



LEADERS WHO  
DRIVE AUTOMOTIVE:  
Lesley Slater



Lesley Slater, Chief Commercial Officer at Athlon UK, proves you don't have to move companies to build a successful leadership career. After more than 25 years at LeasePlan, she has developed a leadership style defined by authenticity, responsibility, and continuous learning.

She believes loyalty is about contribution and growth, not tenure, and that effective leaders take the right decisions — not just the easy ones. As technology and data reshape the industry, Slater emphasises staying curious, staying close to your people, and being bold enough to seize new opportunities with confidence.

For her, leadership success comes from understanding your business and your people — taking time to listen, to learn, and to lead with purpose. It's this combination of experience, humility, and courage that continues to define her career.

**Lesley Slater, Chief Commercial Officer of Athlon UK**, is proof you don't have to hop from company to company to become a senior leader. She discusses loyalty and longevity with Al Clarke, Chairman of the Ennis & Co Advisory Group – and reflects on her initial board invitation with the benefit of experience, highlighting a key lesson for aspiring leaders.

**AL CLARKE: Tell me about the defining moments in your career path and the opportunities that developed you as a leader, starting with how you joined the automotive industry and your initial ambitions.**

**LESLEY SLATER:** I didn't grow up wanting to join the automotive industry. It was something that developed after I got my first job at Capital Bank, a former subsidiary of the Bank of Scotland that was headquartered in my hometown of Chester. I joined the asset finance department at a junior level and found that I absolutely loved working in the corporate finance market. For some reason, the automotive side was the area that interested me most – particularly contract hire. You weren't just funding an asset, and that was the end of it. You were having to think about what a vehicle might be worth at the end of the contract, what you did with it at the end and managing it during the whole contract.

*"I became a team leader relatively quickly, managing quite sizeable teams, and learnt an early lesson that once you're a manager, it's no longer just about what you do personally that drives success but how you lead the team, communicate the vision or strategy and get the best out of everyone."*

I think the fact I was able to recognise this at quite an early stage really helped me to be successful as a leader. It wasn't that my skills and experience weren't important at all but that it was my leadership skills that were going to really drive things forward, and this realisation has informed the way I operate throughout my career.

There's sometimes a temptation in leaders, and perhaps all of us at times, to always want to be the best, but you can't be the best at everything all the time.

*"A successful leader works out what the team needs to do, finds brilliant people for every role and invests in supporting the team and facilitating their brilliance so they can be the best they can."*

**AC: Was there a lightbulb moment when you decided that you wanted to progress to a senior leadership role, or did you just go with the flow in terms of taking the opportunities that came to you?**

LS: I never had a firm plan about where I wanted to be within a certain timeframe. It may sound a bit worthy, but I always just wanted to do my absolute best in any role I had. If that led to something bigger, then fantastic. I wasn't driven by ambition. I was more interested in progression as an outcome of the work I was doing. That's not to say that I haven't enjoyed my successes as my career has developed because the more senior you become, the more influence you have.

**AC: As you progressed in your career, what were the inflection points that allowed you to take the next step?**

LS: Most of the time, I anticipated the opportunities coming, not waiting until they were right in front of me. I looked at how the business was developing and where that might lead to, and then I looked at how my own skills were developing and where I might need to grow. I don't see a career as a linear path where you're constantly going upwards and upwards. There will certainly be times when you plateau during your career, and that's one thing I see quite differently from many others. With some younger contacts, there's very little appetite for plateauing and a greater impatience to move on to the next thing. When I talk about career progression and my own story, it's not just the start and current point but the period of around 10 years in a very similar role. It was a significant role, and there was a huge amount of development and growth within it, but the actual job title and the grade didn't change for almost 10 years.

*"There will be other times in your career when you're on a fast trajectory and*

*things move more quickly, but my view has always been that as long as I'm developing, learning and feeling challenged, I'm not concerned about the clock ticking and how long it's going to take me to reach the next level."*

From the conversations I've had with people over the years, a lot of people don't think like that. For some, the clock is ticking almost from the day they start a new role, and they're already wanting to know what the trajectory is to the next role. I admire this ambition, but it's not always like that in your career, and people sometimes need to understand that they shouldn't feel they're failing if they haven't yet moved on to the next role. It's a question of balance.

**AC: You spent more than 25 years at LeasePlan if you include your 12 years working in its public sector division, Automotive Leasing, and you progressed through the organisation to board director level before moving to Athlon UK five years ago as Chief Commercial Officer. Do you think it would be possible to follow the same pathway now, starting today, or have things changed?**

LS: I think it's possible. Obviously, there are different skills that you need now with all the developments in technology and data, and as a leader, you need to keep up to speed with that.

*"I do think it's possible to grow within a single organisation if you're prepared to work hard for it, though also I think it's easier to move organisations now."*

In the past, the accepted wisdom was that you had to stay in a role for at least three years; otherwise, people would think you're jumping around too much. That's not such a big thing anymore, and people do change jobs more frequently. Hybrid working has also made it easier for people to take opportunities that aren't within their vicinity, and the location of a role is no longer so important. In the early to middle part of my career when I had school-age children, location was a key factor. That's different now.

