



Strategic Leadership in Fashion: Aligning Culture, Product and Global Sourcing

A conversation with Paul Lennen and Sean Coxall exploring the intersection of leadership, culture, and operational excellence in fashion.



How operational alignment and customer-centricity drive resilience in a shifting global market

The global fashion industry currently faces a complex convergence of challenges, from volatile supply chains and geopolitical instability to rapidly changing consumer behaviours and digital disruption. In this environment of relentless change, the distinction between thriving brands and those that falter often lies not in their balance sheets or historical legacy, but in their organisational culture and leadership philosophy. Navigating these seismic shifts requires more than operational efficiency or cost-cutting; it demands a fundamental realignment of how teams collaborate, how decisions are made, and how value is defined for the customer.

Sean Coxall, a distinguished figure in the sourcing industry, joins Paul Lennen, bringing 45 years of experience across pivotal roles at Marks & Spencer, Warnaco, and two decades at Li & Fung. Together, they provide a well-informed perspective on the evolving landscape of global fashion. Having witnessed the industry's evolution from the early days of manufacturing opening in Asia to the sophisticated digital ecosystems of today, Sean suggests that the core principles of success remain rooted in people and products. His insights provide a comprehensive roadmap for leaders looking to build resilience and sustainable growth in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Aligning Culture with Commercial Strategy

A recurring point of failure for many fashion conglomerates is the disconnect between creative vision and business execution. As organisations grow, layers of bureaucracy often accumulate, stifling the very innovation and agility that made them successful in the first place. The challenge for modern leadership is not just to manage scale, but to prevent the calcification of culture that often accompanies it.

Sean points to the trajectory of the Liz Claiborne portfolio as a powerful cautionary tale for the industry. At its height, the company acquired numerous brands, attempting to build a diverse empire. However, despite the potencies, the company saw significant deterioration across its portfolio. The brands operated in silos, often competing against one another rather than sharing resources or insights. In this fragmented environment, internal politics flourished while brand equity eroded. Yet, amidst this decline, there was one notable exception: Kate Spade.

The resilience and eventual triumph of the Kate Spade brand were not accidental, nor were they solely due to superior design. It was the result of a deliberate, robust leadership structure in which the creative lead and the business lead operated in lockstep. "The difference with Kate Spade is the way the people worked together," says Sean. "It was run by two leaders joined at the hip. They made decisions together."

This symbiotic relationship at the top created a cascade effect throughout the entire organisation. Because the leaders respected one another and aligned their objectives, their respective teams—merchandising, design, sales, and sourcing—did the same. There was no 'us versus them' dynamic that plagues so many fashion houses. Instead, there was a unified culture in which commercial reality informed the creative process and creative vision drove commercial ambition.

For modern fashion leaders, this highlights a critical imperative: internal politics and siloed operations are existential threats. In a market that demands speed and consistency, there is no room for misalignment. Success requires a unified culture where the 'why' of the business is clear to everyone, from the CEO to the sourcing teams on the factory floor. Leaders must actively dismantle barriers between departments, fostering an environment in which cross-functional collaboration is the norm. When a company's creative and business engines are out of sync, the product suffers, and customers inevitably notice.

Shifting from Supply Chain to Demand Chain

The traditional retail model, characterised by long lead times, massive volume commitments, and speculative production, is becoming increasingly obsolete. Historically, companies operated on a 'push' model: designers and buyers would spend months—sometimes a year—developing a collection, only to discover, upon shipment, that trends had shifted or the product did not resonate with consumers. This approach is inefficient, environmentally damaging, and fraught with financial risk.

Sean argues that successful modern companies have flipped this dynamic, operating on a 'demand chain' rather than a supply chain. This approach prioritises agility, data, and consumer validation over volume and speculation. It transforms the supply chain from a linear, static process into a responsive, dynamic ecosystem.

Direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands have pioneered this shift, leveraging their proximity to customers to test and learn rapidly. They might produce small batches of a new style, gauge sell-through rate and customer feedback in real time and commit to larger production runs only when demand is proven. "The successful companies of today have what I call a demand chain," Sean notes. "In a very short way of explaining that, the old-style companies would spend a year developing a product and then ship it and then find out it doesn't sell."

