

# HELLO HAMPTON

May 2018



# *huddle up*

AND IMPROVE YOUR SALT SCORES

OWNER'S VOICE  
WITH SETH OLIVER

AND

PROPERTY IMPROVEMENT  
DOESN'T STOP HAMPTONALITY



# SERVICE & TEAM FOCUS

A *lifetime* IN THE HOSPITALITY BUSINESS GIVES SETH OLIVER  
*the edge* IN HOTEL DEVELOPMENT



Seth Oliver, CEO (Head Cheerleader)  
Oliver Companies

## WHAT WERE YOUR EARLY YEARS LIKE?

My family started in apartments originally, so I entered the apartment business at 8 years old. I guess my title would be “gopher.” My dad would point at something and I’d go get it. He’d be laying a basement or foundation, would point at the stone or brick he wanted next, and I’d go get it. The first hospitality project I was involved with was Breezy Point Resort in Minnesota.

When I say my father built it from the ground up, I mean he built it himself. That was in the mid-to-late 1980s. I think my perspective on the world has always been different because of that. I didn’t grow up like a normal kid. Work and family and personal time were all one thing. It didn’t get segregated. Working on a Saturday or Sunday was normal.

## TELL ME ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT APPROACH.

My approach has changed multiple times. When I first started, I had to be a pusher. I was pushing people all the time. I'd write the list, we'd talk about the list. I was always following up constantly. Now I'm a puller. We get into a project and by the time the team is done with that project, I'm onto the next project and my team is catching up. I'm managing to outcomes now.

When I first began, my father had started the hotel side from a preceding company called OH Hospitality (when I was in high school). I formed Oliver Companies when I graduated from college, and bought out OH Hospitality. It was four hotels all based in Duluth, Minnesota. It's a very seasonal market. You make all of your money in four months. This was 2004. Maybe 200 employees.

Now we're underwriting a portfolio. I think we have 19 hotels now and a construction division. Still have an apartment division. Maybe 1,500 employees.

## HOW DO YOU HIRE?

What I found is that I can't have more than six or seven direct reports. When I think about hiring, I think about those six or seven. I'm less effective with more. As I'm moving through the world, connecting and communicating with people, I look for the right personality and skill set. That's not firefighter support (putting fires out). I'm looking for the people who put the systems in place to put the fires out when they pop up. First it's usually friendship, just hanging out. It might take two or five years, when I know the person will be a good fit, I pull them out.

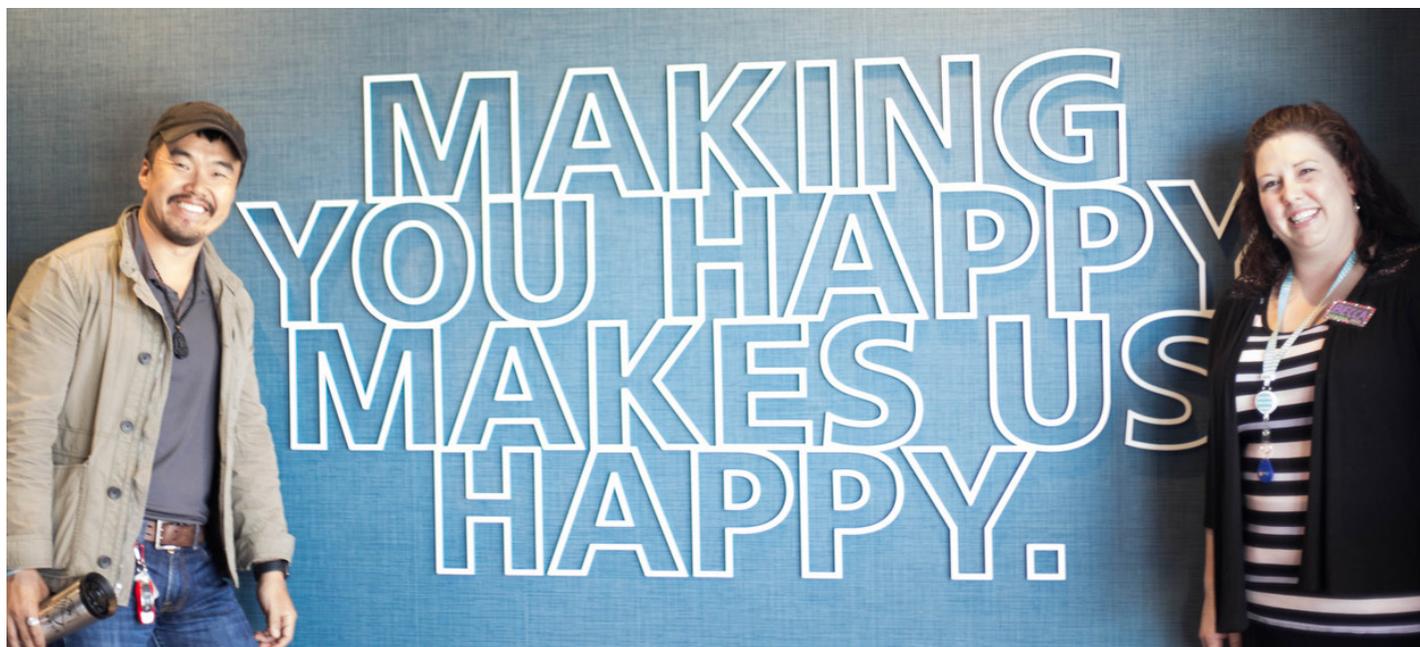
I just hired a new president for our company like that. He's come to us from Facebook, and I've been recruiting him for over 3 years.