**AC: Reflecting on your experience in the fleet and mobility sector, how would you describe the key leadership traits and skills needed to be successful in a commercial role?**

LS: It goes without saying that you've got to understand the industry and the business. You've got to know what the revenue levers of your business are, and so you need to understand how everything works. I don't think you can be successful in a leadership role without that. It doesn't mean you have to be a finance expert or an IT expert, but you do have to understand your business. If you have that understanding, and if you focus on customers and people and take the time to put yourselves in their shoes before you make decisions and look at things from their perspective, then I think you're well on your way. It's not always easy to do that, and it means it can sometimes take longer to make the decision.

*"My view, which I try to convey to everyone in my team, is that you can take the easy decision or the right decision. Sometimes they're the same, but often, they're different."*

The right decision can take longer or be harder to communicate, and it may not please all the people all the time, but I do challenge myself on that quite a lot. I'll ask myself, 'Is this the easy decision?' It's important to take the time and come to the right decision. In the long term, that's normally the best approach.

**AC: In terms of the decision-making process that you describe, how has that developed and evolved in you as you've advanced your leadership experience? Did you feel more compelled to make snap decisions when you were younger?**

LS: There were a few times earlier in my career where I encountered leaders who just wanted to make a quick decision, and I went along with that. But I think I've got more confidence now in making the right decision,

even when the person you're working with is looking for a quick decision. It's not about indecision but being prepared to explain why I'm going to take a moment, or an hour, or a day, to look at things and the implications. If a quick decision can be made, then of course we should make it and move on. But in most cases, it's much better to take some time to think about the consequences of the decision.

**AC: You've invested your career in essentially two organisations: LeasePlan and Athlon. Was it a conscious decision to do that, or did it just evolve in that way?**

LS: It wasn't a conscious decision. At LeasePlan, for example, where I spent the largest part of my career, I didn't decide to stay for a particular length of time. I always felt challenged by the organisation – by the roles I had and the development I experienced. There was also growth and development in terms of leading bigger teams, holding greater responsibility or just being challenged. We also went through several ownership structures, which made things more exciting. Working for shareholders is very different from working for private equity, and if you get all those experiences within one organisation, it makes it a very interesting, if challenging, environment.

I don't think there is a right way or wrong way to progress your career. You just have to trust your own judgement and stay or move for the right reasons for you. For example, I've never been the sort of person who would move on purely for financial reward. Culture, business goals and people are just as important, if not more important, than a specific role or the rewards that go with it, and you know when it's the right time to make a change.

**AC: You mentioned earlier that people now want to take the next step and move up more quickly. What advice would you give to somebody wondering whether**

**to stay for a few more years or jump into something new?**

LS: I have those kinds of conversations regularly. On the basis that I respect the people in my team and will want them to stay, I'll always start off by saying that from a purely business, and indeed a selfish, perspective, I would prefer them to stay. Once I've put that out there, my advice to them is to think about the opportunity they've been offered versus the opportunities they already have. If they want to learn more about the opportunities available to them if they stay, I'm more than happy to discuss. But the bottom line is that they are the only person responsible for their career, so it's up to them to make the right decision for themselves. The main advice I give is to make sure it's an informed decision and that they have taken everything into account. I won't try to persuade somebody to stay in a role just because it's right for me, because I don't think that's fair.

**AC: Returning to the fact that you've worked primarily for these two organisations and remained in them for a significant amount of time, there is a perception that, like car insurance renewal, if you're loyal, then you can end up being penalised for being loyal. Has your own loyalty been rewarded in the companies you've worked for?**

LS: There's a risk that loyalty can get confused with long service, and I think they're different. Some people expect to be rewarded simply for being in a job for a long time, but I don't think that's the same thing as loyalty. For me, loyalty is a two-way street, and, as an employee, loyalty should be about evidencing that you are continuing to contribute and continuing to develop and learn because nothing stands still. You should certainly be respected for what you bring to the organisation, but I don't think you should expect different treatment within that organisation just because you've been in a role for longer than anyone else.

Loyalty can be a positive thing when you are an employee if you are continuing to contribute and develop, and the company recognises that contribution and provides you with opportunities.

**AC: Fleet and mobility is a fast-paced and rapidly changing environment, working with multiple partners, suppliers and customers. As a leader, what is your advice about leading an organisation that needs to be at the front of the curve, not just in terms of technology but also in terms of innovative thinking and the energy to be at the front of the pack?**

LS: This is something that has become more important for leaders, particularly in this industry. There is constant innovation, whether it's in the vehicles, the products or services, so you've got to be continuously learning, and you have to be open to what's going on.

*"Data is one area that is crucial to everything we do now, though we must avoid the temptation to look for data that just confirms our opinions. We need to look also for the information and data that challenges our opinion because that's when we'll learn."*

We must keep listening to customers. By that, I don't mean customers telling you what they want because they don't always know what they want. Instead, we need to spend time talking to customers about what their challenges are and then try to work out how to help solve them.

