

**CATEGORY ENTERED**

OA05 Outstanding Course/Initiative

**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: Leadership Development That Delivers

### Most leadership courses follow a predictable pattern.

**Day one:** ice breakers and introductions. **Day two:** theory and frameworks. **Day three:** action plans that never quite make it off the page. Everyone nods along, collects their certificate and within a month, it's business as usual.

Haven's General Manager (GM) Programme took a different approach. A radically different approach, actually. And the results speak for themselves.



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

## Starting With the Right Question

**When Haven began designing their GM Programme in 2024, they could've asked "What training do our General Managers need?"**

Instead, they asked something more fundamental: "What kind of leaders do our parks, teams and guests need?"

**That shift in perspective changed everything.**

Running a Haven park isn't straightforward. You're managing accommodation, entertainment, food service, retail and facilities. You've got seasonal pressures, diverse teams, owner relationships and guests expecting magical family moments that become stories told for decades. It's commercially demanding, operationally complex and emotionally intensive.

The leadership required for this environment can't be downloaded from a textbook. It needs to be experienced, practiced and embedded until it becomes second nature. Haven recognized this and built their programme accordingly, focusing on experiential learning that would genuinely change how their GMs lead.

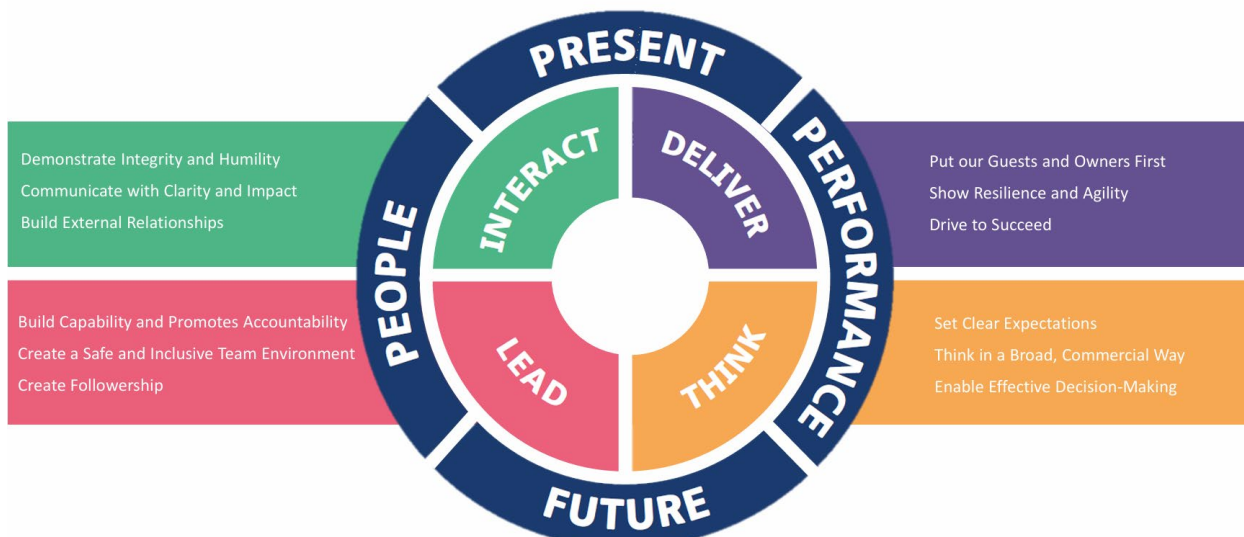
[Strategy and implementation]:

## The Framework:

### Four Milestones That Matter

Haven structured their two-year programme around four "Milestone Moments", each targeting a specific leadership capability from their Leadership Model: Lead, Interact, Deliver, Think. But here's what made it work – these weren't classroom sessions. They were three-day immersive experiences at venues deliberately chosen to push participants beyond comfortable familiarity.

## The Haven Leadership Model for GMs



# Milestone Moment 1:

## Lead

Lead took place at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. The symbolism alone was powerful: this is where British Army officers have developed leadership skills for over two centuries. But the substance matched the setting. GMs engaged in exercises like Operation Safe Haven, navigated command tasks blindfolded and explored concepts like mission command and followership through practical application rather than theory. Colonel Dean's three-step framework – understand yourself, understand your team, understand your job – gave participants a memorable mental model they could use under pressure.



