

A photograph of a Marriott International building entrance. The image shows a large, ornate black metal archway with intricate scrollwork. In the center of the archway, the Marriott logo is displayed in large, gold-colored, three-dimensional letters. To the left of the archway, a portion of a gold-colored lamp post with a white glass globe is visible. The background shows a building facade with a grid of windows.

Marriott International Navigates Industry Challenges with Leadership Development

Hospitality Giant Dedicated to Putting People First

Marriott International is a global hospitality company with a vast portfolio of nearly 8,800 properties across 30 leading brands that collectively operate in 139 countries and territories. Established in 1927 by J. Willard Marriott and his wife, Alice Marriott, the organization has grown into the world's largest hospitality company, offering approximately 1.6 million hotel rooms and employing hundreds of thousands of associates across the globe.

The company's extensive portfolio of lodgings gives guests more ways to connect, have meaningful experiences, and expand their world. Marriott is known for its commitment to providing exceptional customer service and has a diverse brand portfolio that meets the needs of every trip purpose, including Marriott Hotels, The Ritz-Carlton, Westin Hotels & Resorts, and Courtyard by Marriott.

Marriott's employee-centric people practices have earned the organization numerous accolades, including consistent recognition from Fortune as one of the top 100 Best Companies to Work For.¹ In 2023, Marriott was recognized as one of PEOPLE's 100 Companies That Care.² The organization also received recognition for diversity, equity, and inclusion practices such as opening part-time managerial positions³ and providing employment opportunities to refugees.⁴

A Changing World Calls for People Strategy Innovation

Over the past few years, Marriott has been through significant change. At the height of the pandemic, the company's revenues dropped nearly 90%, and its stock price fell by almost two-thirds. Unprecedented in its almost 97-year history, some of the company's hotels had to close their

Summary	
Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Navigating an increasingly complex and ambiguous business environment, including a fundamentally different talent market.▪ Unifying several legacy leadership development programs into a centralized global learning journey.▪ Increasing scale and reach of leadership programming without sacrificing quality or impact.
Solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Gained global alignment on a common definition of leadership focused on three "leadership essentials": Be Curious, Be Courageous, and Be Connected.▪ Created En Route, a leadership development program comprised of five progressive courses that collectively position personal growth as a continuous journey.▪ Partnered with NovoEd to transition in-person and online courses into a blended learning experience that combines a cohort-based learning strategy with practical experience in the flow of work.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ All associates possess a comprehensive understanding of the behaviors essential to effective leadership, and 92% call the company a "great place to work."▪ En Route is five times more scalable to date than Marriott's previous leadership development programs.▪ En Route participants report greater confidence in their leadership capabilities, including active listening, coaching, feedback, and communication skills.

doors, while others pivoted to accommodate frontline workers. Within a year, consumer demand started to return almost as quickly as it had disappeared, presenting new talent challenges.

1 ["Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For® in 2024,"](#) greatplacetowork.com.

2 ["Recognition,"](#) News Center/Marriott International, 2023.

3 ["Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For® in 2024,"](#) greatplacetowork.com.

4 ["PEOPLE's 100 Companies That Care in 2023: Employers Putting Their Communities First,"](#) People, 2023.

Voluntary turnover grew, while “ghosting” and “quick quitting” resignations increased. As Marriott expanded its workforce, the company recognized that the talent market had become fundamentally different. Gen Z employees have different expectations of employers than previous generations and are less likely to stay with a single employer throughout their career. This next generation expects to work like it lives—with modern, digital tools, resources, and learning opportunities.

With increasing consumer demand and evolving employee expectations, Marriott recognized that the hospitality industry is more complex and changing more rapidly than ever before (see Figure 1). Seeing leadership development as a crucial factor in enhancing everyday decision-making, change readiness, and ultimately the guest experience, Marriott conducted an analysis of its leadership programs, processes, and frameworks—a move that revealed a major flaw in its decentralized leadership development strategy.