We also need to listen to what people in the industry are saying and engage with it ourselves. There are so many passionate, knowledgeable people in different parts of the supply chain, and you need to listen to those voices to keep up to date with developing technologies and systems. Equally, we need to have our own voice within the industry and ensure we are sharing compliant information but recognise it can be hard work on top of the core job.

**AC: You mentioned keeping up with technology and the importance of data. To what extent are you involved with AI?**

LS: Like most companies, we've been exploring how AI can support us and encouraging teams to see how they can use it. For some people we've included an objective to find ways of using AI to help them do their job better. There are still a lot of activities that we do that are relatively routine, and so if AI can help to automate those processes, then we want to embrace that.

It's important to think about ownership and responsibility, and I think it's important to evidence it when they have used AI and not try to hide it. It follows that if something isn't quite right as a result of using AI, don't blame AI.

*"The people using AI are the ones who are responsible for what it delivers, not AI itself, and we must own our output."*

**AC: That's a commendably direct and even moralistic approach in terms of ensuring people own their work. Does this stem from something from your own experience? Have you received credit yourself for standing up and owning a particular problem?**

LS: I think it's just part of my nature. I've always felt a huge sense of responsibility for the role that I'm in and the team I'm responsible for. I don't want to make it sound overly negative, but that responsibility has weighed heavily throughout my career. Of course, I love success, and I've built a reputation as someone who champions success and wants to compete, as you would expect in a commercial person.

*"But I will also own the failures and the problems because that's just the way I am."*

**AC: During your career, huge things have changed in technology and in working practices, and the next generation of leaders coming through have different expectations in terms of how they want to work and how quickly they want to progress.**

**What changes have you had to make to your style or approach to meet those expectations?**

LS: This is definitely a relevant topic for boards today, and we are no different. We've got to be prepared to listen to the team and adapt to what people want and expect when it comes to things like flexibility and hybrid working. But we also shouldn't shy away from explaining the challenges around business need and customer need. It can't just be a one-way street.

There are some parts of my leadership style that play quite nicely in this area. Responsibility and authenticity have always been very important to me, and I think that's even more important when interacting with younger generations. The days when senior management were aloof and distant, when they parked in a different car park or ate in a differing dining area, are long gone.

*"Personal offices are becoming rarer, and as a leader, you're therefore much closer to the team, and they see you as a human being, not just a leader."*

I think the team like that, and people who are coming through the organisation as future leaders like that as well.

**AC: Who have been your most significant mentors or inspirations? What was it about them which made them memorable?**

LS: The people who have influenced me the most have been the ones who have been authentic, passionate about what they do and who showed strong emotional intelligence and mutual trust. I've also learnt a huge amount from the people who've shown me how I didn't want to be. Not everyone exhibits positive traits all the time, and when I've found myself in those situations, I've tried to find a way to work with it while being reinforced in my belief that that's not how I want to behave. If ever I've found myself being drawn into a certain negative behaviour, I'll play back the memory of those past experiences and try to find a different way forward.

**AC: Resilience has clearly played a part in your career, particularly having worked at organisations for extended periods. How did you develop that resilience?**

LS: Through necessity. The best times in my career are when I'm part of a high-performing team. In that situation, you experience some great highs, and you celebrate them, but you really learn and bond as a team and become even more high-performing by experiencing the lows as well. You don't enjoy the lows very much when you're in the middle of them, but overcoming challenges and finding ways around things are where you learn the most.

An example was the 2008 recession, which went into 2009 and even 2010, where we had to learn to do certain urgent things and make big changes to ensure the success of our businesses. I remember saying at the time that the situation was really tough, but if we could do these things out of financial necessity, learn from it and then keep doing them in the good times, we'd be really successful. It was very hard, but we really learnt together as a team and found solutions.

**AC: Looking back on your career in automotive leadership, is there one piece of advice you wish you'd received earlier on?**

LS: I'm not the kind of person who tends to look back with regret, but there was a point in my career when I was invited to apply for what would have been my first board role. The opportunity was in operations, whereas my core discipline at the time was commercial, as it is now. I remember expressing surprise to the person who raised the opportunity with me along the lines of, 'Why would you want me to enter the process for Operations Director when I'm a commercial person? What would I bring?' I'm oversimplifying, but that was essentially my response, and I turned down the opportunity to enter the process.

What I didn't consider, to my regret, was the transferable nature of leadership skills.

*"If you've got a great team, you don't need to know everything about the area of the business that you're responsible for."*

Of course, you must understand what the business is doing and what your division is responsible for, but first and foremost, you need great people in your team. If you're bringing strong leadership to that great team, then over time you will come to know everything about the division. You don't have to know it all before you start.

Fortunately, the Operations Director opportunity came up again three years later, and on that occasion, I did enter the process and was successful. I ended up having four fantastic years running operations, but I could have had seven if I'd been bolder the first time. The lesson from this is: make the bold move sooner and trust the people who are coming to you with the opportunities because it's in their interest to pick the right person. If someone thinks you're good enough, why wouldn't you think you're good enough as well?