Implementing a demand chain requires a complete rethinking of sourcing relationships and production timelines. It means moving away from the relentless pursuit of the lowest FOB (Free on Board) price and towards a value equation that includes speed, flexibility, and reduced inventory risk. It requires partners who can handle smaller minimum order quantities (MOQs) and rapid replenishment.

Critically, this shift necessitates a relentless focus on the product itself. In a demand-led world, you cannot hide behind marketing or heavy discounting. The product must stand on its own merit. Leaders must remain close to the merchandise and the customer feedback loop. When executives lose sight of the product—delegating too much to spreadsheets and committees—the brand loses its relevance. As Sean emphasises, **"Product is king, and customer is king."**

This mantra is not just a slogan; it is an operational philosophy. It means that every decision, from fabric selection to logistics, must be evaluated through the customer's lens. Does this add value? Does this solve a problem? Is this what the customer actually wants, or what we think they want? Leaders like Stuart Machin at Marks & Spencer and Daniel Grieder at Hugo Boss exemplify this approach. They are not distant administrators; they are merchants at heart, constantly engaging with the product and the customer experience. They understand that in a crowded market, product excellence is the only true differentiator.

The Rise of Asian Innovation

For decades, the West viewed Asia primarily as a manufacturing hub—a place to execute designs created in London, Paris, or New York. The flow of innovation was assumed to be unidirectional: Western creativity enabled by Eastern labour. However, the centre of gravity is shifting profoundly. We are seeing the emergence of Asian brands that compete not on cost, but on design, innovation, and retail experience.

This shift has been evident for some time in the automotive and technology sectors. Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) are now setting global standards for battery technology

and software integration. Tech giants like Xiaomi are creating ecosystems that rival Silicon Valley. This wave of high-value innovation is now permeating the fashion industry.

Brands like Urban Revivo, Bosideng, and Li-Ning are expanding internationally, offering high-quality design at competitive price points. They are challenging the dominance of Western fast fashion and mid-market players. Sean observes a critical difference in their business models: while Western legacy brands often operate on high markup models (often 10 to 20 times FOB), emerging Asian competitors are delivering comparable quality at significantly lower markups (often 4 to 5 times FOB).

This challenges the established value equation. If a consumer can purchase a coat from a Chinese brand that uses the same high-quality down and technical fabric as a European brand, but at a third of the price, the competitive pressure on Western margins becomes immense. The assumption that 'Made in China' implies lower quality or lack of design sophistication is outdated.

Today, Chinese brands are hiring top global talent—Bosideng, for example, has collaborated with former designers from Jean Paul Gaultier—to blend technical manufacturing prowess with high-fashion aesthetics.

Furthermore, the retail experience in major Chinese cities like Shenzhen and Shanghai has evolved rapidly. Shopping destinations have transformed into experiential hubs that blend technology, lifestyle, and commerce in ways that often surpass Western equivalents. Sean describes malls that feel "like going to another planet," integrating outdoor spaces, digital interactivity, and seamless service.

"I don't think the average person has any idea of what's going on in China," states Sean. He suggests that Western executives who have not visited the region since the pandemic began risk underestimating the competition's sophistication. The 'copycat' era is over; the era of Asian brand leadership has begun. Western leaders must now look East not just for suppliers, but for competitors and, crucially, for inspiration on how to reinvent the retail experience.

Navigating the Sourcing Ecosystem

As the geopolitical and economic landscape changes, so too does the sourcing model. The trade shifts of recent years—driven by tariffs, rising costs in China, and supply chain diversification—forced many companies to relocate production to regions such as Vietnam, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India. While this 'China Plus One' strategy diversified risk, it often came with trade-offs.

Sean notes that while these alternative hubs offer lower labour costs, they sometimes lack the mature infrastructure, vertical integration, and technical skill base found in China. Quality issues, longer lead times, and reliance on imported raw materials can erode the theoretical cost savings. China remains a dominant force for complex, high-quality manufacturing, particularly for brands that require speed and technical precision.

