise. So, one of the things that we talk a lot about is situational leadership. So, I always kind of laugh when people ask about leadership style, right? Because yes, we probably all naturally have, you know, a tendency to be more one thing or another. Some people are more comfortable being directive other **may**...more comfortable having a coaching style. Other people like to be sort of supportive and they'll say this, that and the other, you know, good listeners and all those things are super important. But the truth is that you need to do all of those things, and it kind of depends on the situation. So, if you have a, you know, a young

trainee who's, you know, doesn't know a lot, you know, you kind of need to be directive with that person. They want and need it in order to grow and learn and all the rest of it. And then you have to ask yourself where their motivation level is. And so, if it's high motivation versus low motivation, then you're going to have to adapt your leadership style to that. And then as they grow and hopefully, they're talented and motivated and then they become experts in their role, then how you lead that individual and the style is going to change, right?

Eunice: I just wonder if anyone's listening to this podcast and they are an aspiring leader in the world of hospitality, what are those couple of traits that you've typically identified and thought, that's the rock star quality we are looking for? What are they?

Nick: Well, when I'm thinking about this, I'm thinking, let's say, position of a barman or a line staff. I'm not actually thinking about managers so much, okay? Because, you know, the battle is won or lost on the front lines. It's not really about what the GM says. It's about what's happening in the bar or on the front drive, the doorman, how he interacts, that first impression. It's about the housekeeper who's going out of their way to do something special in the room. And I've got tonnes of little examples that I share with people that are, you know, that don't cost any money. It's just about really people who care, who have that deep empathy and that, and as I said before, they're really good at their jobs, which is technically they're good at executing the standard way of doing things at a high level consistently, but then they're also using their prefrontal cortex, their emotional intelligence, their EQ, whatever, and looking around them and they've got their radar up and they see things that there are opportunities to engage with people emotionally. I can give you an example that pops to mind that is one that I often share, which is of an American lady, single traveller who checked into our hotel in Portugal, and she was incredibly nervous because she was a coeliac and a very serious coeliac. And so, when she checked into the hotel, she was like, oh my God, are they going to get me right? And all this sort of stuff. So right away on arrival, we sort of hopefully put her mind to rest and said, listen, the chef, everyone knows, don't you worry while you're in the hotel, we'll look after you. So, she went down and had her first meal in the restaurant, and everything went well. But this is the magic bit. At the end of that meal, the waiter came up to her and gave her a little card that he'd written out just before she left the restaurant, and on the card, he said, so I've written in Portuguese what it means to be coeliac. So, if you go to any restaurant in the area, just hand this to the waiter and they'll get it and you won't have anything to worry about. Again, it costs absolutely nothing, right? But that story, when she told me, you know, she had tears in her eyes. Right? So, those are the kinds of opportunities that, you know, that exists all around, and it doesn't mean that every single interaction has to be something unusual. Every time you're served a coffee, you don't want it turned into some sort of theatrical moment, but having people who really take pleasure in giving

great services is really what it's all about. And so, finding those people, nurturing them, encouraging them, if you unleash that kind of talent, and in a three, four day stay, you're really touching people emotionally, once or twice is all it takes. Then you're likely to build a customer who will come back and be a loyal customer forever.

Eunice: Wonderful.

David: Okay, Nick. So yeah, let's get back to your career journey and talk about something that seems right at the core of your leadership style, which is belonging. You've described the culture at Six Senses London in one word as family. So, it's clear that you're building something that goes way beyond the standard idea of a hotel team. Hotelling, it's hierarchical by nature, but you are kind of changing that at Six Senses. Can you tell us about that and what that kind of looks like for your team?

