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Meet Phil Cordell, the Man Behind Hilton's New Millennial-Friendly Hotel Brand

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Hilton executive shares culture, branding tips with entrepreneurs in Durham.

A team of executives at Hilton took a different approach in early 2015 when they began brainstorming their first chain of hotels with a “Millennial mindset.”

They identified a problem—existing mid-priced hotel chains were irrelevant to Millennial travelers who had options like Airbnb rentals or cool hostels.

They looked for inspiration to solve the problem—visiting hotels in Europe, where hotels break tradition with smaller rooms and lively common areas.

They consulted a team of trusted advisors to get input and feedback. These were 11 experienced hotel operators who Hilton counted among its most progressive franchisees.

And they worked at lightning speed for the hotel industry, going from concept to the launch of [Tru by Hilton](#) in one year.

The approach mirrors that of a startup, says **Phil Cordell**, Hilton's global head of mid-priced brands, including Tru and Hampton by Hilton. And in fact, everything about the creation of Tru was against the convention of his industry.

“We had to challenge our own thinking, be willing to push guests' thinking and agree nothing was sacred,” Cordell told me in an interview.

An Asheville native, Cordell spent time in Durham this week to visit with entrepreneurs at [American Underground](#) and share lessons learned during his 34-year career at Hilton.

During Helpfest, he gave a talk on culture and branding:

[AU Helpfest: Hilton's Phil Cordell on Cultivating Culture](#) from [ExitEvent](#) on [Vimeo](#).

And later, he met with me to share about his career, and more specifically, the “intrapreneurship” that went on during the planning of Tru.

Cordell got his start in the hotel industry as a bellman at an Asheville hotel and later managed a Hampton Inn in Spartanburg, S.C. He says he chose the hotel industry after a career aptitude test in middle school suggested three optimal career paths: funeral director, preacher or hotel manager.

Hospitality ran in his blood after all—despite a home full of 12 children, his grandmother had an open door policy for guests passing through town. Cordell describes it like this: “We’ll take less as long as we can share more with those who really need it.”

One of the greatest strengths of a leader, he says, is the ability to tell stories. That’s his favorite part of meeting entrepreneurs too.

“I love the opportunity to hear the stories about how people came up with the idea, how they got to where they are and what they hope to do,” he says.

One of his favorite stories became his greatest motivation. A first grade teacher taught his class to “Expect the best.” (Full story in the video below).

[Hilton’s Phil Cordell: The Best Advice I Ever Received](#) from [ExitEvent](#) on [Vimeo](#).

That mentality is what helped him ascend through the ranks at Hilton to eventually lead the three brands (Hilton Garden Inn, Hampton and Tru by Hilton) that make up three quarters of the company’s properties around the world.

It’s also an inspiration behind Tru, he says. With rooms a third smaller than the traditional U.S. hotel room, the focus of each hotel is community. Lobbies are the focal point, with twice the size of a traditional space and areas to relax or hang out, play games like billiards or ping-pong, buy snacks and consume local beers and products.

“The whole idea behind the lobby is alone but not lonely,” Cordell says. Rooms are still equipped, but only with the necessities—55-inch TV screens, powerful showers and comfortable beds.

The January 2016 launch (to franchisees) was considered the most successful in the company’s history. With 200 hotel franchises sold and 400 in the pipeline, Tru is projected to become the biggest Hilton chain over time.

Startup mentality continues as the initial hotels open across the United States this year. There will be experimentation with new marketing strategies since Tru customers are more mobile and social.

According to Cordell, the new brand’s success will be contingent on its ability to evolve, just like 32-year-old Hampton, now with 2,200 hotels and 600 on the way.

Embracing change, breaking convention and staying relevant all comes down to a piece of advice Cordell got early in his career: “Do you know what you don’t know? Are you smart enough to notice gaps?”