



LEADERS WHO  
DRIVE AUTOMOTIVE:  
James Brearley



James Brearley, Managing Director at Lookers, shows that a successful leadership career is built on curiosity, resilience, and adaptability.

He believes leadership is about understanding both your business and your people — listening, learning, and empowering teams. Early experiences running multi-franchise operations taught him the value of specialising teams, prioritising, and making tough decisions.

Brearley credits continuous learning, self-awareness, and resilience — lessons shaped by mentors, influential books, and his father's example — as central to his success. In a rapidly evolving automotive industry, he emphasises staying calm, curious, and decisive while developing the next generation of leaders.

From washing cars at a Ford dealership to running **Stratstone, Inchcape UK and Lookers**, James Brearley has enjoyed a spectacular career in the automotive industry, including 24 years at **Pendragon**. He discusses his career and his thoughts about leadership with **Lynda Ennis**, Co-founder and CEO of Ennis & Co Group.

**Lynda Ennis: Can you walk us through your career journey in the automotive industry, and share the key moments, challenges, and lessons that shaped your path and the way you approach leadership today?**

James Brearley: I had no vision when I first came into the industry. I just drifted into it. I had just left the army with literally no idea what to do next, and I got a job with a Ford dealership in the West Midlands cleaning cars and delivering vehicles around the country. I quickly realised that automotive was quite a lucrative industry for a young man, and when a vacancy for a sales executive came up about eight months later, I put my hand up and was given the job. I suppose I was a quick learner because I soon realised that I was reasonably good at selling cars.

*"I found it was a big advantage to be genuinely interested in people, asking them about what they did, what they wanted and what was important to them."*

After a couple of years in the Ford business selling cars successfully, I got a phone call out of the blue offering me a job at a Rover business and decided to make the move. Again, I was reasonably successful, even if the quality of the cars left a lot to be desired! and the job of prospecting for BL Rover products was hard. I was approached again by the co-owner of a company called Bill Boddice Garages who has remained a lifelong friend. I agreed to join as a sales executive and found myself part of a young team that really gelled and did great things. The owners were highly entrepreneurial, having built the business from nothing, and it was a great education.

I then had a massive stroke of good fortune because the owners decided to sell the business to Mann Egerton, which was part of Inchcape.

*"The best thing that ever happened to me in my career is that I stayed in the business while everybody else left."*

I was still very young at the time, but when a vacancy came up for Branch Manager of a Saab business in Wolverhampton, I managed to convince Inchcape's Regional Director that I was the best person for the job. I told him I knew how to sell and market cars, and I was technical and knew how the service department ran. I had spent a lot of time talking to people in the business about how each part of it operated because I already had a plan in my head to get a bigger job and grow my career. So, I took control of my first dealership at 22 years of age.

Two years later, the same Regional Director offered me the opportunity to move to Jaguar in Worcester as Manager, which proved a phenomenal career move for me. It was a small but prestigious business located in a bit of a backwater. XJ40 orders had just dried up as the country was entering a recession in 1990, which is probably why I was sent there. It was a huge amount of hard work, but it was there that I really learnt how to sell used cars.

In the two years I was in the business, we did well and made a bit of a name for ourselves, but when I was told that Mann Egerton was going to be cutting 100 businesses down to 55 after merging with Wadham Kenning, I knew the writing was on the wall for a backwater site like Worcester. Fortunately, I'd had an approach from a small dealership group that had recently floated. That company was called Pendragon, and it was the best career move I ever made. I ended up staying with the business for the next 24 years.

With the economy in the depths of recession and lots of businesses going bust, Pendragon was hugely acquisitive at the time, and my job changed almost weekly I originally joined to run Stourbridge and Wolverhampton Jaguar before I was asked to run a business they had just acquired in Wilmslow, Cheshire – Ron Stratton co. rescued it from going in to

receivership. Over a few years it became a massive multi-franchise operation at the premium end with brands that included Porsche, Ferrari, Aston Martin, Bentley, Rolls-Royce and Lotus, as well as a restoration business. I took over in 1992, and in the first year, we lost a million pounds. Within 18 months, the business was making a million pounds in profit. It was the best learning curve I ever experienced because I was given complete free rein to be as entrepreneurial as I wanted. For example, we were buying lots of Mercedes E-Class coupes with cloth trim, reupholstering them in leather and selling them for a £2,000 premium. We started importing leather from India to re-trim cars and car alarms from Italy. I could do anything I wanted.

This proved a real launchpad in my career, and as Pendragon grew through multiple acquisitions, I was able to grow with it in various roles within the group.