Nick: Yeah. So, culture is a big topic, isn't it? And ultimately, I think, you know, it's one of those things that if you get it right, at the beginning in particular, that's one of the beautiful things about opening hotels is that you can set the culture if you're conscious about it. And obviously, that starts with hiring, hopefully, the right people who share – it's not like minded, it's like valued. Okay? So, and obviously, in somewhere like London where, you know, there is no more multicultural hotel environment, probably anywhere in the world where you've got literally 20, 30 different nationalities likely to be working in the hotels. We're not asking for a lot of knowledge and wellness and sustainability, but an open mindedness for sure to try and describe the kind of hotel that Six Senses aspires to be in great detail, so people kind of know...you know, it's not, again, there's horses for courses. Some people, you know, they want to be in the three Michelin star, super kind of high-end thing where...you know, that's great, that sort of white glove approach. But that's just not us. So, first thing is to be really honest with people, and make sure that they're ready for the rough and tumble of an opening and explain to them that the whole shooting match really is a question of trust and liking the people that you're working with. And, you know, if you go to work, it doesn't mean you have to be best friends with everyone at work. And I say family because, you know, it's a charged word, so it depends on what family you're talking about, doesn't it? But ultimately, if you look around and you've got enough people who you think this person could be...not just a friend but a best friend, because you share values, because you respect each other, because you see the world as being, you know, hopefully, flawed but you're sort of optimistic and, and you want to try and make it a tiny bit better than when you left. If those kinds of things make you smile then, you know, you got a good chance of doing some good work. But Rome was not built in a day. And you don't have to be the general manager. In fact, you know, I remember some of the hotels where I helped in very junior positions to launch it, and you see them 20...15, 20 years later doing incredibly well. And you just, you know, it fills your heart with joy. It's still your

baby. You were still there at the beginning. So, setting the culture, there is nothing more important. It really is the key to everything because... I think patients, good sense of humour, all that is incredibly important, but more important, almost than anything is to have a place where, when no one's looking at 3:00 in the morning, the receptionist can be walking through the lobby and he's going to pick up a tiny bit of paper from the floor that is in the...you know, it's that kind of, this is my home. This is, I care about this. So, if you can, again, you get, you know, the majority of your people thinking like that, then that's half the battle.

Eunice: We talked earlier around great leadership in hospitality and hotels is about great leaders applying gentle pressure over time. How do you adopt that in the role that you play at Six Senses in London? What's the gentle pressure for you over time with your team?

Nick: Right. Well, one of the things that often young managers will come up to me if you're doing a thing called managing by walking around MBWA, I call it, which is, you know, also something you start off the day doing, you know, I do anyway. I think it's incredibly important.

Eunice: MBWA. We should do that here...

David: We should, yeah.

Eunice: ...at Windsor HQ. Should I start doing that? See if you notice the difference. (Laughter).

Nick: Yeah. I mean, there's no better way to have your finger on the pulse than to just walk and observe and listen and see what's what. And as you do that, you're going to find things, obviously, you know, hotels are complicated bits of human and physical machinery with lots of processes and lots of things that can go right, and lots of things that can go wrong. So, if you're looking, you're going to find, and then you, you know, with a young manager, whoever in their department, and you're sort of talking about this thing that is not quite the way it should be, and the manager will turn to you and say, I've told them a thousand times, you know, that this thing needs to be set up this particular way and still...and I look at them and say only a thousand, you know? And they look at me and I say, yeah, you know, you're probably never going to stop having to say that particular thing. It's just, you know, that is part of the job. You do have to, you know, get up early, go into the building and, yeah, walk around with your eyes open, and expect, and understand that it's never going to be perfect. That day never happens in the life of a hotel, so.

Eunice: And leadership is imperfect in itself, isn't it?

Nick: We are all so different. If you look at GMs, you know, in your role, obviously you get to meet a tonne of GMs. I mean in Six Senses, we have 28 hotels. You put

those 28 GMs in a room, you'd be hard pressed to think of, you know, what is your typical kind of character traits, personality traits, skillset, you know, some are great with numbers, other amazing visionaries, others are just naturally incredible leaders or, and you know, you have to kind of know yourself, accept that you, you know, we're all spiky, we've got areas where we're naturally pretty comfortable.

David: Obviously, the hotel's going to be opening relatively soon. If I was someone coming in, in the frontline role, what would be the first thing I noticed that's so much different about Six Senses versus another luxury property?

