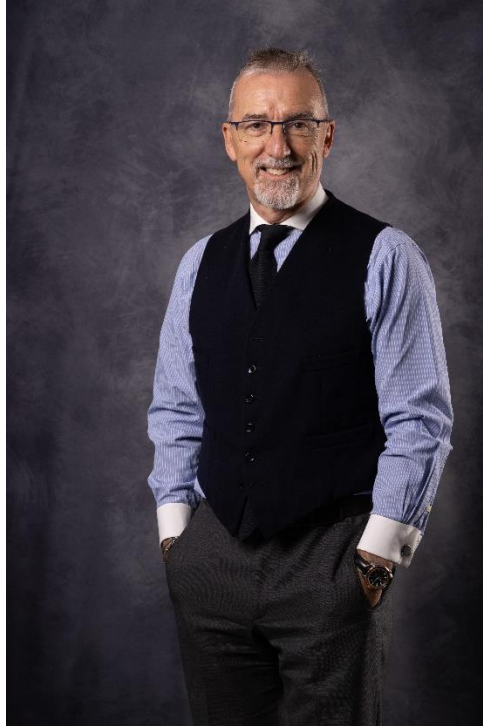


Lessons from the Top: The manager who smiles



This Eric Salmon & Partners, 'Lessons from the top' is a thought leadership article based on an interview by Simone Maggioni with Pietro Gorlier, CEO of COMAU.

SM: Your career began in the late 1980s, after graduating in economics, with your first assignment at Iveco

PG: I was the typical product of Turin, born in Turin, my father had worked 35 years at Fiat. I joined Iveco, which was already a very international company because it resulted from various acquisitions. You could breathe in a very strong international culture there, and I realized that I wasn't prepared for international exposure. So I remember that after a few months, I went to my boss, Guido Maina, a guy that was incredible in teaching and coaching young talents, and asked him to offer me the first available position outside Italy.

SM: An important early intuition — wanting to internationalize your profile

PG: So I went to England for two years, quite a shock, in a little town near Manchester, and that was also Iveco Ford Truck back then, so there were still significant cultural barriers. From that moment on, I never had a role that wasn't international in scope. I think that's perhaps the only time in my life when I

“I realized that I wasn’t prepared for international exposure... I went to my boss and asked him to offer me the first available position outside Italy.”

made the decision to change the course of my career, while in the following 35 years the change came to me!

SM : Seventeen years at IVECO, then seconded to FIAT by Sergio Marchionne for your expertise in dealers network

management, then Marchionne entrusted you also with CNH and then the entire spare parts world at MOPAR, where you became the Brand CEO. Then the real CEO role at Magneti Marelli, COO of FCA EMEA when Marchionne passed away, and finally, in 2022, you were called in to fix and spin off COMAU. Quite an impressive progression

PG: Indeed, I practically worked in all the companies of the group. I think I’ll be one of the last people in the group to have developed a career 35 years long entirely within “Fiat”

SM: Besides that very first major decision to go to England with IVECO, it was decisive for your career when, in 2006, Marchionne called you because he was looking for someone to handle the dealers network, and the CEO of IVECO, Paolo Monferino, suggested your name. How did that happen?

PG: I was in China for Iveco when, at midnight local time, his secretary called me, giving me a phone number and asking me to call it, saying Dr. Marchionne would answer. He told me he wanted me to go to Chicago to explain to the CNH people how Iveco was managing the dealer network.

SM: Not everyone managed to earn Marchionne’s appreciation, perhaps regardless of specific technical skills

PG: Well, unlike other CEOs I’ve dealt with, even recently, Marchionne didn’t see the world as revolving

“Marchionne didn’t see the world as revolving around him... he believed in physical contact between people. He valued a strong work ethic”

around him. The company was not at his service but vice versa. For example, someone else might impose a meeting at any time, wherever he/she was in the world, without caring where you were. With Marchionne, it

wasn’t like that. He traveled a lot and encouraged you to travel because he believed in physical contact between people. He valued a strong work ethic—that was fundamental for him—and humility, regardless of whether you achieved brilliant successes. He appreciated humility, being able to work in a team, putting your own ego aside for results and for the team. With Marchionne, I was never any different from who I am. I think I’m a reasonably humble person, not arrogant, and I usually feel comfortable in groups. One time he told me, “You are reliable.” I suppose that’s how I’ve always come across in life—as someone reliable, hands-on.

SM: What skills do you think allowed you to grow within the group and achieve success?

PG: More than technical skills, I’d start with soft skills, which are especially useful when you move across so many sectors within the group. Also, keep in mind I’m not an engineer, which isn’t so common in the automotive world.

