Creating the next generation of manufacturing leaders: Episode 2

Transcript

Asif [00:00:00] Welcome to the Art of the Impossible podcast for the design and manufacturing industry that explores how you can leverage technology processes and people to make the impossible possible. I'm Asif Moghal, senior industry manager at Autodesk. And each week I'll be joined by two experts from the design manufacturing world to discuss their perspectives on the challenges our industry faces and share what they're doing to overcome. From smart products, mass customisation, digitisation, supply chain resilience and the convergence of once diverse industries, this podcast is for anyone that runs a design and manufacturing business who's interested in making things possible. You can subscribe by following us on Apple, Spotify or via your favourite platform.

Asif [00:00:53] So leadership, it's a topic that has been discussed for many years, specifically in the design and manufacturing industry, and there's many, many views and opinions on it. So that's a subject for today. And we're gonna be discussing how and what we can do to create the next generation of digitally empowered leaders. So we've got two very special guests here with us to explore what and how we can blaze a trail and create the kind of leaders of tomorrow that are digitally savvy and digitally empowered. I'd like to welcome Nick Hussey, CEO of The Manufacturer, and Jason Cole of Jonathan Lee Recruitment. Hi, guys, welcome to the podcast. So it's a topic that we said is discussed quite heavily amongst industry and there's lots of, you know, sort of MBA and Harvard definitions of leadership. But I wanted to start with, in the most simplest possible terms, in the context of our industry, what is leadership? So, Nick, maybe I could start with you. How would you define the role of leadership in our industry, particularly now?

Nick [00:01:58] I think it's a really good question. And actually, you couldn't want for a time when leadership is more important and more challenging. For me, and this does come from an MBA. But for me, I've always picked up on this idea of the servant leader, one who is really responsible to all of the employees and the wider business, the wider business ecosystem, and takes responsibility for all aspects of the business, how the business performs, how the people are treated and how they perform, and the impact on the environment. So that speaks again, potentially to the idea as the triple bottom line and the three core areas of business. So your social impact or environmental impact and your impact on your employees and shareholders. For me with digital leadership now, that role is about setting the path, setting the agenda and the direction for the business, and then utilise the digital media, the ability to use digital techniques and digital technology to analyse things better so that you can produce better evidence, as a leader and to be used for leadership. And that digital, that ability to get evidence and data as part of that leadership processes is crucial. And it's something I think that we miss, we don't appreciate fully and I don't think we fully understand yet.

Asif [00:03:29] Yeah. Really interesting insight. And I think as I was listening to you speak, you know, I'm really aware of the fact that the technology has kind of accelerated at quite a dramatic rate in terms of what we can literally do, what's possible. And it's underpinning a lot of the things that we do in the workspace. So it surely must have impacted the kind of role or even concept of a leader. So, Jason, from your work that you do, talking to lots of CEOs and

manufacturing leaders, how do you think the concept of leadership has been disrupted or changed over the past four to five years?

Jason [00:04:03] I think at the moment, Asif, with leadership has become more of a necessity than ever before. I think leadership stretches to all stakeholders, be they internal or external, because a relationship between a business, whether it be manufacturing or a service provider, serve responsibility to its own workforce, but also to its supply chain and each customer base. So leadership isn't just an internal function, leadership is a much more comprehensive provision than that.

Asif [00:04:42] Nick talked about this sort of a leader being like a servant of the organisation or having a level of responsibility in the triple bottom line. And I remember a time when the boss, the leader of the company, that person was expected to know everything, be able to do everything better than you, and would set a direction and say this is what we're going to do. Now, that doesn't really seem to fit this sort of concept of the servant responsibility kind of thing. So I guess leadership has changed. But what changes have you seen? Have you seen that sort of transition from this kind of autocratic 'do as I say' or, you know, get out of my face kind of leadership to this more servant approach?

Nick [00:05:21] Most most definitely. I mean, I was in the beginning of my relationship with the automotive industry working for an OEM. You know, I used to see more of a stronger, almost more dictatorial style. But of late, in more recent years, more inclusive leadership styles undoubtedly deliver much, much better results. Because I think the immersion of leaders in an organisation brings a better buy in from the breadth of the workforce. I think the workforce feels it can convey the full facts to the leadership group. And there's a stronger sense of truth that comes through the organisation. And that can only be beneficial, I think. I think the digitisation element that they're just to recap on what they're saying, there's a tremendous opportunity now to use digital illustration to help underpin the purpose and the validity of that leadership as well. And I think there's a great opportunity there to embrace what's happening, perhaps with, you know, the movements within industry 4, to help drive that arterial function within an organisation by underpinning it with real data.

