

# Lead Business – Lead People – Lead Yourself

In this article, Jonas Nußbaum and Julia Larsen-Disney interview Freddy Geeraerds, a board member for Webasto China, a global market leader in automotive roof systems, thermal systems, and battery systems. Freddy shares insights into his 30 years of international leadership experience in the automotive and consumer goods industry, emphasizing the rewarding and challenging aspects of leading a diverse team with 19,000 employees and €3.5B in revenue.

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Freddy Geeraerds is a board member for Webasto China. Webasto is a global market leader for roof systems, thermal systems, and battery systems for the automotive industry. He has been a member of the management board for Webasto Group and President for the BU Roof and components and regions EU, CN, APAC and US, and has just successfully completed the handover to the next generation. He has more than 30 years of international leadership experience in Automotive and Consumer goods, with leadership positions at General Motors, Delphi, QTires, Faiveley, and Newell Rubbermaid, in start-ups, turn-around situations, joint-ventures as well as in established business environments.

**What are the most rewarding and challenging aspects of leading a global and diverse team with 19,000 employees and €3.5B revenue?**

*“When succeeding in a demanding situation, whether a turnaround from a crisis, poor performance, a catastrophic launch or when surpassing the competition and you come out on top, feeling the heartbeat of the company and its people kicking in, those are for me the most rewarding moments. Joining Webasto China and leading the recovery from internal turmoil and customer threats to pull back the business... that was such an event.”*

*“It has been enormously gratifying that we established best practices in many aspects of the business. However, transferring best practices is often challenging unless one has a conducive DNA across the whole company. For this, there has to be an overriding company-wide set of values and a high degree of standards. No matter where in the world, our people have the same courageous optimism, and our factories and workplaces have the same look and feel. Our global customers expect nothing less.”*

*“The next storm may arrive today or tomorrow... and then it will show if you prepared the people to handle it. If you have not, then that is your job for today: mould your team. You do not need an executive team of individual supermen and women, but you need super teams, composed of different skills and strengths that complement each other, work together and deliver synergies and passion.”*

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## How did you identify and assess potential market opportunities on a global scale?

*“The OEMs require us to be capable of executing global projects. Typically, we will design the roof in one market and then transfer, adapt, source and manufacture it in the markets where the cars are assembled. A ‘local for local’ approach in every region has proven the right choice for us. Having eyes for trends, technologies, economics and politics, and market opportunities and ensuring this massive amount of regional data is collected and sifted through to define a global strategy that leads to risks and opportunities. In our particular industry: EVs, autonomous driving, roof technology and smart glazing, OEM and customer tastes and changes in perception, competitor intelligence etc. For this there needs to be a central backbone, a formal review structure and cadence, to bring together best practices, lessons learned, technology and trends applied in individual markets. This*



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*requires a process and mindset. In the end, the practice of ‘going to Gemba’, the place of action, has again proven to be crucial, to meet the people, to feel the pulse, to know what is going on locally.”*

## What advice would you give to other CEOs to succeed, and what lessons have you learnt from your experiences in global markets?

*“Being the CEO is never a goal but a consequence of being a good colleague and authentic leader.”*

*“It is important to strike the right balance between central and de-centralised management and to be mindful of creating a strong exchange process and system between all the elements that constitute the business. I’m a believer in minimising resources physically in the headquarters and assigning them as much as possible across the factories and sales offices, even when some of these resources belong functionally to central supporting or*

*service functions like finance or R&D. The closeness to the customer and to the product has always the upper hand. It is not a matter of geography and location, but it is a way of working a service-oriented mentality. Service to those people that add value to the product, to get it shipped to the customer.”*

*“For a company that has the ambition to be a solid international player, it is essential to have an international team and mindset. Ensure as a company you understand and establish your particular DNA and core values and competences, and transfer this into the different markets where the company is active.”*

*“Having had myself the international development in the automotive industry, living in CN, EU and the US, I’m a fan of diversity, employee development and international assignments. Every member of a global executive team needs to have done some type of international assignment in their career prior to becoming an executive.”*

### **How did you address cultural differences and diversity in your global workforce?**

*“Find the best person for the job and ensure diversity in the teams. Be on the lookout to tune your team. If needed, make a change, the sooner the better, so you have a faster benefit. Whether it is gender, race, nationality etc. It all comes into play. You want a self-sufficient team capable of tackling the challenges, to grow and to become better than yourself.”*

*“Our company DNA and values are the same across every location. Ensure you have a dialogue and awareness of differences in culture.”*

*“For example: German disciplined structure, with the occasional over-engineering, has a disadvantage of being time-consuming and sometimes stifling, as opposed to Chinese ad-hoc management style of ‘do it now’ and ‘everything is possible’. The combination leads to improved efficiency: run activities in parallel go for 80% ok, test, validate, run, improve, repeat, and work your way to 100% perfection. Combining German engineering perfection with Chinese ‘speed and everything is possible’ and Japanese ‘continuous improvement’.”*

### **How do you develop your global leadership competencies and what are the best practices and resources for learning and improvement?**



*“The best training and development is the learning organisation, whereby the employees themselves cascade knowledge and train other people. When as a manager, you give training, not only are you setting the example, are in close contact and getting input from other employees, but you are also mastering the content and expertise.”*

*“In a manufacturing company like Webasto, most of the leadership should have deep knowledge of the manufacturing of the product. I love to observe talent in non-manufacturing functions and to coach them into a manufacturing-related assignment, and*

*then rotate them back to their function. That way, the R&D engineering leader who knows how their product is put together is making the best design decisions. The finance controller will be best prepared to assess investment needs and impact, warranty risks, budgeting etc.”*

*“On a personal level, I learn every day: whether a quote in a book, a surprising comment of a colleague, reactions on EV technology in social media or debating the application of hydrogen. I strive to always be aware of, and prepare for new trends (such as AI).”*

*“Be curious, keep your mind open, nimble and fit, talk to people and be inquisitive to understand what they do and the details behind their problems and challenges. Live your values. Integrity and authenticity are your most precious attributes. Understanding the mechanics of change has been a constant for me with new assignments every few years and working in the international expat environment. Set the example. Making your team successful will make you successful.”*



**“Always hire someone who is able to surpass you. I have been fortunate to gather expertise in many aspects of a company’s cosmos. When you can step back and see the success of the people you were able to coach, you feel proud and know you did something right.”**