Nick: So, I'm going to kind of maybe surprise you with the answer to that, because if you're not an expert, a real master of your craft or your domain, then nothing good happens. So, the beginning is going to be pretty structured. So, it's difficult. The first few months is really, hopefully if we do our job right, is making sure that we get the basics, you know, done properly. We have to learn to walk before we can run and hopefully one day fly, but it has to happen in sequence. So, we talk a lot about these intuitive, magical moments, these beautiful things that, you know, people remember forever, but truthfully in an opening in the first few months, I just hope the soup is hot, the showers are, you know, doing what they're supposed to, the beds are comfortable, that we're doing the basics right.

David: Yeah.

Nick: As you're accompanying teams through that process and getting them to feel, you know, more comfortable and more expert, it is a real question of making sure there's the right amount of tension in the system. So too much, it's like a violin, right? The thing will break and it sounds terrible, too little, same problem, right? So, you have to have the right level of tension. It's a, you know, difficult thing, luxury hoteling. You need to understand that the standards are hard, the bar is very high, the standards, consistency is the most difficult thing to achieve. Anyone can throw a party once, but try doing it consistently every day, day in, day out, that's really hard. So yeah, you have to be ready for, you know, some drama, a little few tears and, along the way, but that's why the sense of humour is valuable, right? So, you can take some of that sting out of those first few, you know, experiences where things don't go quite the way you thought they would. So yeah, paying maximum attention to details, but that slow pressure is how you do it. It's not a question of some brilliant star coming in with a, aha, beautiful idea, and then you implement it and you're successful, it doesn't work like that.

David: We're going to move on to our Check-In and Check-Out round. We're going to just throw some classic GM moments your way, Nick, and if they're for you, say check-in. If it's something you'd rather delegate, shall we say, just say check-out.

Nick: I wonder if I'm going to be checking out a lot. (Laughter)

Eunice: We'll find out.

Nick: Yeah.

David: Greeting VIP guests.

Nick: I'll check-in.

Eunice: Good, fantastic. Good start. Okay, this is my world. Interviewing and onboarding new hires into your team.

Nick: Oh, check-in, check-in, check-in.

Eunice: Fabulous.

David: Coaching or mentoring colleagues.

Nick: Check-in.

Eunice: Lovely, lots of check-in's so far.

David: That's good.

Eunice: Personally, curating the lobby playlist.

Nick: Oh, check-out.

Eunice: Okay, (laughs) fair enough.

David: Approving budgets or forecasts.

Nick: Oh, it's the key to everything. I mean; I guess check-in. Yeah, check-in.

Eunice: Check-in.

Nick: It's crucial.

Eunice: Checking all the numbers. Okay. Reviewing online guest reviews.

Nick: Oh, check-out.

Eunice: Okay. (Laughs) Fabulous. Back to you, David.

David: Menu tasting with the head chef.

Nick: Check-in!

Eunice: Yes, me too!

David: I always think that must be one of the best bits.

Eunice: Surely.

Nick: 100%.

Eunice: Surely.

Nick: But sometimes hard. Once I had to do, I think it was almost 50 dishes in one sitting.

Eunice: 50? Five-zero?

Nick: Five-zero.

Eunice: And did you just have a nibble of each?

Nick: Yeah, and even then, you're just...it's painful.

Eunice: Talking about writing. Writing a welcome note to a guest that includes a fun fact. Check-in or check-out?

Nick: Oh, check-in, check-in.

Eunice: Check-in. Lovely. Team building workshops.

Nick: Yeah, check-in.

David: A bit nervous about this one. Taking part in the company podcast.

Eunice: (Laughs).

Nick: (Laughs) Delighted to. Check-in.

Eunice: Check-in. Fabulous. Okay, I think I know the answer. Working on sustainability or wellness initiatives.

Nick: Oh, please. Check-in, check-in.

Eunice: Yeah, for sure, for sure.

David: Taking a selfie with the newest team member on their first day.

Nick: For fun, check-in.

Eunice: I'd say most of that was check-in.

David: Primarily check-in, I would say.

Eunice: Check-in.

David: Yeah.

Eunice: Busy.

David: Surprised yourself there.

Nick: Yeah, I did, yeah.

