



LEADERS WHO
DRIVE AUTOMOTIVE:
Rob Hallway



Rob Hallway has progressed through a 25-year career at Mercedes-Benz to become Head of Global Communications at the company's global headquarters in Stuttgart.

He believes career growth comes from embracing new challenges, saying 'yes' to opportunities, and being willing to step outside familiar roles.

At Mercedes-Benz, he has applied his experience across PR, marketing, and corporate communications to lead international teams, manage global campaigns, and navigate complex projects across multiple countries.

Known for empowering his people and trusting talent to take ownership, Rob attributes his success to mentors who encouraged him to focus on outcomes, give teams space to excel, and lead by example.

Rob Hallway has risen through the ranks of **Mercedes-Benz** to become Head of **Global Communications**. He tells Al Clarke, Chairman of the Ennis & Co Advisory Group, that progressing through a single company requires a willingness to say 'yes' to every opportunity, even if it means being thrown into the deep end.

AL CLARKE: You've spent most of your career with Mercedes-Benz, starting as a senior press officer and progressing to a global leadership role at HQ in Stuttgart. Tell me about your career path and why you made certain career choices.

ROB HALLOWAY: After studying Motor Vehicle Engineering and Management at university, I looked for a job with a manufacturer and started out in fleet truck sales for Renault Trucks. It was a foothold in the industry, but I think I was in the right building but the wrong role. I wasn't the world's most natural truck salesman, but I did learn a lot about speaking to customers.

After a while, I ended up getting involved in advertising and marketing promotions, which felt more natural. I wrote a lot of the marketing and sales materials for the company and worked on sponsorship projects for Renault Trucks, who at the time were sponsoring a couple of F1 teams and a touring car team. I also helped out the PR manager, who introduced me to some commercial vehicle journalists.

On the PR manager's recommendation, I applied for a vacancy for Commercial Vehicle Press Officer at the SMMT [Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders] and was offered the job. The role entailed dealing with journalists in a fast-paced environment, and I found that I really felt at home. Not only did I learn from my interactions with journalists and member companies, but it was also a great opportunity to get noticed by people in the industry. After two years there, I was offered the role of Press Officer for cars and vans at Volkswagen UK, where, in addition to my daily interactions with journalists, I was responsible for managing a press fleet of 150 vehicles.

Just six months into my time at Volkswagen, I received a call from Mercedes-Benz in the UK

offering me a Senior Press Officer role. At first, I was reluctant to take things further, as I was still settling in at Volkswagen, but after agreeing to meet the director, I was persuaded to make the switch. This proved to be the most significant move of my career because Mercedes-Benz has since become such an important part of my life.

"It wasn't part of a grand plan on my part. It was just a case of being offered an opportunity out of the blue and grabbing it."

After two years in the Senior Press Officer role, I was promoted to PR Manager for passenger cars. The scope was later expanded to include commercial vehicles as well, and I ended up staying in the job for the best part of 10 years until I was appointed Communications and Events Director in 2012. I had applied unsuccessfully on two previous occasions and was finally successful at the third attempt. The whole experience taught me a lot in terms of understanding what went wrong with my previous applications and where I needed to improve.

I stayed in the director role for four years until I reached a point where I felt I needed a change. Each year, I was attending the same cycle of motor shows, events and dinners.

"I had told myself that if I ever felt reluctant to attend such events, it was time to do something else."

After 20 years in similar cycles, I spoke to my boss, who suggested that I move to marketing on the basis that I had transferable skills. This was despite the fact I hadn't worked in marketing since the 1990s when I was doing classified ads for second-hand trucks! What interested me about the idea was that it wasn't just to take over from an established marketing director but to set up a new tactical advertising department for Europe. Previously, we launched big global campaigns and then adapted and ran them separately in 19 countries across Europe. The task now was to set up a Regional Centre of Excellence in Milton Keynes and run the advertising for 19 countries from there.

Taking over the new role was challenging because I was dealing with people in Europe

who didn't really want me there because they were used to doing their marketing themselves. It therefore required a lot of collaboration and listening to what they needed to sell cars to customers in their market, which differed from country to country.

I did the role for about seven years, the last four years of which I was asked to combine the job with running Mercedes-Benz World – the brand centre in Weybridge. This was a real eye-opener for me. It was the first time I had owned a P&L, and I was responsible for a visitor attraction that pulled in 350,000 customers a year, from young children to great-grandparents and everything in between. It also coincided with Covid, which was a big test of our mettle, but the experience ended up being very positive. Visitor numbers went up; profits went up; and the satisfaction of the workforce went up during my time in charge.