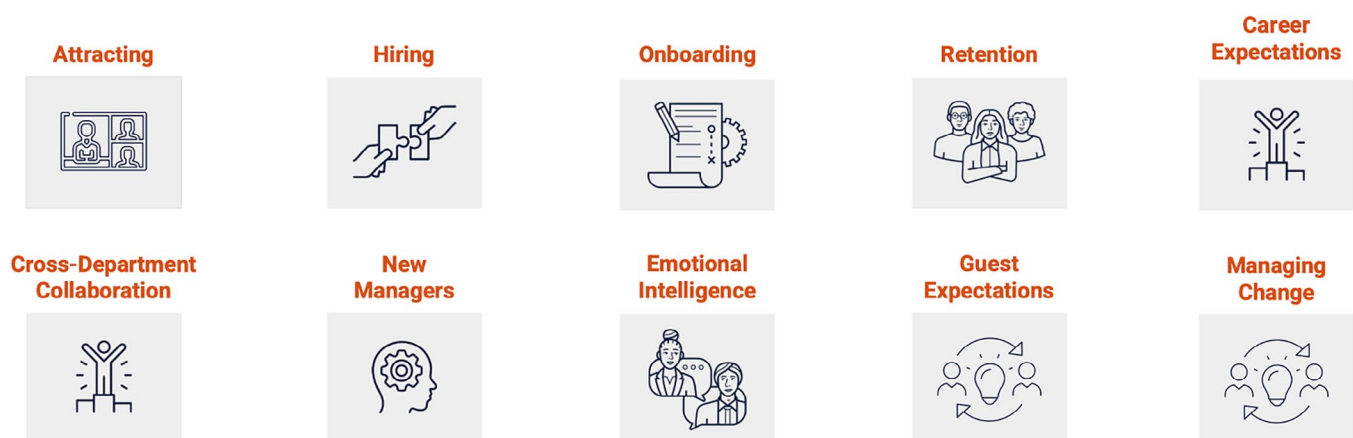
While its workshops and extensive in-person training sessions were well-received by participants, many failed to produce enduring behavior change. Furthermore, the inconsistency in leadership offerings among brands and geographic regions created suboptimal variability. The company decided to standardize and globalize its point of view on leadership across all geographies and hotel brands.

Growing Great Leaders, Investing in Associates, and Increasing Access to Opportunity

Marriott knew that if it got leadership right, everything else would fall into place. Inspired by Mr. Marriott’s 12 rules of success and the understanding that “no one accidentally becomes a good leader,” the company wove a culture of organizational leadership into the fabric of its human capital strategy, which manifests in three “signature elements”: Growing Great Leaders, Investing in Associates, and Access to Opportunity.⁵

To define its leadership culture, Marriott embarked on a comprehensive evaluation of its existing leadership programs. It assessed what was working and what was not by conducting an internal data-driven analysis. The company also looked externally to identify the most successful leadership practices across the industry. Marriott then asked what hadn’t been done—looking for a way to build long-term adaptability. This analysis led the company to identify three broad characteristics of great leadership: Be Curious, Be Courageous, Be Connected. These “leadership essentials” encapsulate Marriott’s vision of leadership for its entire organization.

Figure 1: Marriott’s Depiction of Hospitality Industry Challenges



Source: Marriott, 2024

⁵ [Marriott International 2023 Annual Report](#), Marriott International, Inc., 2024.

Democratizing Leadership Development to All Associates

Marriott believes that every associate can be a leader through their mindset and actions, regardless of whether their role has official people-management responsibilities.

“We developed the Be Curious, Be Courageous, Be Connected leadership essentials to drive a strong sense of culture around the importance of leadership at every level,” explains Ty Breland, EVP and CHRO at Marriott. “Our goal was to establish a common language around leadership that was simple, consumable, and repeatable for all,” Breland adds.