David: (Laughter) We will move on to the next segment, which is Room To Make A Difference. So, there's a reoccurring theme in everything that you shared, Nick, which is that hospitality is a platform for passion and really purpose for you, especially within Six Senses. It's a big mission. How do you take the concept of something that is so big around wellness and sustainability and then ground it into the everyday of running the hotel? How do you do that?

Nick: It's a great question. For example, our spa on its own is not just your average spa with massage and yoga, right? We've really got, in London in particular, a very, very well-thought-out space where you've got places pre and post where people can just chill out, relax. You've got a Biohack suite, which will be partly run by medical professionals. You've got the ability to do what we call integrative wellness assessments. So, talk about the guest experience for a minute. You know, if I was to say, what does success look like for a guest staying three days in our hotel, for example, maybe we would start you out on the first day with an integrative wellness assessment, which is hospital-grade equipment. It doesn't puncture the skin. It's non-intrusive. It takes three minutes. And then it compares you with a sort of algorithm system, software system, to a large data set of people similar to you. And then it'll give you a dashboard of your health. It functions, you know, basically gives you about 12 what we call hard data biomarkers, which are things like your blood pressure and heart rate and those kinds of things. And then, it's very clever because it then takes those things and then comes to, you know, a very accurate assessment of what your general health is. And what's really cool about that is every single Six Senses has these machines now in the world, and they're often run by Ayurvedic doctors who will do essentially the same thing, but without the tech. An Ayurvedic doctor, you sit with him for five minutes, you can be chatting away, and in the meantime, he's looking at everything that is all to do with your health, from your skin to your eyes to your nonverbal, you know, communication, all sorts of stuff. And when they write their report, you know, after their assessment and you look at the results from this programme called the IW, they're almost always the same. So, it's kind of validating for the, you know, 5,000-year-old Ayurvedic tradition of how to evaluate somebody's health, but it's also validating for the tech too. And so, based on that, we'll then customise, personalise your wellness journey or whatever it is that you want to try and achieve. And typically, in a three-day stay, what are you going to do? It's not a Vana destination spa, although we have, that is an amazing place, by the way, one of the Six Senses-only sort of proper destination spas in the Himalayas where you will go, and yes, you're going to wear white and, you know, have specific diets and everything about your stay is all about wellness. But if you're staying in a Six Senses luxury hotel, during that three-day period, we might help you with some nutrition, some yoga, some exercise, some sleep tips. You know, it's fairly kind of low-hanging fruit, and you know, hopefully you'll have a nice time. And then just before you leave, come back, and we'll plug you in again. And now three minutes

later, you may not have lost weight. You might not feel dramatically different, but guess what? Your chemistry, your biochemistry has changed significantly. And that's very motivating for people because they're like, oh, you just carry on doing this, I didn't cut calories, I wasn't sort of starving. I had a glass of wine. I still enjoyed a pampering hotel experience. I had some massage or whatever. But I also just tweaked and changed a few things maybe, thanks to you, and was nudged to do a mindfulness thing that lowered my blood pressure a bit and all those things. So, it all combines to hopefully nudging people into a more sort of healthy lifestyle.

Eunice: And what about the emotional side of wellbeing? As Six Senses redefines luxury wellbeing, that's sometimes easier to look at the physicality of that. But what about the emotional side? Because I'm hearing you talk a little bit about that as well, and that's super interesting.

Nick: It's actually a great, great question. There is this kind of hope that you will reconnect not just with your own physical health but with your spirituality, with your creativity, with other people. So, yeah, we understand that human wellbeing, you know, is not just about having a fit body and there's more to it, right? But, yeah, offering these opportunities, and I think the activity schedule, if you promote it properly, to sort of push people gently in that direction. So, in Ibiza, for example, there's all sorts of very, very cool things we do, fire ceremonies, chocolate ceremonies, arrival rituals. You know, you speak to people after they've done it, invariably you're going to get this incredible kind of, oh my God, that was one of the best things I've ever done, sort of comment. So, we're not afraid of experimenting a little bit. And there are just, it's true, it's horses for courses, and some people will find one thing naturally is better for them. So hopefully, you know, you've got a range of things that allows people to connect. I mean, the creativity thing, for example, is one. People wanting to learn about how to be more sustainable at home. They maybe live in a city and have a tiny little terrace, but they can turn it into a food kind of thing and landscaping in the built environment, for example. You can learn how to do these things and there's nothing more fantastic than living in a place with living things. And it's obviously animals, but also plants and...but you need to know what you're doing, right? You can't just expect that it's just going to naturally come to you. So, those are the kinds of things that I think we can help people to do.

