



In conversation with Claudio Santoni

Claudio Santoni is Engineering Director of Aston Martin Performance Technologies, located in the state-of-the-art AMR Technology Campus in Silverstone. He joined the business in 2022 from McLaren Automotive, where he held several Director-level engineering roles.

I asked him about his current role and his experience of leading and developing high-performance teams.

Claudio, what do Aston Martin Performance Technologies do, and what is the relationship with the Aston Martin F1 team?

The mission of Aston Martin Performance Technologies (AMPT) is to transfer the culture of Formula One to non-Formula One commercial ventures, projects, and applications. It's about taking technology, materials, designs, and software that are happening in F1 and applying them to another context.

We are fortunate to be located within the AMR Technology Campus in Silverstone, just opposite the racetrack. There are three buildings connected by internal bridges that stretch for half a kilometre in total. It means you can go from the office of Lawrence Stroll, our Executive Chairman, at the very end of the building and walk all the way through the entire development – R&D, engineering process, carbon fibre, precision machining shop, 3d printing, the wind tunnel, the model making – every discipline right up to the point where the race car is built and shipped for the race. It's a unique and inspiring place to work because of the pace of change - the pace of trialling new things.

AMPT is a completely standalone organisation with P&L targets just like any other non-F1 business. Under FIA rules, we avoid any work for the F1 team to comply with the regulations of the budget cap. We are under very strict scrutiny from the FIA and they help us by auditing everything we do.

Engineering Directors often say that the more senior they become in their

careers, the less direct involvement they have with engineering. Instead, their role becomes more focused on leadership and commercial concerns. Is this something you recognise in your own career?

You are right to say that as you become more senior, you get more detached from grassroots engineering and from grassroots innovation. That is why I chose this role, because it offered me a perfect mix.

We have an incredibly flat organisational structure, which is typical of an F1 environment, and this is suited to creating new ideas and turning them into a commercial reality. It is all about fast-tracking the engineering and having access to an incredible network and ecosystem of businesses that gravitate around F1. It's not just automotive or racing, because there is a network of partners who work with the F1 team. In many ways, you're spoilt for choice.

The connection to F1 goes beyond access to technology. It's about tapping into the culture of innovation that is embedded in the organisation and in people's mindsets. Decision-making is scarily fast. When I started, I had re-set my brain to understand that when you say something in the boardroom, a decision will immediately be made, whereas in previous positions in larger organisations, it would have taken a lot longer to go through decision-making processes. Here it is quite the opposite, and that gives us quite a unique advantage in terms of fast-tracking ideas and delivering results.

How would you describe your leadership style?

Leadership remains a key skill set, but very much in the context of how we operate. Bringing in experts and creating the right teams is a key part of my role. Our business operates as a start-up because AMPT has only existed for a couple of years, however we are "turbocharged" by the F1 ecosystem around us that is enabling us to do what we do. I suppose the leadership aspect of my job is similar to leadership positions in more structured environments, but the difference is that you can achieve a lot more in the same period of time and for a given amount of effort.

I need to be able understand the whole process from A to Z, so I don't have the luxury of being completely removed from the inner workings of the engineering and the innovation. Quite the opposite. At the same time, it's about finding the right balance and creating and developing a team that is willing and able to operate independently so that we can move on and scale up – so we can look for the next challenge and the next one and the next one.

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We tend to employ engineers that are highly talented, and the last thing you want to do with people like that is to tell them how to do their job. So, there is a very fine art in pointing people in the right direction, creating the opportunities, and then allowing them to do their job and to express their talent, but with a strong focus on results.

Working for a startup requires a certain mindset. How do you develop your team to ensure they perform at their best?

F1, and motorsport in general, is a very specialised industry. The way the car is developed is highly optimised, almost to military discipline and surgical precision. Some engineers thrive on specialisation, but the downside of having a very narrow focus is that certain people find it more difficult to change during their career. They become the best in the world at doing a very narrow segment of the development process but, when you are in a startup, you need to be super agile, moving from one sector to another and from one application to another. It is essential to be more multifaceted as an engineer and to embrace, or at least be curious about, the different segments or steps of the development process. Not every super-specialised engineer is capable of doing that, whereas others have a more open and curious mindset.

I always try to develop people, but you have to give people what they want. If someone is comfortable and successful at doing a particular narrow part of the work, assuming that that part of the work is required, you should

listen to that and embrace it.

