

CATEGORY ENTERED

N07. Experiential Learning

TITLE OF PROJECT

General Manager Programme



CLIENT COMPANY OR BRAND

Haven/Bourne Leisure

NAME OF COMPANY MAKING ENTRY

Inspirational Group

TYPE OF COMPANY ABOUT WHICH THE ENTRY IS WRITTEN

UK Leisure & Holiday company



Haven's General Manager Programme:

When Experience Becomes Expertise

Here's a truth about learning: we remember 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, but 90% of what we actually do.

Yet somehow, leadership development still defaults to PowerPoint presentations and theoretical frameworks, hoping something sticks.

Haven looked at that disconnect and decided to flip it entirely. Their General Manager (GM) Programme isn't about teaching leadership – it's about experiencing it in ways that change how you think, act and lead forever.



[Aims for programme and why any goals were set]:

The Challenge:

Leading 39 Unique Villages

Before we get to what Haven built, let's understand what they were building it for.

Haven operates 39 holiday parks across the UK and calling them "parks" undersells the complexity. These are essentially small towns. Each has accommodation, entertainment venues, restaurants, retail, facilities management and teams ranging from teenagers in their first job to seasoned hospitality professionals.

Each GM runs what is genuinely their own business, facing challenges unique to their location, their team makeup, their guest demographics. There's no one-size-fits-all playbook. Leadership here requires adaptability, emotional intelligence and commercial acumen.

Back in 2019, Haven created a GM talent blueprint with 12 capabilities clustered under their leadership framework: Lead, Think, Interact, and Deliver. They embedded it into every part of their talent cycle: recruitment, development, performance management, succession planning. And they built a development programme that would make those capabilities lived experiences rather than abstract concepts.

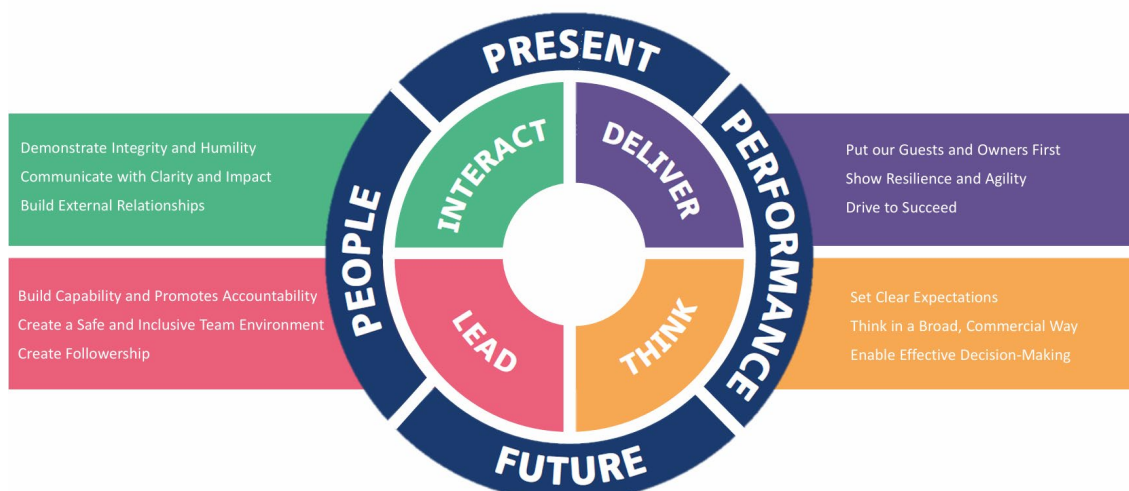
[Strategy and implementation]:

The Design:

Four Experiences That Change Everything

Haven structured their two-year programme around four "Milestone Moments", each one a three-day immersive experience aligned to this leadership framework. This wasn't about simulating experiences in a training room. This was about putting GMs into genuine high-performance environments where leadership isn't theoretical – it's survival.

The Haven Leadership Model for GMs



[Content]:

Milestone Moment 1:

Lead – The Sandhurst Experience

Taking managers to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst could've been gimmicky. Instead, it was transformative. Why? Because Sandhurst doesn't teach leadership through slides – it teaches through doing.

GMs tackled Operation Safe Haven, a military simulation requiring mission command, team coordination and decision-making under pressure. They navigated blindfold exercises where trust and communication weren't buzzwords – they were necessities. They engaged in command tasks that revealed leadership patterns they didn't know they had.

The experiential design was deliberate. You can read about followership, or you can experience what it feels like when your team genuinely trusts your judgment enough to follow instructions blindfolded. You can discuss mission clarity, or you can feel the chaos when your team doesn't understand "the why" behind your commands. These aren't academic distinctions – they're visceral lessons that stay with you.

Colonel Dean's framework became memorable because it was tested immediately: understand yourself, understand your team, understand your job.



Milestone Moment 2:

Deliver – The Perfection Experience

Mosimann's isn't just a venue – it's a masterclass in what non-negotiable standards look like. GMs weren't observing Michelin-standard service; they were delivering it. Preparing high-end cuisine under time pressure, managing multiple tasks simultaneously, coordinating with a team where precision matters more than speed – every element mirrored the pressures they face during peak season at their parks.



The experiential power came from the emotional impact. Feeling the stress when your dish isn't quite right. Experiencing the satisfaction when your team executes perfectly. Understanding viscerally that excellence isn't about working harder – it's about maintaining standards even when pressure mounts.

The Emotional Intelligence component with Dr Martyn Newman used diagnostic tools like the Emotional Capital Report, but the real learning came from applying those insights immediately. GMs received their ECR results and then engaged in scenarios requiring exactly the emotional awareness the reports measured.