“*Organizational leadership means doing what is best for the company. It involves all associates claiming accountability and working together across disciplines and geographies to move the company forward. To do this, we must create an environment for associates to thrive—both personally and professionally.*

Ty Breland, EVP and CHRO, Marriott

To support associates at all levels in unlocking their leadership potential within Marriott, the company developed Become, an enterprisewide leadership self-service portal accessible to all associates from day one. It features a professional development library as well as a career growth website and is designed to guide associates in determining who they want to “become,” both professionally and personally. Available in 17 languages, Become is now a foundational element of the Marriott leadership brand, but it was only the first step in building a unified culture centered on the three leadership essentials.

En Route: A Global Leadership Development Strategy for People Managers

After establishing the Become self-service portal for all associates, Marriott sought to support its people leaders through a journey-oriented, experiential leadership development program that would meaningfully engage both frontline and more senior people leaders, equipping them to empower themselves and their teams to be curious, courageous, and connected.

“*Growing as a leader is a journey that never ends—made up of experiences, exposure, and education throughout one’s career.*

Jessica Lee, SVP Global Talent Development, Marriott

Marriott developed a multicourse concept called En Route, which features an integrated architecture of progressive leadership courses that build on each other and position leadership as a continuous journey. It democratizes access to leadership development, as it was designed to be applicable across the entire portfolio of managed and franchised properties. While En Route is available to all people managers, the courses are only compulsory for certain audiences, such as recent college graduate program participants and specific levels of managers within certain brands and markets.

To maximize the influence of En Route and drive greater scale, Marriott recognized the importance of harnessing technology to its fullest potential. The company sought a technology partner that could enable high-impact, blended learning experiences that drive lasting behavior change. Three key transformation priorities were identified for its new leadership development strategy:

1. Consistently delivering core leadership courses on a global scale to people employed directly by Marriott and Marriott franchisees.
2. Scaling facilitator and program reach with best-in-class learning automation, analytics, integrations, and courses offered in 15 languages.
3. Developing a program that fosters social connection and collaboration to cultivate and engage a diverse, multigenerational workforce.

Transforming a Global Workforce with High-Impact Learning

In late 2022, Marriott partnered with NovoEd, a learning platform provider specializing in cohort-based, collaborative learning that enables deep skill and knowledge acquisition by integrating practice, application, and collaboration directly into virtual experiences. Just a week after the partnership was made official, the first En Route program was developed, and participants began enrolling.

Building a leadership development program that is applicable to all leaders within the organization requires a structure that meets people managers where they are in their leadership journey. Marriott is developing a series of five courses, each building on the last, that together comprise the En Route Core Leadership Program (see Figure 2).

Each course is designed to serve leaders at a particular stage in their leadership journey. Embark and Envision have already been developed and implemented across the organization. The former is designed for first-time people managers; the latter caters to first-time managers who have been in their roles for one to two years.

Embark is specifically designed to build foundational people leadership skills such as prioritization, associate engagement, feedback, collaboration, communication, and delegation. Envision supports relatively new people leaders who have already mastered introductory leadership concepts. Course participants learn about team-oriented topics such as developing others, delivering results, and creating belonging.

Evolve comes next, with topics that include emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, and managing conflict. Engage will support director-level leaders, while Empower will guide the company’s general managers and VPs in driving the organization forward.

Once all five courses are available, leaders can select the one that best aligns with their position or join the program with an earlier course to sharpen their skillsets. “We envisioned each of these courses as an onboarding experience for their corresponding level of management,” said Christopher Walker, VP of Global Leadership Development at Marriott. En Route ensures that those new to leading others receive organizational support on every step of their journey through education, exposure to peers, and intentional, on-the-job learning experiences.

Achieving Global Accessibility

Through NovoEd, Marriott has successfully translated Embark and Envision into 15 languages, making the courses accessible to leaders across the globe.

Figure 2: En Route’s Progressive Leadership Courses



Source: Marriott, 2024

Marriott leverages more than 100 internal facilitators to teach En Route, among other talent development programs. Despite En Route reaching four times more learners than Marriott's previous leadership development offerings, the company did not add headcount to achieve this scale. The facilitators are based in various geographies across the globe, reporting to continent-based learning delivery teams.

