

# SECRETS OF 5-STAR SPA DIRECTORS

*Directors of 5-Star spas share what sets them apart from the rest*

As we gear up to head into a new year, luxury hotels and spas around the world will be working towards landing a coveted Forbes 5-Star award rating.

With this in mind we collected insights from the directors of Five-Star rated spas on what sets their spas apart from the rest and what makes a great guest experience and a great leader in spa and wellness.



**VERENA LASVIGNE FOX,**  
Senior Spa Director,  
Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia  
at Comcast Center

## What sets your spa apart from the rest?

**Detail and consistency.** It was important that we distinguish our spa and give it a concept, an identity, and a soul. Our spa is a crystal concept. This theme made sense to me because we are in the Comcast Technology Center, which is one of the tallest buildings in the United States and a technology building, and there is a relationship between technology and crystals.

We have seven treatment rooms named after seven crystals, which are also connected to seven chakras. Each room has a singing bowl infused with the crystals associated with that room, and there are 700 lbs of crystals that you can't see, walled up inside the walls, providing positive vibes and energies. There are crystals throughout the spa and we work with crystal infused oils. We have a crystal massage, and at the end of the treatment, the guests get a crystal to take home.



**AMANDA RAICH,**  
Director of La Prairie Spa  
Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills

***Our mindset is the most important.*** We had a goal of becoming a Forbes 5-Star spa before we even opened. Everyone that was hired from that point on had to embrace that level of commitment. We have been relentless in our drive and passion to be consistently delivering 5-Star service. In addition to heavily investing in training with Forbes, we hold our staff to our own internal annual recertification. Delivering on this promise to our team and guests is a top priority that is made possible by the hotel and owners. Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills' La Prairie Spa is Hilton's first Forbes 5-Star spa in the Americas, which is a huge accomplishment for the brand. From our skincare partnership with La Prairie, to the additional wellness services and spa amenities, we are proud to offer the finest of luxury. Serving as a testament to this, the spa is outfitted with Dyson hair dryers, Audemars Piguet clocks, and other internationally renowned luxury brands.

***Visually it's beautiful, but the biggest thing is the attention to detail.*** We make sure every little thing is thought of. From the moment we welcome the guest we're watching for little things we can do.

A guest commented on how much they loved the little peanut butter spheres we offer, so the attendant got a little box, packaged them beautifully with a ribbon, and gave it to the front desk so they had it when they checked out. We had a mother and daughter come in who hadn't seen each other for a while and came to spend time together. We took a picture of them, put it in a frame with a ribbon, and left it at the desk as a gift. It's the little things that we do for the guest that they don't expect and that make people walk away and say "Wow. This is something I will always remember."

I make sure to discuss and challenge the team daily. I ask the question "tell me about how you went above and beyond for a guest today?"



**DAISY TEPPER**  
Spa Director at The Post Oak Hotel  
at Uptown Houston



**CARLOS CALVO RODRÍGUEZ,**  
Senior Spa Director, Four Seasons Hotel Toronto

## What makes an excellent guest experience?

*Empathy and the clear communication we have with our guests* are a big part of the guest experience. When a guest comes to our spa, we look for a way to connect personally and emotionally, to make their time with us memorable. We make them feel so comfortable that they open up to us so we can anticipate their needs.

***A great experience lies in connecting from the heart.***

Engagement needs to be caring, authentic, and sincere and not some drummed up rhetoric, which impacts all aspects of enjoyment from the experience.

Whilst the physical environment plays a great part in the sensorial experience, the human element is the major player and what drives the end result. Another very important aspect is the power of listening and then delivering that into service.



**TAFFRYN ELLIS,**  
Senior Spa Director at Four Season  
London Park Lane

## VERENA LASVIGNE FOX

***It's about the team. I'm honored to work with great professionals that understand what we're doing here.*** Going through the greatest school, which was the George V in Paris, allowed me to develop a vision for a level of guest experience that is, by coincidence, at the Forbes 5-Star level. We were not trying for it and I think this is a very important point. We just have a natural belief in what we want to achieve and what we want to provide as a guest experience to our guests, and it's a validation of that.

Also, at Four Seasons, the employee experience is as important as the guest experience. I say I'm very honored to work for such a team, but I'm tailoring a team that then is able to provide what is needed to be able to obtain such a recognition as Forbes 5 Star.