"I'm managing to outcomes now."  
- SETH OLIVER

## WHAT DOES HAMPTONALITY MEAN TO YOU?

The culture at the heart of the brand is very friendly, inclusive, progressive, and I would say service and team focused. To me, it is our personality. No question, in practice I see it as a brand differentiator. Country Inn & Suites thought they were a competitor with Hampton. They tried replicating pieces of Hamptonality, but it doesn't come together. It's like a jigsaw puzzle of someone's face: you get one piece off and the whole face looks wrong. Country Inn & Suites tried getting into hard plates and hard silverware. They tried stealing the daily huddles. They tried Project Grow. None of it really worked for them because it's not their true culture. All of our Team Members know Hamptonality. We have enough mass at Hampton—this is who we are, this is how we operate—which takes forever to build. You can't just rip it off. Culture breaks pretty easily.



Seth Oliver and Rebecca Richardson, General Manager, at the Hampton Inn—Superior, Wisconsin.

## WHAT IS IT LIKE DOING BUSINESS WITH HILTON?

I like doing business with Hilton. There are a lot of new platforms that keep getting rolled out. I'm having a hard time keeping up with all of them: Project Hub, Project Grow, etc. They're meant to streamline, but if ten different brands come up with 10 different platforms, it's hard to log in.

Overall, Hilton is responsive and friendly. When I've had a pain point—and every organization has them—Hilton remedies the pain without forcing me through too much bureaucracy. Case in point, Hampton has done a great job of stress-testing before they launch a new product. And once launched, initiatives are not abandoned. Large organizations have a tendency for the C-suite of executives to think up new ideas and then abandon them because next month there's some other new initiative. Those organizations lose credibility because they don't follow through with anything. Hampton doesn't roll out initiatives and then abandon them. Whether it's the way BPS is going to interface or Owner Access

—with every new thing, they don't abandon the old projects. It gives the brand credibility at every level.

## TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FIRST HOTEL

The first hotel, the one I felt was really mine, was a Hampton in Au Claire, Wisconsin. It's a 106 key, 1980's prototype. I still own the property and it was my first introduction to Hilton. It was a different experience from the hotels we'd owned up to that point (Country Inn, Choice products, one Express, and two boutiques.) What made it special was, at that time, the pieces of Hamptonality were starting to come together. The hourly staff could see and feel Hamptonality. On the other side, the corporate side, working with brand performance support, QA inspections, and the process of running a franchise were much better developed at Hampton than at the other brands we'd worked with. At the operational and corporate level, working with Hilton is more predictable and better developed.