Asif [00:06:53] And I really like what you said about this inclusive nature. So in my mind, I'm building a picture of the sort of leadership we need desperately in this country and globally are those servants of the organisation who are responsible and inclusive. It's always been a challenging job to be a leader of a design and manufacturing business, hasn't it? Never mind. You know, what's happened recently with the pandemic. But if you think about currently the sort of challenges that are on the sort of inboxes or plates of the leaders of today, what are the sort of key challenges you think they're facing? So, Nick, I know you've talked to many, many people in your work at The Manufacturer of straw polling and having conversations, but what are they telling you? What are the top challenges leaders are facing right now?

Nick [00:07:36] Yeah, it's a really challenging time for people at the moment. The problem, and actually Jason began to begin to outline it a bit, it's you can't know everything. And you need to accept as a leader that you shouldn't know everything. And so the big challenges is being across enough of the technology and the developments and the innovation and the design developments to have a broad understanding and a broad perspective of what you should be looking at. But then having that faith and trust in your team to say, OK, we know

we need this particular development, I'm not going to choose the technology. I'm going to leave that to you guys to go out there, work out what we should be using, how will integrate with our existing technology, what the steps are that we need to begin implementation, what training we need, so that you have to be able to accept that you can't know everything except that the change in the technology is changing incredibly quickly and that you're going to have to just have that broad perspective, trust your teams to understand what they need to understand in much more detail and then be prepared to be bold and go for it. You can't sit back. And I think historically, perhaps we in the manufacturing sector have been a little bit reticent to be bold with some of these decisions. And I think now is it's really becoming clear that if you don't act, if you're not bold, if you don't invest, then you really will be left behind and very, very quickly. So as a leader, you have to be prepared to just allow other people to make those decisions, invest in that tech and be confident and determined to help them progress and proceed and get that job done and move on to another level and then look again, you know, immediately to look again.

Asif [00:09:36] Jason, do you think that the leadership of today is comfortable with, because what Nick was talking about there is really contrary to, I guess, how management has developed is "you are the expert, you must know everything, you must have all the answers", almost like the hero leadership style. How do you think the current leadership of our industry is adapting to this kind of change? Is it an easy thing for them to do or do you think they're really struggling?

Jason [00:10:04] Well, I think necessity is the mother of invention, isn't it really Asif? You know. I mean, let's face it, you know, the alterations in the manufacturing sector are unprecedented and velocity of those alterations will increasingly increase under the iteration. But manufacturing has always been demanding, hasn't it? Has always been demanding physically. And actually is always we've been demanding emotionally as well. It's fairly high octane, you know, of all sectors, manufacturing draws arguably the greatest passion in any sector anywhere. I think so. And I think leaders that have come to the fore and are in place now, have seen and experienced those alterations. The changes in logistics, for instance, you know, just in time coming in prior to that culture, leadership style, didn't have the same challenges. That was brought, because with us come globalisation of supply chain, hasn't it? And all of those other things. So I think there's been a necessity to alter the style of leadership. And I think that that's come through with the demands that have been placed upon workforces culturally and the alteration that they've had to put in place to adapt to change. So there's been lesser permanency of leadership style. Looking back at when I started in the automotive sector, for instance, and since what we're seeing now is much more malleable. Agility is a highly necessary and I think with that we've seen probably a greater realisation, a collaborative style, to work with the, you know, sort of the heads of the pillars that sit below that hierarchy to work together to deliver the overall remit, really.

Asif [00:12:22] So let's shift our focus on what does good look like. Nick, when you think of really good leadership in the design and manufacturing sector, who springs to mind that you think, wow, that person is a role model, we should all aspire to be more like them.

