



LEADERS WHO
DRIVE AUTOMOTIVE:
Ian Plummer



Ian Plummer has progressed through a varied career across OEMs, national sales companies, and dealerships to become Commercial Director at Auto Trader.

He believes leadership is shaped by breadth of experience and by understanding both the rational and emotional sides of people.

Across his career, Ian has applied his expertise in marketing, sales operations, e-business, and retail management to lead teams, develop partnerships, and drive performance.

At Auto Trader, he focuses on building long-term value for customers and industry partners, leveraging his cross-industry experience to lead strategically across the UK automotive ecosystem perspective.

Ian Plummer, Commercial Director of Auto Trader, held leadership positions across the automotive ecosystem, from OEM to NSC to retailer, before moving to digital solutions. He tells Al Clarke, Chairman of the Ennis & Co Advisory Group, that building his breadth of experience has always been a key motivator.

AL CLARKE: You've had an extremely varied career which began with selling and marketing paint internationally before you were headhunted by Renault. Tell me about your pathway through automotive.

IAN PLUMMER: I did a degree in European Studies, Economics, Politics and French at Loughborough University and, through the careers 'milk round', was originally offered a job by Accenture, which involved working in the company's Paris office for two years and then transferring to London. This seemed perfect to me, but I later received a letter from Accenture announcing that, due to the ongoing economic recession, they were cutting two-thirds of the people they had offered jobs to, and I was one of them.

My reaction was to go to France anyway to look for a job, though this turned out to be very challenging, and I ended up doing various consulting-type jobs in six-month stints. I was working pretty much for free, scrambling around trying to scrape a living while accumulating increasing amounts of debt.

Through a contact I had made, I ended up securing a six-month internship with Lafarge, a huge publicly listed company that's almost the French equivalent of the likes of ICI, and after helping them to expand into new international markets, I was then offered a permanent position in the company's paint division, rising to the position of Marketing Manager. The whole experience taught me that you must truly believe in something and fight for it if you want to achieve your goal, and I really did have to fight. It also brought home the importance of pushing to make personal connections with people, because that was what opened the door to Lafarge.

After three years at Lafarge, I was headhunted by Renault for a Marketing Manager role at the company's headquarters in Paris, which turned out to be a hugely positive and

enjoyable experience. It led to me doing all kinds of different things – including international marketing, aftersales and e-business – that laid the foundations for my very varied career in automotive, where I've had the opportunity to work right across the ecosystem. It also brought lots of opportunities for overseas travel – mostly within Europe, where I was flying to different markets two or three times a week, and also further afield to countries like Brazil, Turkey and South Africa, wherever Renault had big expansion plans.

After working in a central role, I then switched to the national sales company and retailer world when I relocated to London in 2003 to become General Manager of Renault's flagship dealership in central London. The change of jobs meant I was moving from an international to a very local focus, but I did it to broaden my experience and do what was considered to be an essential "coal face" type learning experience for senior managers in OEMs like Renault that own some of their own retail sites. My main sponsor at the time was the No. 2 at Renault, who told me that everyone on the executive committee had gone through the same rite of passage at some point in their career and that he expected me to really enjoy it, much as he'd done. He was right.

From my starting point of running a local dealership, I progressed rapidly over the next three years to become Managing Director of Renault Retail Group, an AM10 group back then, with responsibility for 25 Renault and Nissan sites. I then moved to the national sales company, Renault UK, as Director of Commercial Operations. A year and a half later, I eventually left Renault and joined Volkswagen Group UK as Head of Retail Operations for its franchised network. A year later, I became Head of Sales Operations for Volkswagen UK, with responsibility for all passenger car sales, new and used, in the UK, as well as franchise management for the 190 Volkswagen dealers in the UK.

The latest chapter in my career started in 2017 when I left Volkswagen UK to join Auto Trader as its Manufacturing and Agency Director, with responsibility for developing strategic relationships with all the UK's automotive

manufacturers and their retailers. A year later, I was appointed to my current role of Commercial Director.

Looking back on my career, I guess breadth is the key point. Having started internationally, I experienced how to work strategically from a head office point of view, then went very local and then filled in the gaps in a national sales company environment before working nationally on the retailer side.

