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What I learned from the Marriott family

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We can all learn a lesson or two from the legacy J.W. Marriott Sr. and Bill Marriott have built. Here's what they instilled early on in me.



By Doug Kennedy (/Author/639/Doug-Kennedy)
 doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com
 (mailto:doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com)
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I often wish I had a better story about how I started my career in hospitality, but the truth is it was because the soon-to-open Marriott Griffin Gate Resort in Lexington, Kentucky, which was about the 125th hotel in the Marriott chain, had the biggest ad in the "Help Wanted" section of the newspaper.

They needed help in the banquet department where I started, but soon I found my niche working as a bellman. Little did I know that this part time college job would—eight years later—lead back to my entrepreneurial dreams when I started my first training company in 1989. Although I have learned so much from having training contracts with the majority of the major hotel chains and many of its most iconic independent hotels, I learned the most during my four-year span with the Marriotts.

In 1981 Marriott was very much a family business. J.W. Marriott Sr. still ran the company at that time, although his son Bill Marriott was taking over the reins. We often saw Bill at our resort, as did every employee of every hotel, as he personally inspected just about each at least once per year. (New hotels like ours saw him much more often.) When I say inspected, I'm not talking about him making a quick walk through the lobby. This man looked in the back hallways, under the beds, in the linen closets and even behind the dish washer.

During the years I worked for him, and long thereafter, he read through all the guest comment cards and personally responded to guests' letters.

As much as I admired his hands-on approach and strong work ethic, I can see now that it was the shared values on which the entire corporation was built that were the pillars of its success. Here are a few of the lessons I learned from working the Marriott:

Take care of your employees and they will take care of your guests

This was the motto of the Marriott Corporation when I worked for them, and it still is to this very day. In fact, if you are on LinkedIn you can follow Bill Marriott's blog, one of his recent postings was in celebration of their 20th year in a row of being listed on Fortune's list of "100 Best Companies to Work For." In the blog, he talks about how "putting people first" was the motto of the company since his father first founded the first

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"Hot Shop" in 1927. I recall that Marriott provided (and mostly funded) healthcare for every employee who worked 32 hours a week. They had profit sharing even back in 1981. They were one of the first companies I ever heard of to allow for domestic partners and step-children to obtain health insurance.

Keep an open-door policy

We were all told on day one that any employee could talk to any manager, even the GM. I remember testing this rule one day when my girlfriend had a traffic accident while leaving work, as the exit was onto a major four-lane highway with no traffic light. I walked into the office of our GM and suggested that they needed to lobby the local government to install one. Sure enough, he did. And one was installed. Marriotts back then all had an old-school "suggestion box" and conducted opinion surveys, even for frontline employees.

Embrace diversity

Growing up in a small southern city, it was working for Marriott that I first really got to know people of other cultures, as our Marriott employed many immigrant refugees. I remember one gentleman who was Vietnamese and had come over after the war ended (just a few years prior) with his wife and children. We had many expatriated Iranians running from The Shah working there, right alongside folks identifying as LBGTO.

Marriott was an oasis of diversity, and our guests seemed to really enjoy this aspect. I also remember these were some of our most hard working associates.

Obsess over quality

At Marriott, we learned from the employee orientation that doing what is right always takes precedent over doing what is easy. When I think of the saying, I can still hear the jingle in my head: "When Marriott does it, we do it right!"

Own the guest request

We were all trained that no matter what your title is, when the guest hands you a complaint or a special request, it was yours to fulfill. If that was not possible, you personally walk them over to the right co-worker.

One memorable example is that Marriott hotels were the first chain to eliminate the "no vacancy" signs that were so prevalent elsewhere. Most hotels saw it as an interruption when a road weary traveler entered the lobby desperate for a place to stay. (Remember there were no cell phones, online travel agencies, mobile websites, etc. ...) A few hotels might—at the most—offer to make change and direct the traveler to a payphone. Not our Marriotts. It was an employee standard to call around for the guest and find them a room.

Invert the organizational chart

In the 1980s, most hotels had a traditional organizational chart with the GM at the top of the pyramid. Marriott turned this upside down, but it was more than a memo on the bulletin board. I remember our GM and assistant GM often helping us bellman carry bags during heavy arrival days. One of my most vivid memories was when the VP of catering for the whole Marriott chain came into the back hallway behind the Grand Ballroom after the grand opening gala to help us break down trays, as our inexperienced team had fallen far behind the tidal wave of dishes coming out of the lavish party.

For many years now, Marriott has been a publicly traded company run by its shareholders, and I'm pretty sure Bill Marriott could have sailed off into the sunset long ago with a comfortable nest egg. Yet he can still be found many days working in his office as the executive chairman.

Today, too many hotels are cold-hearted corporations run by owner representatives who focus only on the bottom line, operated by managers who think they are in the business of renting space and time, and as a result turning a hotel guestroom into a commodity. Yet there are still plenty of inspired owners and managers who realize the hotel business is all about hospitality and at the heart of hospitality is human engagement.

I am glad to have learned this lesson early in life working for the Marriott family.

Doug Kennedy is president of the Kennedy Training Network, Inc. a leading provider of hotel sales, guest service, reservations and front desk training programs and telephone mystery shopping services for the lodging and hospitality industry. Kennedy has been a fixture on the industry's conference circuit for hotel companies, brands and associations for more than two decades. Since 1996, Kennedy's monthly training articles have been published worldwide, making him one of the most widely read hospitality industry authorities. Visit KTN at www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com or email him directly doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com. He is the author of "So You REALLY Like Working With People? - Five Principles for Hospitality Excellence." (https://www.createspace.com/6608751?ref=1147694&utm_id=6026)

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