Nick [00:12:41] So it's a real challenge, I think. And Jason mentioned it earlier, we used to have a sort of cult of hero leaders. And nowadays, apart from the city, which still seems absolutely obsessed with the CEO being all important and a bit like a football manager, you know, they get one chance and if they don't get it right, they're fired and that's it. They're

never any good again and things like that. You've only got a few who stand out globally. And Elon Musk is probably the standout one there, although absolutely the antithesis of everything we're talking about in many ways. He does try to get across everything. He does try to understand all the detail. He ends up doing his own coding despite the fact is, you know, launching space rockets and all sorts of other things. So finding those leaders within the sector, there'll be names that are in my head, but they won't be famous because the leaders that we get that become famous or they're in the public domain, other than the likes of Musk, tend to be the leaders of the bigger organisations. And in many ways, by the time they're at that level, their role is no longer leading the organisation. It's much more involved with looking after the investor relations and PR and corporate governance type issues rather than really running the businesses and being the leader of individual factories, individual divisions, individual teams. And I'm thinking of the likes of [00:14:12]BA [0.0s] and Rolls-Royce, etc., where, you know what Warren and Nigel White had to go through different roles to the people who genuinely make that business tick and drive the teams on. Those tend to be the sort of divisional managers, divisional CEOs, those sorts of people who probably don't make public domain. We probably know their names very well, but they wouldn't be famous.

Nick [00:14:41] But there are one or two who've come across my radar over the years. And one who's springs to mind is Andrew Churchill from JJ Churchill, which is a small engineering, relatively small engineering business. And what I loved about Andrew was superintelligent, set out his plan and really knew his plan. Would tell anybody the plans for the business and they were quite aggressive and quite, well they were extremely well thought through, but they were very much a change of direction for the business and a very bold investment. A series of decisions and tactical changes, strategic changes to the business direction. But he did it with such confidence and vigour that he had been working for the firm. I'm confident I would have been right behind his strategy and things so that name certainly sticks out. But as I say, it's very difficult to pick out those hero leaders these days because we don't really eulogise in the same way that we used to over them. And I think that's probably the right thing, you know, with. It's much more, as Jason said, much more of a collaborative activity nowadays, and rightly so.

Asif [00:15:58] That's a really interesting point that we're making, because I know you guys do, the sort of the top 100 kind of every year where you sort of actively go out and seek out inspirational people who are doing inspirational things and they're not necessarily that sort of MD or the CEO. So, you know, we're getting the sense that and you and I know Andrew and I totally agree. He's a he's a very kind of inspirational leader. But do you have to be right at the top of the business to be a leader, or could you be sort of halfway up the business and still achieve similar results? So it's kind of an interesting kind of debate. So if the best leaders are, we almost we don't know who they are, but they are very clear with their vision. They're very open about sharing their ideas and strategies with other people, and they're very collaborative and inclusive. And going back to what you said earlier, they sort of serve the business. Who makes the best leaders? Jason, from your point of view, there's a debate about the lack of women in leadership. The lack of women in design and manufacturing and the lack of women generally in engineering. What would you say is the answer to that question? Are women better at leadership than men? Are men better or is the answer something different?

Jason [00:17:07] I think. I think fundamentally leadership is a lonely place to be, a lonely role to play, isn't it really? Dependent on how you go about it and I think the best leaders are those that immerse themselves with the people. You know, they get that getting into the

detail. But more than that, empower people to effectively take ownership of the role that they perform to the business, really. And I think, you know, sincerity an honesty in business, in any business, is so beneficial, actually critical, if you're going to deliver things to their optimum level. You know, diversity is absolutely critical. And I think with, you know, some of the work that we've done together Asif, we've seen tremendous examples of where that's happened. But probably the diversity that we yearn for isn't enough. You know, so, you know, the [00:18:19]Roman crazies [0.4s] and Peter Brooker's of this world. Fantastic. The inspirational leaders, you know, delivered, you know, fabulous results even in trying times such as these. But I think those are both people that are of the people. And I think, you know, strategy is all very well, but it's the people that will deliver it.