*"One of the things I'll always be grateful for – and this is a message to all aspiring leaders – was the opportunity to understand from great leaders throughout the businesses we acquired we bought some really good businesses with great people, and I learnt a lot from listening to them, stealing and developing their great ideas."*

After 24 years, I finally felt I had run out of road at Pendragon, the group had run out of money to grow and was therefore looking to consolidate rather than acquire other businesses. My plan was to go into business myself as a JLR retailer, and so I left Pendragon in 2015 to do my own thing. I borrowed heavily and spent a lot of money on property, which thankfully turned out OK in the end when I sold it, but I became embroiled in a costly legal battle with Pendragon over anti-competition rights that made it very tough going. Pendragon never actually took their case to court and they had to settle for £100 but it cost me heavily in legal costs which was their plan. Through a mutual contact, I was introduced to the Group CEO of r, Stefan Bomhard, who was looking for someone to help them buy the JLR distributor business in Thailand from RMA. I flew to Thailand and we got the deal done in about four weeks.

Following that, I was then asked by Inchcape to work on various projects in Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia. Ultimately, I was asked by Stefan to take over as CEO of Inchcape UK, and so I returned to full-time employment.

The brief was simple: to reshape the business, make it profitable, get some cash out of it and make it saleable. That's what I did for the next six years with the help of some phenomenally talented people who I had known for a long time and who I brought into the business. In about three and a half years, we generated £230 million worth of cash, and we turned the business around from one that was making literally nothing to a business making £60 million a year. We took a lot of cost out, which was very difficult, but we reshaped it, and the rest is history.

I decided to leave the business in 2022 after being offered a contract to join another major business that was looking to grow, but after numerous discussions the plan was unclear, and I decided to retire. After bumping into Peter Vardy, I ended up going to Scotland to help him with some challenges he had in his business, which proved to be very enjoyable. It was then that I met Kuldeep Billan, the founder and Chairman of Global Auto Holdings, who had acquired Lookers at the end of 2023, and I was offered the role of Managing Director. I joined the business in July 2024.

**LE: If you could pick out a key moment that shaped your career, what would it be?**

JB: I'd probably say my time running the multi-franchise business in Wilmslow because it's where I really started to learn a lot about people. One of the things I found was that it was difficult to get people to focus on three or four different things and that if I got them to specialise in one product, it was not only easier but also more successful. So, we split the teams up within the businesses, with people concentrating on selling Porsches, people selling Ferraris, people doing used cars and so on. It

was challenging to manage because of extended weekend working, but we became successful and made a huge amount of money. To this day, that business still makes a lot of money and has been continuously profitable since 1993!

*"For me, it was a case of right place, right time, right era, right attitude."*

**LE: Were you conscious of any gaps in your skillset as you progressed through your career? If so, how did you address them?**

JB: I always thought I was reasonably good at my job, and the proof was in the numbers, but every time Pendragon bought a new business and integrated it into the group, I realised that I had a lot to learn would discover ideas that were really clever that could be applied to the whole business. This proved to be a great learning opportunity for me. For example, I saw the way Lex reviewed accounts and carried out their budgeting process and realised how much better it was than the way we did it. I saw how the Vardy business was so much better at used cars. There were many, many, eureka moments like that. You wouldn't normally get that exposure to so many companies without moving jobs a dozen times, yet I could listen, learn and build my knowledge and skill set in one place.

Not only did I discover new and better ways of doing things, but it taught me things about myself – that I didn't have the answer to everything.

**"My advice to young people progressing through the industry is to be open-minded and honest about the gaps in your skill set."**

To this day, I come across far too many people who think they know everything, don't ask questions and just give answers, despite being completely and obviously out of their depth.

**LE: It's a very challenging time for leadership in the automotive industry now. What advice would you give to people aspiring to reach the levels of seniority that you attained?**

JB: There are two books that have been transformational for me. One is called The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, and the other is Flight of the Buffalo. I couldn't give any better advice than to read those two books or at the very least put some effort into reading things that will make you a better leader.

One of the habits that has been particularly influential is

**"Begin with the end in mind. If you're going to do something, you need to know what it is you actually want to achieve, so plan it from the end and work backwards."**

Another habit, 'Put first things first', has also been a transformational life lesson for me because, like a lot of people, I always used to put off doing difficult things. People think I'm obsessive, but I keep a notebook and write things down all the time. Then, every weekend, I go through it and highlight what's important and needs to be prioritised and strike out what's not important or urgent. What's important may involve things I don't want to do because it involves difficult conversations or because a problem is particularly tricky, but I force myself to do them. Keeping a notebook and obsessively prioritising is something I learnt on a time management course in the 1990s, and I've found it helpful throughout my life. The lesson there is to always be open to learning new things (sharpen the saw is a habit), and when you've learnt something that's useful, stick with it.