In 2023, the role of Global Head of Communications came up, and I was asked by the Chief Marketing Officer if I'd like to apply for it. Every previous incumbent had been German and had come up vertically through headquarters, but I figured it was worth a shot, applied, and a few months later was appointed to the job and relocated to Stuttgart.

In my two years in post, I have learnt so much – working globally with responsibility for everything but direct control over almost nothing. I was trained back in my SMMT days to make sure that every comma and every semicolon was in the right place, but now I was managing the reputation of a massive, sprawling global company – the technology, the brands, and the products. Suddenly, I was responsible for a team of 100 people, none of whom are English, and so I relied on the advice I received from one of my mentors:

'Just get out of their way as much as possible and give them space to do their jobs. Don't try to control too much.'

Sometimes the simplest advice can be the most helpful, because this is exactly how I have carried out the role.

AC: Do you think the type of career pathway you have followed through Mercedes-Benz is still available to people today, or have things changed?

RH: In principle, I think the pathway is still there. Some companies like to have vertical specialist promotions, while others prefer to have a broader set of experiences and skills, with a greater amount of horizontal movement. I've met plenty of people at headquarters and elsewhere who have had non-linear career paths.

"I think the common thread is that when an opportunity has presented itself, people have said 'yes!'"

It seems highly unlikely to me that someone who studied motor vehicle engineering in Luton would be a Head of Global Communications 30 years later, but if you look at the career paths of many senior-level people, I'm sure you'll find oddities.

I do think it is still possible to have a very varied career within a company like Mercedes-Benz. It's such a massive organisation that you can get a fresh start or a fresh perspective just by moving round the same building. When I moved from PR to marketing, the two offices were only 20 metres apart, and yet the job, the culture and the environment could not have been more different.

AC: Reflecting on your career, are there any pivotal moments or pieces of advice that have shaped your leadership style?

RH: I've tried to collect the best bits, the greatest hits, from all the people I've worked for. I'm generally quite optimistic in my outlook, and I've worked with lots of people who have had great ideas. Equally, I've had one or two managers that I haven't got on so well with, but I've learnt as much from them.

I try to pick out the behaviours I admire and avoid behaviours that I don't like. I've also listened to people with great life experience.

For example, my previous boss, Gary Savage, gave me some great advice when I moved from PR to marketing. I knew the PR role inside out, having done every role in the department, but jumping into marketing and managing a team of people I didn't know was completely different.

"Gary's advice to me was to trust the people in the team as a default and let them get on with their jobs rather than requiring them to earn my trust. If things go wrong, it's a lot less time-consuming dealing with the problem than requiring 50 people in your department to win your trust."

I think my career has been full of pivotal moments, but a few stand out. For example, I was very fortunate to be in charge of PR throughout the Top Gear glory years, and colleagues in Germany were happy to let me get on with managing the key relationships with the producers and presenters. Other pivotal moments have come when things have started to go wrong and there has been the potential for things to descend into a communications crisis. Being part of a team that helps to resolve such a situation is always a key moment in one's career. As someone once said to me, you don't make your friends when the sun is shining.

In terms of memorable pieces of advice, something that Sir Stirling Moss, the great Formula One driver, once said to me has really stuck. When I first met him, I asked him a question that he must have been asked a thousand times, but he gave me a really interesting, detailed answer, telling me about a race he'd had 50 years ago. After he finished, I apologised for asking a question that he must have had countless times, and he replied, 'Yes, but it's the first time I told you.' I've thought about that a lot.

"I think it's so important because a lot of communication is about re-communication – telling things again and again and again."

AC: You have invested nearly 25 years with Mercedes. What advice would you give to someone who has maybe fallen in love with a company and wants to progress to a senior leadership role? Should they stick with the organisation, or would they be better served going elsewhere?

RH: I don't think anyone should feel that they've fallen in love with a company. It's a commercial relationship. You put in and you get out. What I would say is that when you've been with a company for a long time, it's important to not be seen as just being part of the furniture.

"Always try to change, adapt and innovate. Most big companies also offer different training opportunities, whether it's in-person or online, and you should always take advantage of that."

It's important to always be curious and to try to learn from your peers or people in your department of all generations. There are people in my team who are much younger than me, and they can do things that I can't, whether it's mastering AI or using some of the latest digital tools.

In terms of advising people whether to stick or twist, it really depends on the company, but it is important to say 'yes' when an opportunity arises.

"Don't be afraid to try something you don't think you can do if your sponsors are saying that you can, because that seed of self-doubt can be very powerful."

