



# An Attention to Detail

*Niagara-on-the-Lake's Vintage Inns take a timeless approach to workplace health and safety.*

Si Wai Lai, *President* (seated)  
Paula Quinn, *Human Resources Generalist*



One of the most recognizable hoteliers in the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake is Vintage Inns. The brainchild of entrepreneur, Si Wai Lai, in less than a decade, the Vintage Inns family has grown to include such well-known landmarks as the Pillar and Post Inn, Queen's Landing Inn and Conference Resort, Prince of Wales Hotel and most recently, the Oban Inn. In this bustling tourist destination, the Inns' Shaw Café and Wine Bar on the main street adds another service industry dimension to the Vintage Inns' offerings.

#### BUILDING SAFETY FROM THE GROUND UP

The growth of Vintage Inns has led to challenges for the organization. One of the first and foremost has been ensuring the continued health and safety of both guests and workers in the face of on-going expansion.

At Vintage Inns, this challenge has been met with enthusiasm and success. According to Paula Quinn, Vintage Inns' Human Resources Generalist, three years ago, the group – known for the high quality of its hotel properties – decided to create an equally high-quality health and safety program. This was an ambitious plan, notes Quinn. At the time, the company did not even have a human resources department.

"For Vintage Inns, a clearly defined and accountable health and safety program is viewed as a smart business practice," explains Quinn. "It deserves as much attention as any other fundamental aspect of our daily operations."

By hiring Quinn, Si Wai Lai sent a strong signal to all the employees that she, and her top management, were making a commitment to health and safety.

"There's no way that health and safety can be viewed as a part-time, on and off again function," says Quinn. "It needs to be in the forefront of everyday activities. It needs to be applied with consistency across all our properties so that everyone clearly understands what management expects and

their role in ensuring that health and safety expectations are met."

Under the strong leadership of Esther Lee, Executive Director, Administration and Human Resources, Quinn began the task of weaving the fabric of a health and safety program that eventually would become one of the key spokes of a well-defined human resources department.

But it didn't start out that way. A preliminary look at the Inns' past health and safety record showed stunning losses of revenue. "One of our properties' NEER surcharges was \$10,000 for two years," remembers Quinn. "No one was allocated to claims management. Our short-term disability claims were extremely high and there was incredible potential for abuse of the system. We were literally waiting for an accident to happen."

With the assistance of the March of Dimes, Vintage Inns developed a comprehensive "Early and Safe Return to Work" program and targeted five to six areas with the most accidents. They also did physical demands analysis for specific positions such as room attendants, porters, stewards and bakers, as well as a job site analysis of two positions.

The organization was quick to recognize the tangible financial benefits that a sound health and safety program could bring. Quinn points out that Vintage Inns' initial \$9,000 investment in setting up its "Early and Safe Return to Work" program reaped a return of \$11,000 in the first year alone.

Another pressing issue facing Vintage Inns was the lack of consistency throughout the Inns' hotels. "We had Joint Health and Safety Committees that were made up of management and staff from each property but they were not sure what their exact role was," remembers Quinn. "This did not help inspire their attendance or involvement. Someone was required to take charge of monitoring this but since we were a multi-property company, it was impossible. There

wasn't any consistency."

With the assistance of an OSSA consultant, Vintage Inns set out to revamp its Committees' roles and functions. "Once our Committees had a clearer vision of their goals, they were able to start working towards a safer workplace for everyone. The ideas just started flowing," says Quinn. As well, a set of health and safety manuals was developed. These identical materials are used at each Vintage Inns property to ensure the same high standards are applied across the entire operation.

This continuity was especially important last year when Vintage Inns needed to ready the Prince of Wales property for the company's first ever WSIB Workwell Audit. Equally educated employees and management at all the group's properties were able to pitch in with assistance. The happy result was that the Prince of Wales passed the audit on the first try.

#### ESTABLISHING A TEAM APPROACH TO SAFETY

Commitment from higher management is essential to any health and safety program, as is the creation of a Joint Health and Safety Committee and certification of Committee members, notes Quinn. But employees play an equally important part in making a safe workplace a reality.

The Vintage Inns' employee count fluctuates between 800 and 1,200 depending on the season. These employees are referred to as 'team players', and they have provided Vintage Inns with a valuable key to ensuring a top-notch health and safety program.

For a program to truly fulfill its potential, one core requisite is to instill a source of pride in all workers, advises Quinn, "If our team players feel pride in our health and safety record – and feel safe on the job – then they will continue to be involved in creating a safe environment. A number of our team players have asked us to help them achieve certification for

themselves, even when it is not a requisite of their job."

An integral component of Vintage Inns' philosophy is encouraging team members to assess health and safety concerns and then to make recommendations. After all, notes Lee, team players are on the front lines. "If they understand their rights and responsibilities, they will act on them," she says. "It is up to management to start them off on the right foot by emphasizing the importance of health and safety right from their two-day orientation training. Then they must ensure team members understand management's total commitment to health and safety initiatives."

#### TAKING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Both Quinn and Lee stress that health and safety should not be restricted to "on the job" functions. Vintage Inns' management believes strongly that health and safety education for its team "off the job", and for the community-at-large also fulfills Si Wai Lai's philosophy that corporate business has a "social responsibility to the community."

As a result, this spring, Vintage Inns is launching a one-day Safety Awareness Day that will include local school children and Niagara-on-the-Lake residents. The day will feature bicycle safety and barbecue safety tips, along with general health and safety outdoor/water safety ideas that are suitable for the summer months.

Today, Vintage Inns' desire to become a groundbreaker in health and safety has become a reality. In fact, the company now acts as a "mentor" within the WSIB program, helping other companies to achieve viable health and safety programs.

"The positive things just keep building and building," says Quinn. "We are very confident about the future. Our safety and health standards are implemented in our core values. It's a part of our vision now."