But when you are working for a startup like AMPT, you do need people who thrive on flexing. It's difficult to transfer technology and knowhow from F1 to other places if you always sit in the same very specialised position. You need to be able to look left and right and up and down and be able to step out of your specialism and try to embrace the bigger picture. In engineering, it's very easy to get dragged into the details of a particular issue, with lots of numbers and geeky details, but you also and often need to take a step back and ask yourself, 'What does it actually mean?'

As a leader, do you therefore see your role as creating the narrative of that bigger picture, so that people who are involved in a narrow piece of work understand how it fits into the overall narrative?

One hundred percent yes. I think it is essential for people to engage with the narrative. In our team, you never know where the next great idea is going to come from, so you must make sure that people are in a position to use 100% of their brain, not just that narrow portion of expertise that kind of works on autopilot. Whatever work we are doing, whether it is design or software of whatever, we always keep the project picture in mind, and there is always a relationship between each micro-step in the engineering and the overall project picture and related stakeholders. Everyone in the team should be informed about every aspect of the project and everyone should be able to tell the story of the project.

The downside of a flat organisational structure is that it can limit the pathways for people to progress their careers. Does this have an impact on talent retention in your organisation?

We're in the privileged position of being able to choose what we work on, and therefore what we work on has to be relevant both for the organisation and the individuals in the team. We don't just want work. That's easy. It's about dreaming big – choosing the right, meaningful challenges, applications, and relationships that can lead to much bigger things. When those bigger things come to fruition in the future, it will create new levels within the organisational structure and new opportunities for individuals to progress. You never know what might come out of a particular new idea or new project. It could be a whole new technology. It could be new factories being created to implement that technology. It could be a new partnership, or a new car.

Where do you source your talent?

Here in Silverstone, we are fortunate to be able to tap into a very high-quality pool of talented people who come from F1 or motorsport performance environments. They tend to be highly motivated and attracted to the challenges that this industry can offer them. AMPT recruitment is led by the same in house recruitment Team that feeds talent into our F1 Team.

In my previous role at McLaren Automotive, I was presented with a very interesting recruitment challenge when I set up the McLaren Composites



Technology Centre in Sheffield. It was a greenfield project and I started with an office of 40 desks and nobody working for me. The job was to design the new carbon fibre platform for the future McLaren supercar, which involved designing the new building, building it, bringing in all the technologies and delivering the new platform within three years in readiness to assemble the new car. To do that, I had to hire an entire team from scratch locally. I found one woman who had learned about composites as a manicurist fixing nail extensions. Her interest in the subject led her to getting a job with a sports car manufacturer in Yorkshire and I ended up hiring her, her husband and pretty much all her workshop colleagues. I hired someone from a company in Sheffield that was in the business of making prosthetic limbs with carbon fibre elements, someone else who made high-end carbon fibre Hi-Fi speakers and someone who was making hip replacement implants using 3D printing and precision machining. Some of these people turned out to be the best talent I ever recruited. I learnt the lesson to keep an open mind and be curious about people that come from diverse sectors and experiences.

Looking beyond AMPT, what are your general thoughts about the availability of skills in the UK automotive industry.

I've been in the UK for a long time,

and so if I look at my last 25 years of creating teams and hiring talent, sometimes it's been easier to bring in people from other European countries than to find the talent in the UK. In the UK, there also tends to be a quite a high turnover of staff compared to what I have seen in other European countries where I've worked, which means finding the right talent can be challenging.

My view of the talent landscape is currently skewed at Aston Martin Performance Technologies because everyone wants to work with us, but my experience of the last 25 years has been that finding the right talent is not easy. Design engineering is a critical but often underrated discipline and people like to move on quickly to management roles or else develop their careers as contractors instead of permanent members of the team. Automotive software teams are also very precious and the UK has not enough of that expertise, especially in the context of the exponential increase in software complexity of modern cars.

In more recent years, electric powertrain expertise has also been in high demand, though people are now learning and converting, so this area should be better populated in the future. It's going to be very interesting to see what happens with the ICE powertrain in terms of how fast the transition will actually happen. There are still a number of combustion powertrain projects being worked on, so you could get to the point where there are not enough skills to do combustion powertrains because everyone has converted to electric. In general, Internal Combustion or

Electric powertrain engineering skillset are also often insufficient in the UK and significant support is called in from Europe.



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