The Crystal Maze challenge wasn't entertainment – it was experiential team dynamics. Physical challenges, mental puzzles, time pressure and communication barriers created conditions where you couldn't hide behind your usual patterns. Natural leaders learned to step back. Quieter voices learned to speak up. The team learned how they worked together.



Milestone Moment 3:

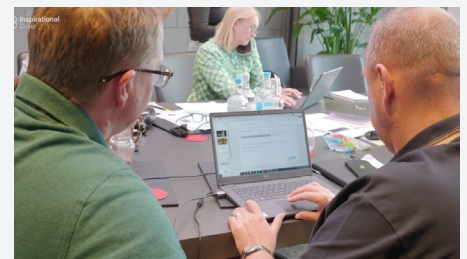
Think – The Entrepreneurial Experience

This milestone took experiential learning to another level. Haven recreated The Apprentice format – not as role-play, but as a genuine business challenge with real stakes. Teams lived together in a shared house, creating the immersion that makes learning stick. They were transported daily to a high-level venue, reinforcing that this wasn't everyday work – this was strategic thinking time.

The 48-hour challenge to develop viable business strategies wasn't theoretical. Teams had to identify actual market gaps, create third package offerings that could work at Haven, generate revenue opportunities without major capital investment. The brief was deliberately open – no constraints, no predetermined answers, just smart people solving real problems.

Here's where the experiential design got clever: teams had to use AI tools, even those who'd never touched generative AI before. No training modules. No practice runs. Just figure it out under pressure, the way you'd have to in the real world. The rapid adoption was remarkable – participants went from AI novices to leveraging it for ideation, planning, marketing materials and video production within hours.

Guest speakers Jamie Murray-Wells (Glasses Direct/Google) and Nick Jenkins (Moonpig.com/Dragon's Den) didn't deliver polished keynotes – they engaged in candid conversations about the messy reality of building businesses and making tough decisions. Participants weren't learning about entrepreneurship; they were experiencing entrepreneurial decision-making under the same time pressures and uncertainty actual entrepreneurs face. The teams produced marketing videos, created presentation materials and pitched to senior leadership. Every element required skills GMs don't normally use – graphic design, content creation, strategic communication. Stepping outside their comfort zones wasn't incidental; it was the point.



Milestone Moment 4:

Interact – The Communication Experience (to be delivered in January 2026)

Exeter Chiefs rugby club and Royal Marines training might seem like an odd combination, but both environments will teach the same fundamental truth: clarity of communication matters more under pressure.

At Exeter Chiefs, GMs will learn from athletes who need absolute precision in their communication because miscommunication during a match cost points. They will experience what happens when messages aren't clear, when tone doesn't match intent, when the person receiving the message interprets it differently than intended.

The community projects with local organizations will take GMs out of their Haven bubble entirely. Building relationships with external partners, understanding different organizational cultures, adapting communication styles to different audiences – these won't be simulations. They are real projects with real organizations counting on them to deliver.

The Royal Marines challenges will test leadership under physical and mental pressure. You can discuss integrity and humility in a classroom, or you can experience what those qualities look like when you're exhausted, frustrated and still need to lead your team effectively. One creates intellectual understanding. The other creates behavioural change.



[Creativity/innovation/technology]:

Why Experiential Learning Actually Works Here

Traditional training assumes you can transfer classroom learning to workplace application. Experiential learning flips that – you learn through application, with immediate feedback, in conditions that mirror real-world complexity.

Haven's programme worked because every experience was designed around specific learning objectives tied to their GM talent blueprint. Sandhurst developed capabilities around self-leadership and followership. Mosimann's built understanding of operational excellence and emotional intelligence. The entrepreneurial challenge stretched commercial and strategic thinking. Exeter and the Marines will hone communication and relationship-building.

The reflection component was crucial too. After each experience, structured reviews helped GMs process what happened, how they performed and what they'd do differently. Experience with reflection becomes learning.

[Feedback and experience summary]:

The Outcomes:

When Learning Becomes Leadership

Learning environment ratings consistently above 4.6 confirm the delivery quality. But the real measure is behavioural change back at their parks.



Facilitator Effectiveness



Impact of Learning



Your Reaction to Learning



Learning Environment

GMs implemented GISAR review frameworks with their teams. They embedded emotional intelligence practices into how they manage performance and relationships. They applied followership principles, creating cultures where team members understand not just what to do, but why it matters.

The business pitches from MM3 weren't academic exercises – several ideas have fed into Haven's actual innovation pipeline. When your experiential learning programme generates viable business strategies alongside leadership development, that's meaningful ROI.

Perhaps most significant is the succession impact. Each GM was encouraged to identify high-potential team members to mentor and develop, spreading leadership capability throughout the organization. The experiential learning didn't stop with the participants, it rippled outward.



Supporting me in avoiding complacency and helping me bring a new level of challenge / support to my direct reports. This is showing dividends in Team Manager population as a result.



Spending time at Mosimann's was a great experience, mixing practical tasks with more thoughtful learning and reflection, working as a team and focussing on the similarities to our own business and where we could improve our service and offering.

[Outcomes]:

Why This Stands Out

Experiential learning programmes often struggle with two challenges: creating experiences meaningful enough to change behaviour and ensuring transfer back to the workplace. Haven succeeded at both.

The experiences were genuinely stretching – Sandhurst, Mosimann's, Exeter Chiefs, Royal Marines aren't venues you book lightly. Each environment naturally reinforced learning objectives through its culture and standards. And the programme design ensured application between milestones, with coaching support and reflection built throughout.

Haven didn't just teach leadership – they created experiences where leadership capabilities were tested, refined and embedded. That's experiential learning delivering what it promises: transformation through experience.



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