Creating Transformative Blended Learning Experiences

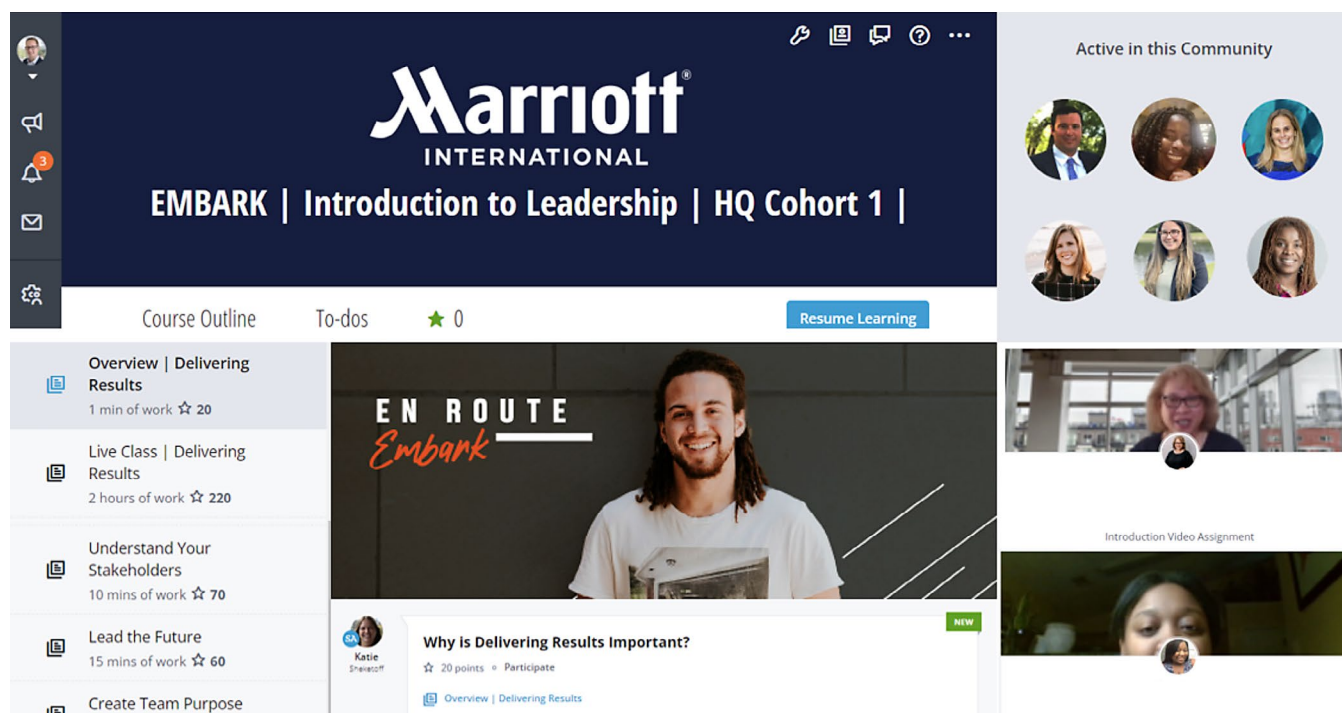
Embark and Envision share the same blended course structure, which is designed to space out required virtual content to leave room for leaders to implement what they have learned within their respective teams. Each course takes five to seven weeks to complete, and key elements include:

- **Online cohorts:** 30 to 40 learners go through the program together with asynchronous content, assignments, discussions, and peer learning integrated into the online course environment.
- **Virtual, instructor-led modules:** Three synchronous two-hour classroom sessions are led by two global facilitators.