SM: Even Marchionne wasn't an engineer

PG: Exactly, he had soft skills. What helped me the most was curiosity—the desire to learn. I've always

“What helped me the most was curiosity, the desire to learn....and team building”

been curious to understand things beyond what I managed directly or was responsible for. Working in commercial roles, visiting a factory was a huge curiosity for me, a great interest in

understanding how things worked, also because, mentally, I'm perhaps a bit of an engineer in the way I seek rationality. Another important soft skill for me is team building—creating a team with diversity of thoughts and views. This was even more important for me when I was moving into areas where I didn't have all the knowledge or skills. I probably learned the importance of the team during the ten years I coached volleyball up to the Serie B league. I try to dedicate a lot of time to selecting people and then leading a team that I don't want to be identical to me—on the contrary. Sometimes I realize I might be excessively tolerant, a bit verbose (as you can see, I like to talk 😊), and thus somewhat inefficient. Obviously, fundamental technical skills have to be there; when you come from a background in economics and commerce, your primary skill is understanding numbers, quickly! By the way, numbers never lie!

SM: But also your customer orientation is fundamental

PG: True, although I classify that under curiosity. And I must admit it wasn't a skill I naturally had. A manager who was fundamental for me in this regard was Franco Fenoglio, who at the time was the Commercial Director of IVECO. He traveled a lot, worked a ton, visited customers, suppliers, partners, and knew how to establish relationships regardless of language. He could tune in to the person he was talking to, with respect, everywhere in the world.

SM: What else has contributed to your managerial growth?

PG: I learned a lot from Marchionne. One of the fundamental things, besides work ethic, was getting to

the root of problems—deep analysis, getting to the bottom of issues.

“I learned from Marchionne, besides work ethic, to get to the root of problems”

SM: So, we could say that at least three bosses have shaped your career path:

Guido Maina, who initially sent you to England; Franco Fenoglio, for customer focus; and Sergio Marchionne, for work ethic, team spirit, and analytical depth. But how does one “build a career”?

PG: In so many years of work, the only time I asked for anything was at the beginning, after six months, when I asked to go to England. From there on, situations came to me. But it takes humility—the humility to strip away your ego and learn.

SM: You also have to trust the organization, which at some point notices you

PG: When I talk to young graduates, I try to explain to them not to focus too narrowly on something specific they want to become but to stay open, seize opportunities to discover, be curious, and learn, go

out of your comfort zone, accepting jobs you are not familiar with, because everything you gather transforms into something useful. I realize this when I visit plants. I'm not a technical person—and I always state that upfront—but I can ask the so-called “stupid questions,” and that's how you learn. I say to my CTO, “Come on, prove to me that I don't understand a thing.”

SM: Let's talk about Comau, your current role. What motivated you to accept the challenge of Comau?

PG: When I decided to retire from Stellantis and was offered the opportunity at Comau, I asked myself if I still had the energy and strength. Thanks to my wife, who is wise and has always helped me reflect on many things, I thought about the three important things in life: family, work, and oneself. I realized that until then, I had neglected myself. Now, I've committed to doing something I don't know every year,

“I do it (the CEO) because I want to help—to make sure that the people working for me succeed...have a clearer vision of the future”

like studying Spanish, getting a boating license, or something else. For family, I decided to set real KPIs for myself, such as the time I spend with them every week! And then there's work: for me, it doesn't make much sense to do it for the

money, since I've reached a sufficient level of well-being. So why do I do it? I do it because I want to help—to make sure that the people working for me succeed, to ensure that every day the 3,800 people at Comau have something a little better, a clearer vision of the future. And this approach has given me more clarity in my objectives.

SM: Have you had to revise anything in your leadership model?

PG: I've realized that here, more than ever, I have to lean on leadership style rather than business knowledge or technical expertise. In the past, as Chief Parts & Service Officer of Stellantis or CEO of Marelli or Mopar, I was operating in areas I knew well. Comau is technology, automation. I certainly can't lead through know-how, but through leadership—and that's what I always tried to do, though in this case I had to reinforce that approach even more, which consists of helping people make decisions, defining how decisions are made, and guiding people, with a strong emphasis on the team, knowing that in the end your role is to synthesize the contributions and make a decision, if in that moment you are alone.

SM: How did you approach the mandate to prepare the company for a spin-off? What were the organizational and cultural aspects you focused on the most?