Nick [00:18:40] I think in manufacturing, we are a little bit slower. In manufacturing engineer we're just that little bit slower. The diversity levels within the sector are terrible. And I think in many ways we're kind of our worst enemies. It tends to be the situation that the manufacturing business is run by an engineer, typically an engineer, and an engineer's mentality is incredible. It is. I can solve a problem. That's what they do. That's what the whole mindset is. And in many ways, your better leaders aren't necessarily the ones who think that they can solve the problem themselves or that the problem is indeed theirs to solve. So in many instances, and this goes back a few years, but we were finding leaders of manufacturing businesses writing their own software. You know, they all I could develop coding in their spare time. Absolutely. Anything. Well, hang on, there are experts, brilliant people all over the world creating the most incredible technology and software code. And leveraging every piece of input you could get. You can't possibly do this sort of thing. And it took a while for that to come through. So I think the fact that we have engineers at the heart of manufacturing businesses is fantastically valuable because they're problem solvers. But that doesn't necessarily mean they're the best leaders. And it's going to take a leap of faith for manufacturing businesses to pick the current H.R. director as the new CEO or the current design director as the new CEO. Apple be perhaps one example where they have done that. But that's the sort of thing instead of the best engineer gets the job as CEO when that becomes vacant, we should look to a much broader group, and also we should be looking outside the sector and bringing in people with completely different skill sets.

Jason [00:20:35] This is something that occurs very often in their medical sector as well. We have a friend who worked in that domain and he said it's, you know, brilliant minds surgeons have, but try articulating the nucleus of the problem or the operations to that a family.

Nick [00:21:03] There are a lot of work in the legal sector years and years ago. And typically what would happen is the oldest person, the oldest partner in the business would become the head partner and effectively the CEO or the one who had the best sales. So what they called the rainmaker. The guy who brought in the most business, and didn't necessarily mean in any way that they would be the best leader of that business. And it took a long time for the legal sector to realise that. And now they are typically, they would never promote from where they are, rarely promote from within. What they tend to do is bring in a leader from outside with a completely different set of skills, a different mindset, a different mentality, different thoughts on business models and things. And I think the manufacturing sector is beginning to get that. But it could be a lot, lot bolder in bringing in leaders from outside or promoting from within different roles within the business.

Asif [00:21:54] So that's a really nice sideway, too. I suppose one of the other questions that I want to take in the debate with you is we've defined what I think leadership is. It's this concept of serving the business. And Nick, I think you said the triple bottom line. We've defined you know what I like to think of the DNA of good leadership and potentially somebody from outside of the enduring sector, but has clear vision, is able to articulate that vision. They're open-minded. They're collaborative. They're inclusive. And they empower people. They surround themselves with the right set of organisations. So if that's the DNA, that's the blueprint of excellence. What on earth can we do to raise the level of leadership that we've got in our industry? Because without strong leadership, I think our industry is just going to meander through crisis after crisis. So how on earth do we create the kind of leaders and sort of business leaders of tomorrow? Nick, what what are some of the things that you've seen that kind of work or are interesting concepts?

Nick [00:22:53] So I think we need to ensure that the current leaders of the business accept that they don't know everything and that they can't solve everything. And we'd be were definitely beginning to get there with that sort of thing. Again, drawing on the analogy from the legal sector. They understand the value of the knowledge that's in their heads and therefore in other people's heads. And so they put great store on a continuous professional development where they have to comply with certain regulations and end a certain amount of events and read a certain amount of material each year. And I think something along those lines within the sector would be really good. An appreciation that attending events, courses, conferences, online learning, peer group networking, all of those sorts of activities are tremendously valuable. And Jason touched on it earlier than it's a desk can be a desperately lonely position to be in. And I think if we can encourage manufacturing leaders to be more outgoing, be prepared to leave the factory for days and weeks on end to go elsewhere, visit someone else's factory, you know, go abroad and look at something, go to a technology show. You know something? Autodesk run their own done, and there's various others that, you know, there may look unrelated. Why do I want to go to Google Cloud event, for instance. Well, just go and see what happens and be inspired, go to a design show and go to China and look what's going on over there and all sorts of things like that. I think if you could get the manufacturing leaders to get out from behind the factory desk or the shop floor, you could make an enormous difference to their personalities, their outlook, their vision and their entire leadership skills. And I think that would be a really good way to make a sea change in the sector that would make a difference for me. If they had a bit more appreciation that there is a lot to learn out there. You don't need to know it all in detail, but get out there and get inspired. Go to events, go to conferences, go to exhibitions, go, go and see things every instance. Now, in the virtual world, if you have to do it virtually, then by all means do so. But that would be the key for me.