I had no clue about being a marketing director before I did it, but I had a brilliant team, I was honest with them about what I could and couldn't do when I started, and I spent my weekends boning up on the subject. We ended up having seven very successful years.

AC: What are the differences between leading at a global level as you do now, compared with a national role? Are

you the same leader with a different title, or have you had to change?

RH: I've had to adapt and change my leadership style with every job.

"In my early career, I was much more of a micromanager, but everything would slow down to a crawl if I tried to do that now."

Communications can be very fast-paced, and a story that comes up in the morning can be gone by the afternoon.

I've got a team of about 100 people now, and I'm part of a bigger division, the Marketing Communications Division, which has a total of about 400 people based at Mercedes-Benz headquarters.

"I'm one of the executive leaders there, so it's important to lead by example and empower the team."

I've got lots of experts in the team as well, so I allow them to get on with their job while being very clear about the direction.

I used to be very hands-on with writing, which I love doing, but now I have 15 people who write press releases. My role is to set clear guidelines about the tonality and the kind of things we talk about and what we don't mention. I also have an extended team all around the world, and I speak regularly to colleagues in the big five markets in South Korea, the UK, Germany, America and China.

A key aspect of my leadership style, which I have learnt from the best leaders, is that if someone comes to me and asks, 'Have you got five minutes?' the simple answer is 'yes', when that's very rarely the case. If I'm in the middle of something crazy, I'll make sure I get back to them by the end of the day. I try to be as approachable as I can and to be consistent in that.

AC: You talked about the big five markets, one of which is obviously China. How much involvement do you

have with China, and how important is it for leaders to understand the Chinese approach to the industry?

RH: It's crucial. I first went to China in 2008, and I've been back many times since and have been able to observe the astounding pace of change.

"If I go there for the Shanghai Auto Show or for a market deep-dive visit, like I have this year, I'll spend as much time as possible absorbing the culture, absorbing the challenges that they're facing and looking at what the competitors are up to."

AC: If you were having your career again, would you choose an assignment that would allow you to spend time in China? Do you think spending time in China is something a leader would be wise to invest in if the opportunity came up?

RH: Yes, I think so. A lot of my colleagues have been to China for an assignment, and it's completely changed their perspective. I've had the chance to immerse myself in the German culture, and I can tell you that it's completely different from the UK in terms of the mindset and the rules and regulations, and yet the UK and Germany are relatively close neighbours.

"In China, the cultural differences are of a different order, so it would be very valuable for anyone in the industry to experience that."

AC: Alongside the day job, you've taken on other roles. You've represented the company at the SMMT, you've been involved in the Mercedes-Benz Owners Club and were on the Board of Trustees at the Brooklands Museum. How important have those extra activities been to your career, and what advice would you give to others in terms of doing things outside their normal role?

RH: They've been really important to me and have been a differentiator in many respects.

"From a purely selfish point of view, it's a bit like having a savings account because if you put something in, eventually you'll get a return."

For example, working as the chair of the Public Affairs Committee at the SMMT for four years gave me a really strong sense of what was going on in the industry, and being involved in some of the big issues gave me a real sense of achievement.

I really enjoy my involvement with the Mercedes-Benz Club because I've always been slightly in awe of people whose hobby is collecting nice German cars. I admire their enthusiasm, and I cherish the relationships I've made. In 2017, they asked me to become honorary president, and I'm now in my ninth year. I write a column every month, so it's definitely not the work of a moment but requires genuine commitment.

"Being a trustee of the Brooklands Museum really broadened my perspective and taught me a lot."

As a registered charity, it's trying to tell the story of the birthplace of British motorsport and aviation while working with a very tight set of budgets and dealing with very different challenges to the ones I faced in my day job.

AC: You're in a role where a news story can break at any time, and you need to be able to react. What advice would you give to potential leaders about time management?

"RH: There's never enough time, and things are only getting faster with the omnipresence of social media."

I normally have between seven and 15 meetings a day, and I'm lucky to have a secretary who manages my calendar and an assistant who preps me for these meetings.

"Within my diary, I like to ringfence 45 minutes or an hour once a week just to be available to people in the team."

A big bugbear of mine is people who scroll through their emails in the middle of

meetings. One of our board members, Britta Seeger, taught me something. She's one of the busiest people I've ever met, and I can remember having a three-hour meeting with her where she didn't check her phone once. I asked her afterwards how she did that because most people scroll at least some of the time, and she replied,

'I only had three hours with you, so it's got to count.'

It was another one of those throwaway lines that has stayed with me.