The other book, Flight of the Buffalo, is based on a central metaphor for leadership. If you're the lead buffalo and you start a stampede and end up running over the edge of a cliff, we all know what's going to happen to the rest of the herd they will follow-do not be a head buffalo. Conversely, we've all seen how

geese fly in 'V' formation, and the goose at the head of the V will drop back after a certain time and be replaced at the front by another goose.

**"The lesson is basically: be like a goose, not a head buffalo-learn to let others lead."**

Based on that analogy, the book is full of testimony from businesspeople about their experiences – what went well and what went wrong.

The book resonates with me because I recognise that I was a head buffalo for probably about half my career. I felt I knew more than anybody else, having done most things across the business, and I knew the best way to fix things. But, as my job got bigger and bigger, suddenly I couldn't do everything. I couldn't direct people the way I used to because it was impossible. What I found was that people were still coming to me with their problems because I was the chief fixer and the world is full of problem finders, and I realised that if I carried on like that, I was essentially teaching people to look for problems without solving them for themselves.

I learnt from the book a simple technique.

**"If people come to me and say they've got a problem, I'll ask them to explain the problem, and then I'll ask them what they plan to do about it before I ever offer my opinion, most likely they know better than me in any case."**

The third part of the conversation will be, 'So what do you need from me?'

**LE: Automotive retail is moving so fast, with new technology, new business models, new entrants and new customer behaviours. How do you develop leaders of the future with the skills to manage in this complex, turbulent environment?**

JB: The first thing is to keep calm and carry on. As long as I've been in the industry, it's always been changing and reinventing itself. For example, when I first started as a Ford sales executive, there were 364 Ford dealers, and the margins were double what they are today—margins and networks have shrunk. I was also three years into my career when I came across my first diesel car, it took 20 years to fully adopt Diesel and two to drop it! The industry has transformed itself countless times, and what's happening now is just a continuation of that. When I say, 'keep calm', I mean break it down.

*"If you try to deal with absolutely everything yourself, you've got no chance. My strong advice to people is not to get overwhelmed."*

I go back to the 'seven habits and my little notebook: 'Put first things first.' What's the most important thing we have to wrestle with today?

**LE: Reflecting on your leadership journey, what's one piece of advice you wish you had received earlier in your career—something that could have influenced how you approached your work, your team, or the people around you?**

JB: I remember a very senior person in the industry telling me about 10 years ago that he was not going to have anything to do with negative people anymore. I reflected on that after our conversation and realised that I had spent far too much time in my career working with people I didn't like or didn't work well with, so it would have been good to have had that piece of advice earlier.

*"My advice to anybody today is that if you work closely with people who don't bring out the best in you, then it's time to move and do something different, you will find it liberating."*

**LE: Who has inspired you the most in your career and life, and what lessons did you learn from them that shaped the way you lead?**

Business-wise, I would pick Sir Nigel Rudd, the former Chairman of Pendragon. He was a person who was running multiple businesses, and yet I remember being in a meeting with him when he started asking detailed questions about the performance of service operation in our Grays Inn Road service centre one of 300 operations. He just wanted to make sure I knew the answers. He was a very clever man and was a big influence on me in a host of different ways.

Outside business, I was inspired very early on in my career by my father-in-law. He was a self-made man who had worked for himself in financial services and done very well. He had a Porsche 911, a Rolls-Royce, an aeroplane and a boat in Majorca, and he inhabited a world that I had absolutely no idea about. I was still very young, and seeing his incredible lifestyle was a big motivation for me.

*"It made me realise that if I wanted material success, I wasn't going to get it unless I got a bigger job and then a bigger job. It made me determined to push as hard as I could."*

In terms of who I am, there's no question that the biggest influence in my life was my father. Growing up in the '60s and '70s, it was a time when interest rates were sky-high, businesses were going bust every day and even the lights were going off because of the miners' strike. My father served in Airborne forces and the Special Air service and after he left the Army he became an engineer and consequently he was made redundant three times in the space of four years, and yet he was never out of work for a single day because he was prepared to do anything.

*"As a child, his resilience was quite incredible to me. He just kept going, whatever happened."*

I remember one time he was talking about his basic Airborne training in the army, and he described how the NCOs would select

two people with mismatched heights and weights and tell them to get into a ring for three minutes to knock the hell out of each other with no gloves—milling it is called. He said the point of it was that if you were put against someone much bigger than yourself, you'd be knocked down to the canvas it did not matter how tough you were. What they were looking for were people who would get back up quickly. If you got knocked down 20 times and got back to your feet every time, that's what they were looking for. It's a story that's always stayed with me.

*"As my dad said, whatever happens in life, you're going to get kicked, and you're going to go down. What you've got to do is get back up quicker than anybody else."*