"I think that breadth of experience across the whole ecosystem of automotive is something that has stood me in good stead, giving me a great vantage point on the industry, and I would encourage anybody who aspires to leadership to think about doing something similar."

AC: Given that you have covered so many areas of the industry, did you have a pathway in your mind about where you wanted to get to, or did you just take the opportunities that materialised for you?

IP: I followed my opportunity originally when I was offered a job by Renault, but even at that early stage of my career, I knew I wanted to focus on breadth in terms of living and working in different countries. It didn't actually work out that way because I was repeatedly offered new roles that kept me anchored to France for a while, but I did get to travel to a huge number of places, engaging with people and learning the benefit of understanding people's culture to develop better connections with them.

Ultimately, my search for breadth in my career wasn't answered by living in different countries but by taking on different jobs in areas such as aftersales, which I think is a hugely interesting part of automotive, marketing, e-business and international development.

As I mentioned, the person who was the No. 2 at Renault recommended that I should experience retail, and I totally bought into that. I saw the value of doing something so different, and so I moved to the dealership in London and embarked on the next phase of my career. The steps I later took on my journey were not at all fully mapped out but were opportunistic in the sense that new things

came my way. I believe in making opportunities happen by always working on visibility – both in terms of making yourself visible through the quality of work that you do and having your head up to ensure you spot trends and have visibility of the opportunities around you as they're being shaped. When those two aspects of visibility are aligned, opportunities will come to you.

AC: Reflecting on your experience of holding executive responsibility in both OEM and retail businesses, what were the differences, if any, in your leadership style?

IP: Fundamentally, I think leadership principles should be pretty much the same across any business, so I don't see a difference between leading in the OEM world and the retailer world. You need to have clarity of vision, you need to be able to communicate that vision to get alignment with it across the business, you need your team to demonstrate the values of the business at all times, you need to deliver speed and quality of execution, and you need to be aware of what's happening externally in case you need to pivot. All of those leadership qualities don't change from one business to another.

What I do think is different, though, are the cultural habits of OEMs compared to retailers.

“A good leader should always be able to engage both the hearts and minds of their teams, their customers, their peers and their partners.”

By that I mean appealing to the mind through rational arguments and the heart by making people feel valued, empowered and motivated. In reality, I think leadership in the OEM world leans more towards rational thinking and can sometimes neglect appealing to people's hearts. At the risk of over-generalising, my observation is that people working for OEMs don't feel as empowered as they could and don't always have the same level of passion and loyalty as they would if their hearts had

been properly engaged. In retail, you see more of the tub-thumping, sports coach-style of leadership, which is more emotional and less rational. Does that mean they are right to be less rational? Of course not. They've got to have a solid business plan, and they need to deliver on all the things I've just mentioned in terms of quality and clarity of vision, team alignment, quality of execution and so on.

To extend the sports coach metaphor, the best modern-day coaches are not just motivators but use a lot of data analysis to get their tactics right and are very good at getting individuals aligned with what their particular role should be. In other words, they are not only able to harness the passion, commitment and motivation of the people in their team, but they also ensure the team members understand the tactics and the details to deliver the best results.

If the retailer and OEM worlds want to be smarter, they should stick with their strengths but also think about building on the things that don't come so naturally or instinctively to them. OEMs can be a bit dismissive about the more emotional side of retailers or their slightly less data-driven nature, but instead they'd do well to focus more on some of those EQ-type areas. Equally, retailers can be dismissive about a perceived lack of warmth and people focus on the OEM, but they'd obviously always do well to expand the power of data-driven decision-making alongside their huge streetwise experience. Greater mutual understanding and appreciation can unlock a lot of opportunity!

AC: Would you advise someone at the start of their career to try to experience both sides of the fence in an OEM and retailer, and is that still possible in today's world given the pace at which the industry is running?

IP: Yes, I would, and yes, it is. I've been asked to mentor a lot of people or to simply offer advice to numerous industry contacts, having made the kind of career change choices that I've made. I would always

encourage people to keep their head up and to look around them at how things are reshaping all the time. A lot of people do tend to become insular over time and end up focusing their career path within a single company. That can still be a great choice for some people, but it's also probably unwise and unrealistic to think that every step should be vertical. Going sideways, learning something different within the same business if not outside it, adds breadth and understanding and equips you for doing bigger, broader jobs.