## What does it take to be a great leader in spa and wellness?

### TAFFRYN ELLIS

***You need to be passionate about spa and wellness on all personal levels and live that out day by day with your team and your guests.*** If I don't take care of myself, how can I take care of others? So, I am always practicing and researching healthy lifestyle principles and rolling those out in my workplace to lead my team and my guests, but I also do this in my home and with my family – so what my family receives from me, so do my team and guests.

Being authentic – genuinely myself so that others feel comfortable to be themselves too, no matter what they are going through. Ditch the small talk and be honest and caring – less words and more actions, like hugs and smiles and making people laugh. I love to make people laugh.

### CARLOS CALVO RODRÍGUEZ

***There are two essential things to consider, one being continuing education;*** as this is an evolving industry and significant changes are to come, we must update our knowledge and expand the reach beyond what we know spa and wellness are currently.

And secondly, be hands-on, be on the field with the team, understand what they go through daily, do the work and bond with them. See the operations from their eyes so you can guide them to excel and to the next level.

### AMANDA RAICH

***Passion, emotional intelligence, versatility, surrounding myself with the right team and a strong financial understanding.*** I could have been up with a sick child or helping another with a school project they left to the last minute, but I come into work, have a second coffee and prioritize the spa from that point forward.

I check my appointments, calendar, and to-do list which is organized into different sections: Finance, Engineering, Orders, Monthly Goals etc., so I know what the area of focus will be. I walk the spa every morning and love that alone time before everyone gets in to ground myself and feel a renewed sense of pride. Also not to take myself too seriously at the end of the day; I go home to my children, get kisses, cuddles, hear about their day and we start all over again the next day.

### DAISY TEPPER

***Caring for your team and being there. Leading by example is a big thing.*** Treating them with the utmost respect is very important to me. The way I see it, they're my internal guests, and if I take care of them, they will take care of the other guests. The bread and butter comes from these people. If you treat people well, they will go above and beyond.

### VERENA LASVIGNE FOX

***It's critical to lead by example.*** It's important to listen to your team. We need to communicate effectively. My door is always open if somebody has a problem, and if there are challenges, we fix them and we find solutions. My

team knows that I'm very much about celebration and very much about sharing positivity around us. They know that we are better off when we are focused on the positive things in life. I think a great leader is also someone who has a vision and who actively looks for ways to differentiate ourselves from the competition. I feel very honored to be able to serve a team, and I think this is how they feel about me as well, that I'm there for them and that I inspire and motivate them on a daily basis and help them to grow.

## Does technology play a big role at your spa these days?

### AMANDA RAICH

Yes and No; we have a six-in-one facial machine that looks like a robot, we have online booking, we have QR codes for press readers in the lounges, and our room lighting, curtains, and music that are all controlled by iPads in the treatment rooms. However, we haven't gone down the route of extreme high-tech, such as no-touch wellness therapies. We are still very hands-on and consider ourselves a healing spa. Not to say there isn't a space for those but coming out of the pandemic our guests still want connection and touch.

### DAISY TEPPER

Technology does play a part, however I don't want technology to take over what we truly are about. Spa to me is nurturing, caring, and healing, mainly through touch, which people want even more these days. I don't believe in touchless therapy nor do I plan on taking that direction in the near future.

What I do like and know to have improved operations are online booking, which takes the pressure off of the call volume, and text message confirmations. Both of these save on time and labor. Intake forms are a huge plus, saving time and paper, and keeping guest information confidential safely under their profile. And in-room

technology, like an iPad set up with music selections, temperature, and bluetooth options is a wonderful enhancement to our rooms.

### TAFFRYN ELLIS

Absolutely! From online booking to express check in and out, this is part of the experience. But I do require some digital detox from the guests and also for the team and myself! I try to encourage no cell phones in the spa and for me and the team – when we get home – switch off!

### CARLOS CALVO RODRÍGUEZ

We have seen an increase in demand for solutions and services that require technology, from digital consultations to touchless check outs and equipment that provides faster results and supports health and wellness. Technology is here to stay, but our industry's essence is that human connection will remain much needed.

### VERENA LASVIGNE-FOX

Yes, in different aspects, technology plays a role - front and back of the house. Online booking has taken a strong push over the last years, especially since the pandemic. Guests love to use technology, and we have reached a 98% completion rate of the guest intake digitally before the guest even gets to the spa, which makes the guest experience so much more enjoyable when they arrive. Another aspect is using technology to inventory and keep accurate track of what is in stock or what needs to be ordered—looking at the treatments where technology through the use of devices can complement the experience and provide enhanced results for our guests. At the same time, I believe that the human touch cannot be replaced.

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