PG: Preparing for the spin-off, which by the way had already been attempted and failed once before me, had a first step: reestablishing positive results, without which it couldn't happen. So I said: let's forget about the spin-off for now and focus on the results. And the key element for that was to establish clear accountability. Organizational clarity—who was responsible for what in achieving results. We

“Comau needed organizational clarity, accountability, engagement”

focused fundamentally on that for a year. In this process, it was important to put the right people in the right places. Evaluating people and the roles they held was crucial, thanks also to the work done by Eric Salmon, who reassured me

because, aside from a few inevitable weaknesses here and there, they highlighted the quality of our management team. Besides organization (roles and responsibilities) and the right people, the cultural aspect was critical. The Comau brand was recognized, but there was a lack of pride, which is fundamental because the first promoters of a company are the people who work in it. The only thing that can really keep me awake at night is thinking that there might be a lack of commitment, of engagement from people who perhaps haven't fully grasped the importance of what we're doing. That's why I dedicate a lot of time and energy to visiting markets, plants or departments and talking with people. I abolished the famous management "buvette" to eat in the canteen with everyone and create opportunities to meet people at all levels. It made me very happy that a journalist called me "the manager who smiles." A leader has to offer empathy, affection, care for people. People work and have their lives, their problems—as a CEO, you have to serve the people working in the company, not the other way around. You have to make sure that the 3,800 people working here can improve the company every day thus improving their jobs. If I arrive in the morning and chat with the security guard, that human connection creates value, and it's felt and recognized inside the organization. I'd also point out that, having always managed very cross-functional organizations, I've never been worried about dealing with lots of intersecting activities, decision-makers, stakeholders. I expect the same from my collaborators—to accept the complexity of intersections and "grey areas," to take ownership of whatever needs to be done.


SM: With a private equity fund as the new reference shareholder, what does that mean for you in how you interpret the role of CEO?

PG: It's possible I might be underestimating this aspect a bit, but I don't think I've had to change much. Our shareholder respects the management team. I've always tried to shield the organization I manage from various pressures from above. True, there are some aspects that in the past were handled by the group—for example, banking relationships that require specific expertise. We've had to create our own financing system, and here the choice of CFO was crucial in preparing for that—one of the best choices (as you know very well). I'd also mention that, thanks to my long experience in the "Marchionne school," I'd acquired some competence in dealing with banks and boards.

SM: Is there something new or different that a CEO today should have compared to the past?

PG: There's no doubt we're in the middle of a technological revolution that will permeate every sector—artificial intelligence, technology, robotics... What worries me right now is the cultural change. Many of

the values we thought were important are being questioned today, even by those deciding the fate of the world. We're all struggling to understand generational change. The generations entering the workforce now—what do they need, what values do they have?



"Engaging the new generations is the main challenge for leaders.... perhaps what becomes more relevant is the value of what you do—socially, technologically, or innovatively"

How do we engage these new generations? I'm no longer sure that career progression is at the top of their priorities. The financial part is certainly important, but it doesn't seem to be a differentiator

compared to other companies. Perhaps what becomes more relevant is the value of what you do—socially, technologically, or innovatively. We’ve had significant first signals about this in the transition from remote work back to the office (by the way, calling remote workers “smart” seems almost offensive to those who physically go to the company). I still firmly believe in the emotional and personal contact component. And I’m not at all convinced that virtual work is more productive; in fact, I fear it creates inequalities! Meanwhile, we still lack data on the productivity of working from home. From home, there are people who work twice as much, and others who try to hide—it’s not that simple to manage these situations. How do we resolve the apparent contradiction between the fundamental value of the people working in a company, virtual work, and the context of a declining demographic trend? Many don’t realize, for example when talking about immigration, that the real problem will be finding people. According to the United Nations “World Population Prospects 2024,” by 2100, Italy will suffer a demographic drop of 15%! Surely new CEOs, future leaders, will have to grapple with these issues. For now, organizing an occasional team dinner still seems like a valid and useful idea.

SM: Is it part of leadership’s role to try to bridge the gaps in human relationships that arise partly from technology, partly from the characteristics of new generations?

PG: Absolutely. There are many examples showing that failing to do so simply doesn’t work. I still don’t understand when I learn of CEOs that after a meeting with their top managers, don’t spend time with the team, having a drink or dining together.



“surround yourself with people who are mentally independent, and foster human relationships as much as possible within the company”

SM: Whereas Marchionne played cards while traveling...

PG: Exactly.

SM: As we reflect on Pietro’s journey, two essential lessons stand out: the importance of surrounding yourself with people who are mentally independent, and the value of fostering genuine human relationships within the company.

Our sincere thanks to Pietro—and to Mrs. Gorlier—for sharing these insights and for exemplifying the leadership qualities that inspire growth, resilience, and connection in organizations everywhere.

by Simone Maggioni

smaggioni@ericsalmon.com

[Simone Maggioni | LinkedIn](#)