Asif [00:25:14] And it's a good point because there is so much now that's been converted to virtual. So I guess that there's plenty of opportunity to do that. But it sounds like this that the power to develop that leadership rests with the leaders themselves. Because, you know, as far as I am aware, we don't teach these kind of skills formally. Like if you if you study engineering, you'll go into a degree or do an apprenticeship. And that's a very clear, defined path. And you kind of know what you'll get at the end of it. But I don't see anything equivalent or similar in terms of developing leadership. From what you said, perhaps we don't need it, but we just need to motivate and empower more people to kind of get out there and explore what's possible. So, Jason, why is that not happening then? Because I don't I'm

not sure it is. Are manufacturing leaders taking the time to step back from what they do and if they have the time to step back from what they do?

Jason [00:26:06] I wonder sometimes, Asif, whether this kind of an inane responsibility to refine and recalibrate your own internal systems. And then once that task has been completed, you go back to the beginning and do it again. And I reiterate what Nick said actually, that I think, you know, the regeneration and the re energising of business relies on a number of different things, really. I think I think education is one of them, not necessarily academic education. I think education that comes from exposure to external communities, like collaborating with people within your own sets, around tangential sectors to bring fresh ideas and fresh approaches. And I think would you do that? Would you become open to that? It says to your people internally that you are accessible internally because you're open to ideas. You are illustrators to that workforce that you are collaborative and that you want to interrupt for the good of the organisation, and in return it gives you access to opportunity as an organisation because you are open. But I think that is a symptom, I think being inward facing an and revisiting sorry, a revisiting systems in the physicality of that business can be something that can be quite prohibitive.

Nick [00:27:45] It's that classic lean operational excellence, continuous improvement that the internal focus on saving 10 seconds here and five seconds here and getting one more product out the door is great. And by all means, have somebody doing that. But they shouldn't be the leader of the business. They should be out and about, and visit the factory once a week. You know, that's how it should be, that they're looking at other things constantly and checking that they're on the right path and that they're not missed an opportunity. And things like that.

Asif [00:28:14] I think what's really interesting about this discussion, as I've been listening to you both talk, is we haven't really mentioned technology at all. Yet again, it seems like the tech is irrelevant, particularly in a subject or an area of expertise like leadership. It's much more about the person and their attitude to leadership.

[00:28:33] It is. And actually, since all the tech is sort of fiddling while Rome is burning or coding coding. That's exactly right.

Asif [00:28:42] Or, you know, maybe that's one of the side effects of having engineers is maybe that's one of the side effects of having an engineer. Not saying that engineers are terrible leaders, but, you know, are natural. Oh, naturally, we're geeks, aren't we? We like to fiddle. We like to mess around. And that's a superb skill to have if you're solving technical problems. But maybe it's not relevant in all cases. So I think that what I'd like you to ponder, maybe even sort of a kind of share with us is, if I was a MD of a mid-sized manufacturing business, say, 200 to 250 people like the real sweet spot of our industry. And I'm sort of mulling over the idea of I need to develop better leadership. And I came to you both. And we had a cup of coffee. What would be the one bit of advice you would give me? The one thing. What is that one thing that I should do that would start me on my kind of transformation of my own leadership style or even putting someone in to run the company. Jason. What if we start with you.

Jason [00:29:47] Get in the centre of the people, get in the middle of the people and open yourself up to them. I think an insular approach to leadership is unsuccessful and flawed cheafly. I think the personality of a leader is all important. I think having that sense of being,

be open to being approached for wanting to get a better phrase is so critical. I think is as fundamental as that.

Asif [00:30:28] Great, get in to amongst your people. And, Nick, from your point of view, what advice would you give me?

Nick [00:30:34] I like the idea of just giving you one. So but I will. We got this rule of six at the moment, haven't we? If I were the leader of that business, I would go and find these six new leaders in that business. And I would develop them as a team. So you get in amongst those guys. You get to understand that the best six that you've got in whichever areas you have them and you really focus not on developing yourself, but in developing them so that you're almost making yourself redundant. If you can develop that group and trust that group and give that group the power and the authority and the confidence to go make their own decisions, then you are freed up to go outside and begin to look around and see what's going on, which I think is the crucial thing.

