

A leader with a song in his heart: Conrad Hilton



An Executive Leadership Time Machine interview

Hotelier Conrad Hilton converted a fleabag into a hotel empire that earned him the nickname “innkeeper to the world.”

In 1919, luck brought Hilton to a Texas hotel housing oil-field workers, its 40 rooms turning over every eight hours. A week later, Hilton owned it. He soon began buying and building hotels. The Dallas Hilton opened in 1925. By the late 1940s, Hilton owned the iconic Palmer House in Chicago and Waldorf-Astoria in New York City.

Hiltons were the first hotels to put air-conditioning, TVs, ironing boards and sewing kits in their rooms. Modern hotel-reservation systems evolved from Hilton’s 1948 prototype. Today, Hilton Worldwide owns thousands of properties.

EL: Welcome, Conrad Hilton. You had a vision of first-class hotels where none existed. What helped you think big?

Hilton: There’s a vastness in Texas and I believe that people born here breathe that vastness into their soul. They dream big dreams and think big thoughts because there is nothing to hem them in.

EL: You have exacting standards. At the same time, you are known as a gentle executive who never rebukes employees. Is it true that you are relentlessly positive?

Hilton: Why dwell on things that aren’t nice? In the early 1960s, we launched a drive to help our employees be more courteous to guests. In the work areas, we put up posters that said: “Have you smiled today? It’s bound to give you a lift.”

EL: And is your favorite TV show “Sing Along with Mitch”?

Hilton: By golly, yes! I don’t sing along, but I sometimes do a little dance.

EL: You are famously courteous, honest and trusting, but unbelievably persistent. The Great Depression wiped you out, yet you bounced back with bold deals that netted you a lineup of prestigious hotels. You also persisted against a board of directors who didn’t want you to expand abroad.

Hilton: Leaders never leave the game or sit on the sidelines. They make mistakes, but they don't quit.

EL: How do you define success in a leader?

Hilton: Success is a process more than a realization. It's never final. Success seems to be connected with action—with specific actions. Successful men keep moving. They don't stop to think about the next move.

EL: Are you saying that leaders should act without reflection?

Hilton: Not exactly. I know when I have a problem and have done all I can about thinking, figuring and planning. I keep listening in a sort of inside silence until something clicks and I feel a right answer.

EL: Pardon us, but that brings to mind something you said about your last wife, Zsa Zsa Gabor ...

Hilton: If I had waited one hour more, I never would have married Zsa Zsa. Luckily for me, I'm better at business.

EL: Johnny Carson once asked you, when you were a guest on "The Tonight Show," whether you had a message for the American people. What did you say?

Hilton: Please put the shower curtain inside the tub.

Sources: *Time*; *Mental Floss*; *The New York Times*.

Image: *timeinc.net*