

## CHAPTER ONE: A CITY IN MINIATURE

**O**perating a ski resort seems fairly simple on the surface: make snow, groom, run lifts, teach people to ski. No big deal, right? But as you've probably guessed, there's a lot more to it. An *awful lot* more! In fact, a ski resort might reasonably be compared to a small city. After all, it contains the salient elements of a municipality:

- Public transit (lift operations)
- Education (ski school)
- First Responders
- Roads & Parking
- Utilities (water, sewer, electrical distribution, data networks, etc.)
- Public Safety
- Retail Stores
- Restaurants
- Manufacturing/Production/Industry (snowmaking)
- Equipment and Property Maintenance
- Real Estate
- Overnight Accommodation
- Recreation
- Administration/Government

The management of each department might reasonably be thought of as a unique business in itself. Ski School is really like an actual school: it requires a principal (ski school director), teachers (ski instructors), and support staff. It must develop a curriculum, educate students, and develop objective means to evaluate success. As with an actual school, the future good of the "community" depends on this success. Similarly, the utilities like water, sewer, and electrical must have planning, leadership, operation, and maintenance elements well-orchestrated in order to sustain the community. And on and on with each individual department.

Since each department requires its own leadership and has direct ramifications on the health and success of the larger community, it necessarily follows that executive leadership and management of a ski resort takes on an almost governmental character, in that it must bring together all of these myriad individual sectors to ensure the wellbeing of the greater community.

Like a public official, a resort executive also has constituents to please, who are often very vocal in their moments of dissatisfaction, and who will vote with their dollars by "moving" to a new resort if necessary (though not without making a lot of noise first). Change and growth—both necessary to the success of ski resorts in a competitive market—must then be handled with diplomatic aplomb, and a keen sense of public relations.

When considered in this municipal analogy, it becomes clear that a ski resort is more of a microcosm than a simple one-dimensional business.<sup>3</sup>

Were one to wax philosophical, he might speculate that this parallel is at least partly responsible for the sense of community that develops around individual resorts, much as it does around towns and cities. A ski resort is, after all, a community. Each ski area has loyal resident skiers who consider it "home," who feel personally invested in its success and future, and who often feel very strongly and passionately about changes to the character of the resort. Skiers have such an intimate attachment to their home ski resort that they feel a certain ownership of it, just as a resident of a small town feels in some way that it is *his* town.

Contrary to a common misconception, the *size* of a ski resort does not particularly affect the *scope* of the operational complexity. Granted, a small day-use ski area may not have certain departments like lodging and real estate. Nevertheless, even the smallest ski resorts must contend with a veritable jungle of departments and intermingled elements in order to achieve success and deliver a quality skiing experience. In fact, in some ways it is even more daunting to operate a smaller ski resort, owing to more limited human and financial resources. At a large

---

<sup>3</sup> Of course, one might discover similar parallels in any number of other complex businesses. The remarkable thing about the ski industry, however, is how exhaustively its constituent elements mimic much broader communities.

resort, dozens of executives and numerous senior managers are at the beck and call of the GM to run the city in miniature. But at a small ski area, all the same elements of the city must be stewarded by just a few leaders. Indeed, the notion that the "local hill" is simple to operate is misguided. There are undoubtedly executives of large resorts who would not stand a chance at achieving success at a small area with limited resources, just as well as there may be small ski resort managers who would be overwhelmed by the scale of a large resort.

## THE CITY'S OFFICIALS

With a sense of the scope and scale of what goes into the operation of a ski resort, attention can be turned to the executive/senior management team that provides the governance and administration of our microcosmic city. The sketches in the chapters that follow are just that: sketches. They hit the high points to give a big-picture understanding of the roles and departments. It would be nearly impossible to provide an exhaustive description of a real-world ski resort manager's or department's complete role, as it tends to be ever-evolving and highly dependent upon changing daily conditions.

Not every ski resort is organized exactly how it is presented here. Particular titles may be different (for example, the Director of Mountain Operations at one resort may be the VP Mt Ops or the Mt Ops Manager at another resort) and precise reporting structures vary. But the concepts can be applied broadly to *most*

ski operations. Size and scale of the resort will have a major impact on the scope of the executive and management team.

For our purposes, we'll begin with the General Manager (GM), who is the "boss" at the ski resort. We'll then consider some key members of the executive or senior management team, including the heads of Mountain Operations, Base Operations/Services, Finance, Marketing/Sales, and Food & Beverage. Also, we'll take a quick look at other senior roles, like Director of Planning/Development, Ski School Director, HR Director, Risk Manager, Information Technology/Systems Director, and Lodging/Hospitality Director. Any number of these roles may fall to officers or executives, or they may simply be members of senior or middle management. Regardless, each has responsibility for critical areas of the ski area operation.