Asif [00:31:22] So kind of there we have it. Leadership, it seems to be around serving your organisation. The best leaders seem to be open, collaborative, inclusive. Very curious about what might be possible. They don't know everything. They don't delve into the weeds of the technology or the features of the functions of the processes, but they kind of surround themselves with the right people. And so you don't necessarily, from what I've understood from today's conversation, don't necessarily have to go on a course to develop leadership. It sounds like we can develop leadership in situ whilst doing our job. And the top two tips that I've taken from this conversation is get in amongst your people and start scouting out for this magnificent six, magnificent seven is the movie, but. Can we stretch it to seven, Nick? Can we go from six to seven? Just so it's as good as a sound bite. So go find your magnificent seven of people that you ordinarily wouldn't think are the automatic choices for leadership. But go and look for the people with those qualities. And it whilst it's not an easy process, it sounds like that's the sort of thing that everybody could literally do tomorrow if they wanted to. Would you guys agree?

Nick [00:32:40] Totally. I think that's exactly right. And and it's it's it's not a long, drawn out process. It's something you can start, you can make a mistake and get it wrong. You can go back, you can try again. You just need to start. You just need to make that first move and begin to enthuse and energise and provide your teams with the authority to go make their own decisions and let them make mistakes, occasionally, controlled.

Asif [00:33:06] Do you think there's a network of people, so again, put myself in the shoes, I'm listening to this podcast, you to know what Jason and Nick, they speak sense. I'm going to get this done. Actually, I need a bit of help. Where the hell do I go to kind of like, get some help? You know? Jason, I know you have communities of people together. Nick, I know you guys are talking about communities, but how important is a sense of a community that you can tap into and just ask someone else like me? I'm thinking of doing X, Y and Z. Did it work? Do those communities really exist?

Jason [00:33:39] I think so. I mean, I've think there are, you know, particularly within the SME community. I think there are you know, there are groups of people, many groups of people really that there will be open to having conversations where they can share the same sort of pain that, you know, that we that we're describing really. I mean, this isn't a rare issue.

It's a it's a very common issue, I think. And even if you know, even if those collaborators aren't going through now, they certainly will have been. So, yeah, I mean, there are lots of business communities. And Nick mentioned the importance of going out and meeting people and building connections. That's exactly the purpose of doing those things, you know, into similar things that Nick's organised before. And, you know, it's waiting there [00:34:33]to be Actually, [0.8s] you know, it's it's another difficult thing to break into. And frankly, if you are the sort of person that finds it difficult to go into those communities, forming links and connections, then maybe you are not that leader you think? I don't know. You have to connect to people. You have to be able to identify people. Otherwise, you know, the aspirations of the business can't quite properly be met.

Nick [00:35:10] Yeah, I totally agree. There are lots of those communities out there. And, you know, you can start with your own professional institutions, with trade associations, with specific media groups and things like that, and there are lots and lots of forums and community sites and peer group networking opportunities. So I would grab all of those. The only thing I would say if you go down that road, you got to be careful not to end up in a sort of pigeon-holed world. So if you're into a particular type of chemical engineering, your root for better leadership is not to go and join the chemical engineering associations immediate group, because the chances are they're going to be of similar mind to you. And you need to join something a little bit different, something more challenging for you.

Jason [00:36:04] Yeah, I completely agree. And clearly, we spend a lot of time at Jonathan lee, you know, collaborating with businesses from a variety of sectors, [00:36:14]SMT, make UK. [4.7s] You know, the initiative that we're working on at the moment offers, you know, a lot of business collaboration and opportunity and those things are there for the taking, really get out there and connect to people. It is my advice.

Asif [00:36:37] Okay. So it sounds like the secret of leadership is to get out, connect with other people outside of your normal sphere and create the opportunities that will take your business forward. So I want to thank you both for a great discussion so we know that leadership is not an easy job. I think, Jason, you mentioned it's you know, it can be a lonely profession. We know the technology is sort of forcing its way through our doors. And whilst it's definitely a tool to use, technology isn't necessarily the answer. And so I hope that some of the comments and feedback from Nick and Jason have given anyone listening to this podcast some ideas, things they can literally practically try tomorrow or if they haven't, I hope it's giving you something to just help be a bit more sympathetic to your leader or your boss because they don't have an easy job. Maybe you could go and help them. So thanks for listening to The Art of the Impossible. And tune in next song.