

DARE Q & A with: Kathleen Matthews



Kathleen Matthews is the chief communications and public affairs officer for Marriott International, the leading global hotel company, with 3,800 properties in more than 70 countries. She is responsible for the company's global brand public relations, corporate communications, social responsibility, and government affairs. She co-chairs Marriott's Executive Green Council and serves on the U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board to the Secretary of Commerce, as well as the boards of the U.S. Travel Association, the International Tourism Partnership, and the Economic Club of Washington. She is also Vice-Chair of the World Economic Forum's Policy Council on Aviation, Travel and Tourism.

Matthews is a 1975 graduate of Stanford University, and was a 2004 Fellow at the Institute of Politics at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Prior to her career at Marriott, she was an award-winning news anchor at the ABC-TV affiliate in Washington, D.C. for 25 years, and hosted the nationally syndicated Working Woman television show. She has been awarded nine local Emmys and other top honors during her journalism career.

Q: What is the most challenging thing you have ever had to do and where did you get the courage and confidence to do it?

A: After twenty-five years in a high-profile job as the ABC News TV anchor and reporter in Washington, D.C., the work I'd loved for so many years was no longer the challenge or the thrill that had kept me motivated and excited. I loved the storytelling, interviewing people, and investigating tough, topical issues, but the stories were repeating themselves and I was beginning to "phone it in." Not sure what to do or how to repurpose my skills, I applied for the Institute of Politics fellowship at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and convinced my employer to give me a six-month sabbatical to take classes and teach a seminar about the changing media landscape.

What I learned at Harvard was that my skills were infinitely portable. Framing a news story had taught me about framing a business or political strategy. Understanding "headlines" had taught me how to envision goals and outcomes in a compelling way. Packaging the news had taught me about marketing strategies. So when I left Harvard and returned to work, my mind was open to new possibilities.

The big opportunity arrived as an out-of-the-blue job offer from Marriott International, the global hotel company based in my home town of Washington, D.C., to head up their Global Communications and Public Affairs department. The benefits were obvious: international travel and a chance to stretch my skills (*cont.*)

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A: (*cont.*) and be reborn in a second career. But there were obvious risks. I had never worked in business, except in an editorial function, so I didn't know about budgets or business plans. I had never managed people, just collaborated as part of a big news team. Taking the job would mean taking myself off television, where I had been a fixture on the nightly news for more than two decades, and was a popular news anchor. Was I ready to give up a position where I was successful to risk failure? Would I miss being on TV every night and hate anonymity?

My kids, then in their teens, were split. The oldest encouraged me to take the leap, to tap all my skills and potential. The other two said I was crazy to give up a job that so many people coveted. My husband was the tie-breaker. "Eventually, you'll have to get off TV, either because you get fired or get too old for your

audience. Quit while you're at the top of your game."

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He was right. I was so fortunate to find a CEO willing to invest in me and offer me an opportunity to reinvent myself. It took courage and firm resolve to tell my TV bosses that I was leaving, because they didn't want to lose a popular news anchor they had helped make famous through publicity and on-air visibility. But once I imagined a new life, there was no turning back.

It also took honesty in sharing my vulnerabilities with my new boss. But taking a page from journalism, where the truth is paramount, I was transparent about my lack of business and management experience.

Being honest about who I was and what I could—and could not—do was important. But my new boss saw unique talents in me that were lacking in his organization, and so he shared the risk with me. I took the leap, and today when people ask me whether I miss television, I quickly and honestly say, "Not one bit."

Q: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made? What did you learn and how did you recover?

A: Going from a TV newsroom, where the hourly news cycle drives fast, independent decision-making, I was not prepared for the more deliberative, complex decision-making in a corporate business environment. When I arrived at Marriott, I was convinced our CEO should have a blog to be able to talk directly to customers in a friendly, informal way. Bill Marriott, who was seventy-five years old but intrepid, also liked the idea of jumping into what was for him the new world of social media. I was convinced that I could launch his blog in a matter of days. When it launched—in a matter of weeks—everyone was amazed. Emboldened by this success, I continued to push new initiatives. What I didn't realize was that I was stepping (*cont.*)

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A: (*cont.*) on toes. My agenda for change was not necessarily widely shared, and I didn't know the organization well enough to understand all the fiefdoms I should be visiting. Rather than enlisting allies for my initiatives, I alienated some senior executives, who, convinced I wouldn't last in the position, were determined to wait me out. Finally, I hit the wall and failed—for the first time in my career. I could not get an initiative through the organization. But I quickly realized my mistake, and I started working on the relationship building that I had been too busy to pursue when I first arrived at the company. Today, I better understand the importance of “friend-raising” when you want to get big things done in a corporation.

Q: If you had a young woman you cared deeply about entering the workforce today, what single piece of advice would you have for her?

A: My advice to my twenty-three-year-old daughter and to all young women entering the workforce is: “Know who you are and define your greater purpose in life.”

In any job, you will be more successful if people see you as having passions beyond simple success. During my journalism career, my passions were for “telling the truth” and “the importance of an informed electorate.” I would ask myself, “Why is it important for someone to know this information?” This fueled all my news reporting and made every story seem important to me and my audience.

Today, working for a global hotel company, my purpose beyond promoting Marriott's interests is to “share the rewards of travel, which have enriched my own life, with everyone I touch in the world.” I believe that travel makes the world a better place because it enriches people's personal experience, helps open their minds, creates lots of jobs in the world through the travel and tourism industry, and in some aspirational way, may be the pathway to peace. Having this purpose makes every task and project seem important to me and fulfills a larger purpose than just helping Marriott be a successful business.

Q: How did you make the leap from middle to senior management?

A: In my TV career, I moved from production assistant, to writer, to producer, to reporter, to news anchor by working hard, focusing on the details, and being grateful for the team that helped me do my job every day. Being collegial and generous goes a long way toward building your network, recruiting allies, and helping you succeed. In my career as a hotel executive, I encourage other women to take on (*cont.*)

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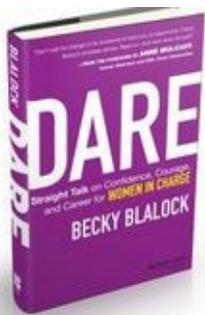
A: (cont.) projects, sometimes fighting above their weight class, so they can demonstrate their skills and capabilities.

Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

A: Preparation builds confidence, whether you're an athlete who practices harder or an actor who rehearses longer. The same is true in business. If you are prepared, you are more likely to succeed, and success breeds self-confidence. Also: don't be afraid to ask for help. When you get help or advice, you also recruit an investor. That person now has some skin in the game and will do all he or she can to ensure your success.

Q: What is your greatest fear today?

A: As I get older, I wonder how long I can keep up the current pace of my life. On the other hand, I know that the fast pace keeps me energized and inspired. I crave new experiences, and as long as my career provides that, I'll stay in the game. The question is, when do you stop or shift to a lower gear? Like my career switch from TV to hotels, I'm sure I'll feel it in my gut when the time is right.



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