# Milestone Moment 2:

## Deliver

Deliver shifted gears entirely. At Mosimann's, GMs experienced Michelin-standard operations firsthand, preparing high-end cuisine under time constraints that mirrored their own peak season pressures. The attention to detail required was intense, deliberate and eye-opening. The milestone then pivoted to Emotional Intelligence development with Dr Martyn Newman, using diagnostic tools like the Emotional Capital Report to help GMs understand their emotional patterns and their team's needs. This wasn't abstract psychology – it was practical application of EQ in high-pressure environments. The day concluded with a Crystal Maze challenge and insights from Olympic gold medallist Heather Stanning about elite performance and resilience.



## Milestone Moment 3:

### Think

Think might've been the boldest design choice. Haven essentially recreated The Apprentice, housing GMs together and giving them 48 hours to develop viable business strategies addressing real Haven challenges. Teams identified market gaps, created third package offerings, developed revenue opportunities – all without requiring major capital investment. They used AI tools (many for the first time), produced marketing materials and promotional videos and pitched their concepts to senior leadership. The entrepreneurial edge was sharpened further by guest speakers Jamie Murray-Wells (Glasses Direct/Google) and Nick Jenkins (Moonpig.com/Dragon's Den), who shared candid insights about building businesses and making tough decisions.



## Milestone Moment 4:

### Interact (to be delivered in January 2026)

Interact will combine Exeter Chiefs rugby club with Royal Marines training. Communication mastery from athletes who need absolute clarity under match pressure. Community projects with local organizations that remind GMs why external relationships strengthen both brand and business. Leadership challenges with the Marines that test integrity and resilience in ways that can't be faked. The milestone will culminate in a celebratory dinner with Haven's Executive Committee – recognition that participants have completed something genuinely significant.



Between milestones, learning continued through personal coaching, digital support tools, 360° feedback surveys and application at their parks during peak season when pressure tests everything.

[Creativity/innovation/technology]:

## **Why This Design Works:**

### The Science and the Art

#### **There's deliberate psychology underpinning every element.**

Adults don't learn leadership through passive consumption of information. They learn through experience, reflection, practice and feedback. Haven created what participants repeatedly called a "safe space" – an environment where experimentation, failure and learning carried no real-world consequences.

The programme also leveraged what educational psychologists call "contextual learning". Military settings teach different lessons than Michelin kitchens, which teach different lessons than rugby stadiums. Each environment naturally reinforces specific leadership principles through its culture, standards and expectations. Sandhurst breathes followership and mission clarity. Mosimann's embodies non-negotiable excellence. Exeter Chiefs demonstrates team cohesion under pressure. These aren't abstract concepts being explained, they're lived realities being experienced.

[Content]:

## **The Innovation Factor**

#### **Let's address the AI integration, because this was genuinely forward-thinking.**

In MM3, Haven introduced generative AI not as a separate training module, but as a practical tool for the business challenge. GMs who'd never used ChatGPT or similar tools were leveraging AI for ideation, planning and content creation within hours. The rapid adoption demonstrated both the technology's accessibility and the programme's culture of experimentation.

The gamification elements also deserve recognition. Competitive challenges tap into natural motivation whilst teaching collaboration. Teams wanted to win, but winning required everyone contributing their strengths. Natural leaders had to moderate their instinct to dominate and instead create space for others – a crucial skill when your role is developing people rather than doing everything yourself.

Haven also made smart choices about credibility. Bringing in successful entrepreneurs who'd built businesses from scratch provided insights you can't get from textbooks or consultants. These were candid conversations about decision-making, risk, innovation and resilience - the messy realities of leadership rather than sanitised case studies.

[Feedback and experience summary]:

## The Measurable Impact: Beyond Satisfaction Scores

The impact of learning and reaction to learning ratings consistently hit above 4.6 out of 5 across all modules. But rating scores, whilst important, don't tell the complete story.



**Facilitator  
Effectiveness**



**Impact  
of Learning**



**Your Reaction  
to Learning**



**Learning  
Environment**

The real impact shows up in changed behaviours at park level. GMs implementing new leadership frameworks. Teams reporting improved communication and clarity. Practical application of emotional intelligence in daily operations. Strategic thinking becoming embedded in how GMs approach challenges rather than just reacting to immediate pressures.

“Revamp our recruitment and selection process, bringing my Team along the journey with me.”

The business pitches from MM3 produced viable strategic ideas that have fed into Haven's innovation pipeline, potentially influencing real investment decisions. When your leadership development programme generates actual business value beyond developing people, that's meaningful ROI.



My levels of resilience and ability to lead through adversity will be much more recognisable. My Team, guest & Owner KPIS will see improvements as a result of implementing key learnings.