- **Virtual learning circles:** Groups of four to six associates engage in discussion boards, collaborative assignments, and peer feedback activities. These elements are supplemented by two one-hour meetings, spaced a week apart, designed to promote accountability, autonomy, and ingenuity.
- **Learning in the flow of work:** Experience-driven course assignments, which often have peer circle and community feedback requirements, enable leaders to apply their learnings inside their own teams.
- **Selective in-person enrichment:** The En Route program blends in-person interactions where it maximizes value, such as for certain language markets, high-potential development, and integrated talent planning.

All core elements are facilitated within a single platform interface (see Figure 3). Evolve and the final two courses in the En Route lineup (Engage and Empower) will have a similar structure, but they will increasingly leverage a flipped classroom model to maximize the discussion and collaboration opportunities experienced people managers and senior organizational leaders receive during the instructor-led and learning circle portions of each course.

Figure 3: Embark User Interface Example



Source: Marriott, 2024

Fostering Social Connections and Collaboration with Virtual Learning Circles

As a hospitality company, Marriott operates most of its business in person and has traditionally leveraged in-person training. En Route blends its digital experience with small learning circles of four to six peers collaborating on assignments while coaching and providing feedback to each other (see Figure 4).

“It’s important that our leaders leave (the training) with a sense that they are not alone,” shared Katie Sheketoff, Director of Global Leadership Development at Marriott. “Since they’re with the same group over time, our leaders tend to establish a sense of trust and safety, gradually scaling up their vulnerability level,” added Sheketoff. As a result, leaders often choose to lean on their learning circle peers after courses end, as they’ve become accustomed to the benefits of an outside perspective and community.

Results: Elevating Leadership Program Quality, Reach, and Impact

En Route is five times more scalable than Marriott’s previous leadership development programming, largely because of its blended delivery format. Additionally, preliminary results

reveal that En Route is more impactful in terms of scale and behavioral change than in-person predecessors.

Participants report greater confidence in their ability to explain what leadership looks like and improved skills related to the three leadership essentials:

- **Be Curious:** participants report increased active listening skills.
- **Be Courageous:** participants report increased confidence in leading through difficult changes.
- **Be Connected:** participants report greater awareness of the stakeholders they need to consider and collaborate with to achieve results.

During the first seven months of the program, more than 5,000 newly hired or promoted leaders completed Embark, and more than 5,000 managers with one year of people leader experience completed Envision. Once all five En Route courses are implemented, Marriott anticipates reaching as many as 30,000 leaders per year.

Impact of a Systemic People Strategy

In addition to elevating its leadership development strategy with En Route, Marriott also revisited its compensation framework, heightened its focus on holistic wellbeing, and increased employee flexibility and choice. The launch of the new people brand, Be™, underscored Marriott’s commitment to its associates, promising them the opportunity to build their careers, belong to a global team, and become the best versions of themselves.

Figure 4: Elements of Marriott’s Learning Circles

What	Why	How
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Groups of 4 to 6 (in cohorts of 30 to 40)▪ Same group for entire course▪ Breakout discussions during virtual sessions▪ One hour of unmoderated learning circle time between each facilitated session▪ Additional online collaborative environment for discussion and feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Peer learning: learn and get feedback from each other▪ Ability to share openly▪ Practice new skills in a safe environment▪ Develop social connections and allies across Marriott and across geographies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Facilitator launches breakout discussions and unmoderated sessions▪ Participants follow assigned roles that ensure success of their learning circle (e.g., recorder, timer)▪ Absences are positioned as opportunities for others to exemplify leadership▪ Virtual group workspaces and discussion boards are offered through the collaborative learning platform

Source: Marriott and The Josh Bersin Company, 2024

These investments in the employee experience resulted in 92% of Marriott associates naming the company a “great place to work,” marking a 7% increase from prepandemic metrics. This accolade is a measure of employees’ trust in the people they work for, enjoyment of who they work with, and pride in what they do.