I keep coming back to my point about the importance of breadth. There are so many different areas of the automotive industry that are fascinating and offer rich opportunities, and people need to think about their careers with an open mind. The best way to do that is just to lift your head. Speak to people, connect, network, engage, and ask questions. One contact leads to another, new contacts provoke new thoughts and ideas, and then over time you develop a better and broader understanding of the different parts of the ecosystem. That helps both with succeeding in your current role by better understanding your context and all your various stakeholders, as well as with giving you that vital visibility that I've already touched on and which can be so valuable for your next role, wherever it may be.

Not only should people look to gain as much breadth as they can, but they should also do it as early as they can because it's much easier to step sideways and add new things into your mix when you're less senior and less set on a certain pathway or job type. The more senior you become, the less likely it is that companies will want to recruit you for a different type of job role, whether it's an internal or external hire. At higher levels, they're more likely to be interested in buying the experience you have now and can immediately put to use.

AC: For the last eight years, you've worked as a supplier to both retailers and OEMs at Auto Trader. Is there any difference from a leadership perspective compared to being the

OEM or the retail customer?

IP: We think of ourselves at Auto Trader as a tech company, which distinguishes how we operate. We don't build or directly sell a physical product such as a car, but we build a digital solution or a data solution for a particular problem or opportunity, so it's very different from my previous roles in terms of the way I work with partners in the industry. We work with just about all the different stakeholder categories in the business, and we work with partners on a very consultative, long-term basis.

In our world, when we see a gap in the way that a reseller or a brand or a finance partner is performing in a certain area, we use our data and our consultative experience to try to explain the gap that we see, the value that can be delivered by optimising that opportunity and how we can help them. The only frustration with the job can come when either they don't buy into the solution, or perhaps they don't deliver it well. On the other hand, the huge benefit of the job, and the thing I enjoy most, is the enormous variety of situations we work in. We work with 14,000 retailers, all the OEMs (both heritage brands and new entrants), the finance companies, the leasing companies, the charge point companies, the insurance companies and the Government. So, there's huge breadth as well as variety, and my job is extremely enriching because of it.

As a tech company, we really need to be agile in terms of prioritising our focus. Some priorities will stay in place for a period of years while we're developing a particular project area of the business, but we never have rigid structures or siloed departments. And we don't really have much BAU either. We've got pools of people who are pulled into different projects and priorities for varying lengths of time. In that environment, everybody – including all managers – needs to be flexible, and nobody is fighting for things like the headcount for a given area in the way a lot of traditional, larger businesses work.

We have to stay very close to our customers to make what we do valuable and relevant to

them. And the consultative, partnership-based approach we take to our work always has to be based on long-term value-add for both parties. If our solutions work for car buyers and for our industry partners, they'll work for us too! So, a key part of my job is building deeper and broader relations with our customers to better understand them and then bring that understanding back into the company to serve our customers' needs. That's no different from any other business, but the focus is on building value over the long term, not pushing a product at them they don't need and could quickly realise doesn't deliver the desired results. We're a PLC listed on the FTSE100 and are, of course, expected to deliver value for our shareholders. But we're also fortunate to be recognised and entrusted to follow a pathway that builds long-term value for our customers instead of being pressured by investors to deliver short-term results at the expense of doing the right things for the right reasons and in the right ways. Put a different way, our leadership should always reflect our company purpose, which we define as "Driving change together. Responsibly."

"Living up to that ambition and to our values is something we truly believe in and work very, very hard on."

AC: As you say, Autotrader is a tech business, which by definition is rapidly evolving. What advice would you give to people in other sectors, such as OEM or retail, who are having to change rapidly?

IP: You need to start with a solid understanding of the landscape you're working in and the shifting forces that may be changing that landscape so that you can better appreciate what your customers value and whether you as a business are delivering that value, as well as where there are gaps to optimise and new areas of opportunity to develop. I honestly don't think this happens enough in traditional businesses, where too many people are invariably heads down in deployment mode, often doing things in pretty much the same ways they have done for years without enough challenge to the BAU logic or "not invented here" mindset.