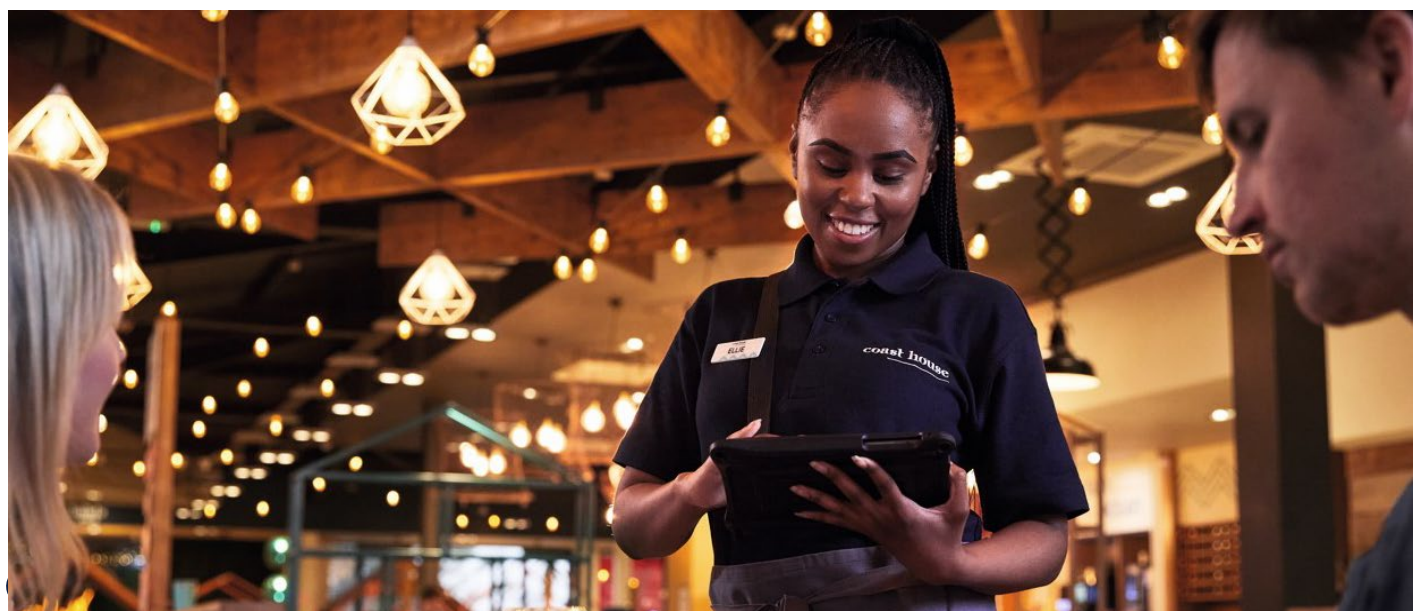
[Outcomes]:

## What Participants Gained: Skills and Perspective

### **The programme developed specific, measurable capabilities.**

GMs reported increased confidence in strategic decision-making, clearer communication with their teams, stronger resilience under pressure and improved emotional intelligence. They returned to their parks implementing frameworks like GISAR reviews, embedding EQ practices and applying followership principles with their teams.

The networking benefit was substantial too. GMs who previously operated in relative isolation built relationships with peers facing similar challenges. They created support systems that extended well beyond the programme itself. In an industry where GM-level isolation is common, that peer network is genuinely valuable.



# Why This Course Stands Out

**Leadership development programmes are common. Good ones are rarer. Ones that genuinely transform how leaders think, act and inspire others? Those are exceptional.**

Haven's GM Programme succeeds because it rejected conventional approaches and built something experiential. The venues aren't window dressing – they're carefully chosen environments that naturally reinforce learning objectives. The challenges aren't theoretical exercises – they're practical applications with immediate relevance to participants' roles. The reflection isn't box-ticking – it's structured time for genuine insight development.

The programme also achieves something crucial: it makes leadership development aspirational. When your course involves Sandhurst, Mosimann's, Exeter Chiefs and Royal Marines training, you're signalling that leaders matter, and their development warrants significant investment. That helps with retention, succession planning and attracting ambitious talent.

## The Bigger Picture

**Haven's GM Programme demonstrates what's possible when you're willing to invest properly in leadership development – not just financially, but conceptually.**

It shows that experiential learning, when designed thoughtfully, delivers results traditional training simply can't match.

Haven applied the same principles to their leaders' development that they apply to guest experiences: make it memorable, make it meaningful, make it matter.

And really, that's what makes this course outstanding. It didn't just train General Managers – it transformed how an entire leadership tier thinks, acts and develops others. It built capability that ripples through teams, parks and ultimately the guest experience itself. That's leadership development done right.



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