The sophisticated supply chain ecosystem in China—where fabric mills, trim suppliers, and garment factories are geographically clustered—allows for a speed of development that is hard to replicate elsewhere. For brands operating on a 'demand chain' model, this speed is often worth the premium.

However, the sourcing landscape is not static. We are seeing a bifurcation in sourcing strategies. High-volume, basic commodity products continue to move to lower-cost regions, while fashion-forward, complex, and quick-response products remain in or return to China and nearby sophisticated hubs.

For small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and startups, the complexity of managing a global supply chain can be prohibitive. While retail giants like Walmart and Costco may have the resources to go direct to factories and manage their own compliance, quality assurance, and logistics teams, smaller brands launching diverse collections often lack the infrastructure to manage dozens of supplier relationships effectively.

Here, the role of the intermediary remains vital—but the definition of value has changed. The old 'post box' agent, who simply passed tech packs to factories and took a commission, is dying out. Today's brands need strategic partners. They need agents who offer genuine value-added services: design support, fabric innovation, 3D sampling, and sustainability compliance.

Sean recounts developing a product line where the factory, despite having the right machinery, struggled to capture the brand's specific 'DNA' or aesthetic nuance. It required deep technical intervention and on-site guidance to bridge the gap between a garment that was technically correct and one that felt 'right' for the consumer. This ability to translate brand vision into manufacturing reality is where the modern sourcing partner proves their worth. The future of sourcing is not one-size-fits-all; it requires a strategic assessment of where a brand sits in its lifecycle and what partners can best unlock its potential.

Leadership Evolution: From Star to Coach

Perhaps the most significant insight Sean offers concerns the personal evolution required of leaders. In the early stages of a career, success is often defined by individual contribution—being the best buyer, the sharpest negotiator, or the most creative designer. One rises by being a 'star'.

However, ascending to senior leadership demands a complete inversion of this mindset. "You no longer can be the star; your job is to develop stars," Sean asserts. This transition is notoriously difficult. Many executives struggle to let go of the ego validation that comes from being the expert in the room. They continue to hoard decision-making power, becoming bottlenecks that stifle their teams' growth

Sean warns that when leaders fail to make this transition, they can become "monsters"—ego-driven figures who rule by fear or micromanagement. In contrast, effective leaders act as coaches. Their primary role is to align smart facilitated collaboration and remove obstacles. They understand that in a complex global business, no single individual has all the answers.

This requires a high degree of emotional intelligence and humility. It involves listening more than speaking and being willing to change one's mind in the face of new evidence. "Successful people... they're not smarter than anybody else," Sean observes. "They change their mind." This adaptability is crucial. In a rapidly changing market, rigid adherence to a past strategy or a personal opinion is a liability. The ability to pivot, admit mistakes, and empower others to find solutions is the hallmark of resilient leadership.

Sean also touches on the role of spirituality and humanity in leadership. Following personal tragedy, he adopted a philosophy focused on controlling the ego and treating others with compassion. He argues that the workplace should not be devoid of humanity. Leaders who care for their teams create environments where people feel safe to take risks and innovate. "When you take care of others, you don't have to worry about yourself," he says. This is not just a moral stance, but a pragmatic one. High-performing teams are built on trust, and trust is built on genuine human connection.

Conclusion

The fashion industry stands at a crossroads. The era of easy growth, driven by expanding markets and cheap labour, is largely over. We are entering a period of intense competition, where value is scrutinised, speed is essential, and authenticity is non-negotiable.

To survive and thrive, Western companies must shed the bureaucratic weight that slows them down. They must dismantle the silos that separate creativity from commerce. They need to look at the rising power of Asian brands not with dismissal, but with the intent to learn and compete.

Most importantly, they must return to the fundamentals. They must build cultures that empower teams rather than constrain them. They must listen to the customer with genuine curiosity. And they must remember the unshakeable truth that sits at the heart of this industry: Product is king. No amount of marketing spend or supply chain optimisation can compensate for a product that fails to excite the consumer.

The leaders who will define the next decade of fashion will be those who can balance these operational complexities with a clear, human-centric vision. They will be the ones who understand that their role is not to shine the brightest, but to illuminate the path for others. In a market defined by relentless change, this clarity of purpose and adaptability of method is the ultimate competitive advantage.