When you think of OEMs, they are very large businesses with international structures, and the NSCs end up deploying a strategy that is increasingly just given to them but which, in some cases, may mean they are not doing things in the right way for the right reasons. For example, OEMs will focus on driving leads, and they'll do marketing based on driving leads, such as test drive requests or website activity. But brand websites are small and declining, so driving people to a website where the average dwell time is about a minute and a half is not the answer. Getting people to visit the website has a part to play, of course, but it shouldn't be the only thing you're doing. Equally, driving consumers to submit leads when they actually want more transparency, flexibility and control over their buying journeys – just like we all do in our own shopping experiences outside of cars – is clearly not the most consumer-centric way of working.

The trouble is that NSCs are using the wrong methods and focusing on the wrong KPIs because their head offices tend to have outdated views of things based on delivering standardised metrics that allow them to compare the performance of one country with another. The idea behind driving lead volumes (over quality) or website activity (over a joined-up hybrid digital-physical experience) is intended to reinforce things like the marketing strengths of the brand and the sales funnel. But surely the smartest thing to focus on should be the end result of marketing that delivers the best return on investment in terms of efficient sales conversion with strong sales volume and value? Instead, with "siloed" thinking, KPIs are sometimes being "ticked" at the expense of that end result.

Another key point I would make about being flexible and responding to the market is not being parochial. In a business structure like ours, overly rigid processes and structures clearly wouldn't work. We have to move fast, and we need to align on common goals for our wider business, each of us delivering on our own part of a shared journey, but all focused on the bigger picture goals. That also means that none of us can be fighting to defend a given "silo" or defend any form of vanity project. Instead, we do need broad alignment around clear end goals, so that means open communication is very

important. The type of method that works for us is daily stand-ups within teams at the start of each day to talk about what happened yesterday, what is happening that day and what to prioritise. In many ways that's not so different from how a successful work unit within an OEM car plant will do daily quality reviews on its own part of the wider production chain, but it's just all based on a far faster moving set of tasks, goals and challenges.

Also, while as a PLC we obviously have all the proper processes and governance in place to manage our activities, when we're business planning and thinking about new commercial opportunities, we don't do what a traditional OEM would do in terms of creating a massively complex spreadsheet with lots of data and a five-year horizon. That would take months to build out. I get that if you're building a factory or working out the ROI for a new engine, then you would need that level of detail. But you don't need it in our world because if you focus too much on detail, you end up getting mired in it. Instead, we try to focus on the size of a market opportunity, whether we think we have a credible right to play in that area, whether we have or can develop the right tools to succeed and whether we can realistically create strong value for ourselves and our partners by working on that opportunity. We don't have formal milestones for years one, two, three or four. Obviously, we track things, but we don't map things out in extreme detail because by the time you start doing that, the whole context may have changed anyway. We know the ultimate goal and direction of travel; we set the first start point ... and we start!

AC: Reflecting on your career, who have been your most significant mentors or sources of inspiration? What was it about them that made them memorable?

IP: The first person I would name is Jean-Frédéric Nothomb, who was my boss at Lafarge and who is now a close friend and godfather of one of my children. He was an extremely inspirational people-focused leader who was brilliant at building team trust, camaraderie and loyalty. He inspired people to go above and beyond in some difficult contexts, and I took away a lot of

leadership and communication learnings from working with him.

The second would be Jacques Chauvet, who was a Senior Vice President at Renault for whom I worked for a period as his Executive Assistant and then e-Business Director. The first of that role was one of those typical stepping-stone jobs that you do in a huge company to learn how the big bosses work, and I found him to be an amazing person with an absolute passion for understanding the broader context of the world, the economy, the car industry and people's cultures. He taught me that if you understand the places you're working in and the people you're working with, it makes a massive difference to the way you deal with people. Jacques was brilliant at that, and he also had an amazing leadership combination of both strategic vision and detailed execution, a rare talent indeed.

Thirdly, I would say working with Nathan Coe and Catherine Faiers, the CEO and COO of Auto Trader, really is a huge pleasure. They are both massively inspirational. But what I take most from them is that while they're undoubtedly some of the smartest people I've ever worked with – they're quite brilliant thinkers – they're also very down-to-earth and authentic, with EQs as high as their IQs! As simplistic as it may sound, you always understand any judgement calls they may make when you know that they're always focused on doing the right things for the right reasons.

"They achieve that too-rare combination which I described earlier of joining up the rational and emotional sides of both decision-making as well as communicating and delivering."

And it's a powerful mix!