Eunice: I just wanted to know what's your perspective on the future of luxury, are there any trends that you're seeing?

Nick: Yeah, I mean, we've been saying this truthfully for about a decade now that people are wanting to go in a more sustainable direction, more authentic experiences, wellness offerings are becoming more and more important. So, we're delighted that the whole, you know, industry is moving in that direction. This isn't a zero-sum game. And, you know, hopefully the things that we're doing now and

taking plastic out of kitchens and, you know, is at the cutting edge of that, but our sustainability team has written a how-to of how to remove plastic from hotels. And that's an open-source thing that we're very proud of because it isn't super simple. We've learned the hard way how to do that. And so, we've kind of given a road-...and I think, you know, more and more customers are demanding that, you know, businesses are being more sustainable. And then, you know, authentic, you know, local, what we call handcrafted experiences, I think people are really looking for that more and more. So, I would say that's a trend. And the other one in wellness that is kind of, I'm delighted to hear it that's coming out is fun. Now what I mean in fun, in wellness, is kind of as opposed to the traditional way of thinking about wellness, which is you eat less, exercise more. I personally hate the gym. So, you know, I don't like to exercise for exercise's sake. But if you make a game out of it, if you turn it into a competition, the gaming industry really figured out how to addict people to games. Maybe not so healthy but using that same approach to addicting people to healthy things. Pleasure, fun, that's kind of the new way of approaching wellness, and I think that's going to carry on.

Eunice: What's it like working with a heritage building, but then really infusing that modern luxury wellness to such an old property? What does that feel like?

Nick: Well, I mean, the truth is that the only thing that was really preserved and is grade two listed is the facade.

Eunice: Oh, okay.

Nick: So, which is actually great because it means that you have these dramatic ceiling heights. So, you've got four, five, and even six-metre-high ceilings in some parts of the building.

Eunice: Stunning.

Nick: I mean, we also, when we landed, the first thing we did was to read books about William Whiteley and about how he operated the building. When the building opened, it had 6,000 people working in it. It had restaurants on the roof, gardens. There was everything from a haberdasher to a menagerie. There was art galleries, theatres, restaurants. He was a very interesting man, actually. He was really one of the first people who kind of thought of turning the sort of transactional shopping thing into an experience. So, when you arrived in the building, you were greeted by staff who would then, you know, offer you a glass of champagne and would become your personal shopper for the day. This is a nice way to do it so.

David: Yeah.

Nick: It was one of the first ones to have elevators in the building. He also bought a big farm not far from – in North London, actually, not far from the Whiteley where

they were growing almost all of the produce that they were using in their restaurants. So, you know, farm to table isn't – you think of it as a sort of modern concept, but you know, these guys were masters of that. And he was also preserving the food that was – when you harvest, there's always excess food, right? So how do you do that? You know, it's canning, it's dehydrating, it's fermenting, it's all the old-fashioned ways of preserving food. And, of course, it also turns out to be very good for your health. So, we're going to be doing that. For example, in the main kitchen, we have a fermentation lab inside the kitchen, and we've hired one of the country's most experienced and advanced fermentation chefs. So, there'll be a lot of pickles on the menu.

Eunice: (Chuckles).

Nick: So that's pretty cool.

David: We eagerly await our invitation to the [inaudible 00:42:35].

Nick: Yes, he's going to need a lot of help.

Eunice: He sounds like he was very ahead of his time in terms of his outlook and his, just his vision of what could be.

Nick: He's from the north, so he came from an agricultural family initially, so he really loved the land and loved farming, which was helpful from that perspective. But he also, when he came down to London, he was really inspired by the great exhibition of 1851. So that enormous structure, we looked into it. I hadn't realised or had forgotten how amazing that thing was. It was a kilometre long, this building.

Eunice: My God.

