

The making of a Great Place to Work® - the story of Marriott International

A friend was narrating his story of an experience at the Ritz – Carlton hotel. He was suffering from a sore throat and decided to take his mother’s advice and called room service asking for a glass of hot milk mixed with a spoon of turmeric. Three years later after checking into the same hotel, he promptly receives a phone call from the room service, “Sir, would you like your favorite hot milk with turmeric!” Much as he hated drinking hot milk with turmeric, my friend was impressed by the memory of the hotel’s staff.

The Ritz-Carlton is one of the many brands of Marriott International.

"Take care of the associates, and they'll take good care of the guests, and the guests will come back." This was what J Willard Marriott said many decades ago. The founder of Marriott has since been vindicated many times over. Today, Marriott International has nearly 2,900 lodging properties located in the United States and 67 other countries and territories. Between now and the end of the year it will add another 100 properties to take the tally to 3000 properties.

Marriott International, Inc., is a leading lodging company. Its heritage can be traced to a root beer stand opened in Washington, D.C., in 1927 by J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott. Today, the company manages and franchises hotels and resorts under the Marriott, JW Marriott, Renaissance, Bulgari, The Ritz-Carlton, Courtyard, Residence Inn, SpringHill Suites, TownePlace Suites, and Fairfield Inn brand names; develops and operates vacation ownership resorts under the Marriott Vacation Club International, The Ritz-Carlton Club, Grand Residences by Marriott, and Horizons brands; operates Marriott Executive Apartments; provides furnished corporate housing through its Marriott ExecuStay division; operates conference centers; and manages golf courses.

Marriott consistently makes it to Fortune’s Best Employer’s List. And it is number 5 amongst the Top 25 Great Places to Work® in India. Visit a Marriott property and you will sense the enthusiasm and energy of their Associates (They call their employees Associates). I decided to visit their Juhu property and talk to a few employees to find out what makes this hotel an employer of choice. Here’s what I found.

1. A strong Brand

Marriott International does not own the hotels it operates. It owns the brands and runs the management. In this sense it is a true professional services firm. A lot of people can construct a world class property; it takes a Marriott management team to make it a world class hotel. “When I was working with a rival chain, I kept on wondering, if Marriott can do it, why can’t we,” confided a senior manager. “When I decided to shift from Delhi to Mumbai, I had a colleague who used to work in Marriott in Mumbai. She almost forced me to come for an interview at Marriott,” shared the current head of Training.

2. True Empowerment

Empowerment is the cornerstone of “the Marriott way.” Marriott has numerous examples of how their Associates feel empowered. Employees decide when to give a fruit basket or other complimentary items to guests. There is a high degree of pride in the unique relationships they form with their guests. One example quoted was how an Associate in a restaurant offered the most expensive bottle of champagne to an unhappy guest- as a complimentary gift! Such examples are applauded and recognised. In the employee website, as well as, the company website you will find a number of stories of exemplary behaviour of Associates.

3. Guarantee of fair treatment

Marriott employees feel empowered because they know that fair treatment is a cornerstone of the Organisation’s philosophy. This is what J W Marriott, Jr, current Chairman and CEO has to say, "I want our Associates to know that there really is a guy named Marriott who cares about them..." Bill, as he is affectionately called, makes sure these are not empty words. Each manager has to give an undertaking of fair treatment. There is a process of escalation of employee grievances (Speak Out process), right up to him. Indeed, as the current HR Manager found out, getting a call from Bill’s office to enquire about an employee grievance is not surprising. Considering that Marriott employs over 150,000 employees globally, this is a strong example of the emphasis placed on fair treatment. And for employees too shy to write to Bill, there is always the option of anonymously calling up the Integrity hotline, a 24 by 7 toll free number.

As one employee commented, “A very unique thing in this place is the work culture. I think all Associates are treated equally. At an individual level there are differences but no one turns their back when someone actually needs help.”

4. Communication

If fairness ensures that employees are not penalised for doing the right thing, communication processes are what ensures that employees know what the right thing is. This is what Bill Marriott says in his blog (<http://www.blogs.marriott.com>), “Many years ago, Marriott did something revolutionary at the time for hotels. We not only began asking guests about their stays, what they liked and didn't like, but we also took that information and created databases and tracking mechanisms so we knew how each hotel was doing.”

Marriott is the only hotel I know of which has a daily newspaper, called the Daily Packet. The Daily Packet is a communication tool which comprises of the Hospitality Basic of the Day, Events for the day, Daily Birthdays, Special guest recognition of associate efforts, HR eye opener for the day, Daily occupancy rate, etc.

So the chances are the Associate who offered the bottle of champagne to the customer, did it with the full knowledge of how well the business is doing, and whether she can afford to spend that much on service recovery.

An important part of the communication process is the performance communication.

Every quarter the GM addresses the associates and shares the Balance Score Card which comprises of the Revenue, Guest Satisfaction Survey results, Turnover rate, Audit Scores etc. The winners for departmental and individual recognitions schemes are awarded during this Quarterly Associates Meeting. This is followed by the department head along with the line manager conducting a quarterly performance review with the Associates. This is to give the Associate feedback and an overview of the last quarter and set his goals and action plan/development for the next quarter.

5. The Marriott way

I cannot end an article on Marriott without emphasising their 12 rules of success. Like any other great Organisation (Remember J&J's Credo), Marriott has defined its 12 rules of success as under:

1. Continually challenge your team to do better.
2. Take good care of your employees and they'll take good care of your customers, and the customers will come back.
3. Celebrate your people's success, not your own.
4. Know what you're good at and mine those competencies for all you're worth.
5. Do it and do it now. Err on the side of taking action.
6. Communicate. Listen to your customers, associates and competitors.
7. See and be seen. Get out of your office, walk around, make yourself visible and accessible.
8. Success is in the details.
9. It's more important to hire people with the right qualities than with specific experience.
10. Customer needs may vary, but their bias for quality never does.
11. Eliminate the cause of a mistake. Don't just clean it up.
12. View every problem as an opportunity to grow.

The above rules are supported by 20 Basics – basic behaviours that exemplify the above rules. Marriott's brand beliefs can be summarised in one line as their spirit to serve- their Associates, Customers and Community.

In line with the above Marriott have awards for Community Service and Diversity. Do not be surprised if you see hundreds of Marriott employees (joined by enthusiastic guests) descending on Juhu beach to clean it up. They did precisely that. Just as they took care of 26 school kids and many others during Mumbai floods.

I recall visiting a friend of mine in the HR department of a reputed five star hotel in the beginning of my career. The HR department was in the basement. My friend took me to the staff canteen, a dimly lit place where we were served some beaten rice (*Poha*) from an Aluminium Container, in a steel plate. I was amazed to see the difference between the basement and the other floors.

Times have changed. The HR department in Marriott is at the same level as the Reception. And the basement is no less. For Marriott the “Heart of the Organisation” is as important as the “Front of the Organisation”. As you walk through the “Associate Corridor” which is designed to make you proud to be in Marriott, and enter the Associate canteen, you can’t help exclaiming, “Are all restaurants in this hotel as good as the Associate canteen?!”

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