Next Steps: Supporting Leadership at All Levels

After the successful implementation of Embark and Envision, Marriott realized it could deliver leadership development experiences online and at a greater scale without sacrificing the quality of formerly in-person programs. The impact of the blended learning format cemented the strategy to continue with additional levels of En Route—with Evolve launching in Q1 2024, to be followed by both Engage and Empower. These courses will progressively introduce the concept of viewing each hotel or property as an ecosystem, where all associates are seen as key stakeholders in its success.

Lessons Learned

The Marriott approach to leadership was developed with intentionality at every stage. The cornerstone of success is its commitment to long-term sustainability, willingness to embrace blended learning, and determination to prioritize programs that support frontline leaders. These distinguished approaches have industry-agnostic value and are summarized in more detail below:

- **Fall in love with the problem, not the solution.** When the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the course of the hospitality industry, many companies pivoted to widespread layoffs, furloughs, and reduced work schedules as a short-term response to financial pressures.

Marriott combined immediate measures with a long-term investment in leadership development—seeing leadership as a sustainable solution for improving organizational agility and the employee experience. This strategy enables frontline leaders to foster excellent workplaces and guest experiences by leading empowered and engaged teams. As a result, Marriott strengthened its position to successfully navigate future industry volatility.

- **Move the needle on culture and performance with blended learning.** Valuing the social networking opportunities that in-person training provides, Marriott initially hesitated about moving to a blended learning delivery format. However, driven to create an industry-leading leadership development strategy and program portfolio, the company chose to innovate.

Through novel strategies such as integrating virtual, collaboration-driven learning circles and building opportunities to connect course content with practical experiences within the flow of work, the company’s En Route courses have greater reach and impact than previous in-person alternatives. This equips Marriott to foster greater culture and brand consistency across all owned and franchised properties.

- **Unify culture and help employees thrive by prioritizing leadership program impact, not audience seniority.** Recognizing that frontline leaders are furthest removed from the CEO yet closest to the guest experience, Marriott prioritized the development of courses that support this population.

While many organizations prioritize senior leadership development so that company values can be modeled from the top down, Marriott launched programs that focus on the fundamentals of individual and team leadership first—enabling swift adoption of the company’s new leadership mindset and behaviors across its global workforce.

Conclusion

Despite the ever-evolving nature of the hospitality industry and the rapid pace of technological change, Marriott continues to focus on the single core value that’s been a strategic differentiator for nearly 100 years: “Putting People First.” The company’s unwavering dedication to its people and its focus on growing great leaders reflect its continued commitment to the success and growth of all associates.

Marriott’s flagship leadership development program, En Route, has successfully engaged thousands of leaders while fostering a global culture of connection, collaboration, and practical problem-solving, enhancing business adaptability and resilience amid ambitious growth goals and industry uncertainties.

About the Authors



Josh Bersin

Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the "home for HR." In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. He is frequently featured in publications such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Executive*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CLO Magazine*. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.



Jordan Hammerstad

Jordan is a lead analyst at The Josh Bersin Company. Passionate about the intersection between behavioral sciences and the workplace, Jordan pursued a neuroscience degree before obtaining her master's in human resources and industrial relations from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. She is a certified HR professional and brings experience from multiple industries including commercial real estate, industrial process solutions, higher education, transportation, and retail.

The Josh Bersin Company Membership

The Josh Bersin Company provides a wide range of research, tools, and advisory services to help HR leaders and professionals address the ever-evolving needs and challenges of today's workforce. We cover all topics in HR, HR technology, talent, and corporate learning, with a special focus on the professional development of HR teams.

Our corporate membership program provides HR leaders and teams with the skills, strategies, benchmarks, and insights to build cutting-edge HR and people strategies through research, assessments, professional development, exclusive events, and community. Corporate membership also includes access to Galileo™, the world's first AI-powered expert assistant specifically developed for HR. Trained on 25 years of The Josh Bersin Company's research, insights, and expertise and enriched by carefully curated material from our trusted content partners, Galileo unlocks information from over 50,000 verified assets to answer any HR-related question with timely and meaningful answers.

For more details, contact us at info@bersinpartners.com.