Nick: So, it's sort of, imagine Kew Gardens but, you know, three times the size or more. It was absolutely vast. And, of course, at the time, it was really showcasing the sort of advanced technologies of the world and, so he went in and you could see everything from the Koh-i-Noor diamond to, you know, fabrics from all over the world, to the latest tech at the time, you know, whether it was agricultural or other...it was obviously booming industrial times, so there were a lot of gadgets there. And so, he just, you know, thought that that was kind of the vision or the inspiration for the building was to kind of be this emporium where you would find a little bit of everything there. And so that was an interesting part of the story that we obviously...and you can see it in the design very much so as you walk around the building, you've got that feeling of that period.

David: That staircase that's-...

Nick: Also, the stair-...yeah, that's a great point. So, people who remember the Whiteley, I mean, when I was growing up, I used to go and, you know, there was a

bowling alley there and there was a cinema and that sort of thing. But everybody remembers the iconic staircase, which as you walk into the building, it was underneath this dramatic dome. The dome was preserved, and the staircase was preserved. So, it's an interesting story actually, it was taken apart and sent down to a factory in Devon where it was lovingly restored and is now in the lobby of the hotel. Actually, it's the first thing you see as you walk in. So, that'll be a lovely backdrop.

David: It's a real feature when you look at some the concept art.

Nick: Yeah, yeah.

David: I don't know if you've had a chance to see it yet, but yeah, it looks like it's going to be.

Nick: Yeah, and relatively easy to understand because, you know, many hotels **do a point of sort of older buildings that kind of rabbits' warrens** and it takes a while to figure out. But this one, obviously, they started with a clean slate to a degree. The main lobby level, you have the restaurant, the bar and the reception, obviously, that great staircase that leads you up to a whole floor dedicated to the private members club, which is really going to be one of the unique features of the hotel. And it's got its own restaurant, bar, meeting spaces, a longevity clinic. And, you know, we'll be doing great programming up there. And then the level below the ground floor is all spa. So, it's two and a half thousand square metres of wellness space, which for us at Sixth Sense is obviously really important. But yeah, it's got a really lovely pool, a thermal suite, which includes a magnesium pool and a regular sauna, a cold plunge. You've got a flotation tank, you've got a hammam and it's 29 different sort of therapies, if you will, on that floor. So, including a Biohack suite and an alchemy bar and some interesting things that are unique to us, so.

Eunice: Gosh, it sounds astonishing.

Nick: Yeah, yeah.

Eunice: Absolutely astonishing.

Nick: We're really, really excited. I think it's, I've been told I shouldn't reveal too many of the secrets before we open, but I think we've got some things that will really surprise and delight.

David: Nick, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been incredibly insightful. Your journey has been a powerful reminder that leadership is about energy, purpose, emotional connection, and not just performance. We have one final question for you before you go, and it comes from our last guest, Melissa Tang, who is also within a Six Sense's property. And she wants to know if there is a wellness tip that you can give us that perhaps our listeners could apply to their day-to-day.

Nick: Yeah, this is not very original, but I think it is the most powerful single thing, which is meditation, actually. But it took me a long time to find the one that was right for me. And so, I would suggest trying different formats and typologies is a good idea. I use Transcendental Meditation, TM, which people can learn anywhere in the world now. They have centres all over the place, and I particularly like it because it's 20 minutes. It's very easy. And when I do it, I notice my day is just that little – takes the edge off, takes the edge off everything, makes you less reactive. You just feel calmer in your skin. I would highly recommend everybody introduce some kind of meditation into their day. It's great.

Eunice: I love that, Nick. What a great way to end. Thank you so much for that, for sharing.

Nick: A real pleasure. Thanks for having me.

David: Thanks for coming up.

Nick: No, it was fun.

David: That is a wrap on season one. Thank you for tuning in to Leading a New Era where we go behind the scenes with the GMs shaping the future of luxury and lifestyle at IHG. If you've enjoyed hearing Nick's story, don't forget to subscribe, share, and check out our other episodes in this season, where we've met some inspiring leaders from across IHG's global portfolio of hotels and resorts. Goodbye for now, and thanks for tuning in.