Supplier Partnerships, Risk, and the Future of Sourcing Leadership: A Conversation with Laurent Madelaine, Former Chief Product & Supply Chain Officer at Gymshark

Paul Lennen speaks with Laurent Madelaine, former Chief Product & Supply Chain Officer at Gymshark, about a career spanning Carrefour, Tesco, and Lacoste. Their conversation covers what world-class supplier partnerships require, how to manage risk when tariffs and disruption strike overnight, the rise of sourcing as a boardroom priority, building talent, and where AI and near-shoring genuinely fit.

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From the Shop Floor to Sourcing Executive

Laurent's path started on the retail floor at Carrefour, managing footwear and home textile departments before moving into buying and merchandising. In 2001, he was sent to Bangladesh to set up Carrefour's sourcing office from scratch, a market the business barely understood at the time. From there, he moved to Tesco, starting a period of twenty years based in Hong Kong leading clothing and footwear sourcing, before taking on end-to-end product development, sourcing, supply chain, and distribution centre operations at various brands including Sears, Lacoste, and more recently at Gymshark in the UK. .

He credits that multi-functional path, store operations, buying, then sourcing, with giving him an understanding of what colleagues actually need. Arriving in Bangladesh, he already knew what buyers wanted and where the gaps typically sat, which shaped how he brought buying teams into an unfamiliar market. His view is that sourcing is a service function within a wider chain, and understanding each link matters more than any single technical skill.

Building World-Class Supplier Partnerships

Asked what "world-class supplier partnerships" means in practice, Laurent broke it into standards and relationship.

On standards, brands need manufacturers capable of operating at an industry-specialist level: the right material capability, technology, and factory standards. Where a supplier isn't yet there, the brand's role is to help them reach it, through direct investment or by raising expectations against a benchmark.

The relationship side is about creating what he calls emotional attachment, making the brand matter to the supplier, and vice versa. At Lacoste, that meant hosting supplier conferences during the French Open in Paris; at Gymshark, it means inviting suppliers to Lift events so they understand the brand's community and customer base. Supplier conferences work best, he says, when they explain the business and its direction rather than just quality standards, because suppliers who understand and believe in a brand are more willing to invest in it.

That investment takes several forms: production capacity secured through multi-season planning, machinery and technology upgrades, and a willingness to follow the brand into new sourcing countries rather than losing the business to a different supplier. He noted that Chinese suppliers, in particular, have been proactive about investing overseas alongside their brand partners.

Laurent pushed back gently on the idea that partnership means friendship. It's a business arrangement: brands bring volume and growth, suppliers respond with capacity and investment, and both sides do what they say they'll do. Even strong partnerships involve tension and negotiation, disputes happen, and moving production to a new country often meets supplier resistance that needs to be worked through rather than ignored.

Consistency matters too. Laurent emphasised a clear sourcing strategy communicated the same way across the whole team, so suppliers hear one message whether they're speaking to the sourcing executive or the buyer. He also stressed transparency about a brand's own challenges, such as inaccurate planning, so suppliers aren't caught by surprises they weren't warned about.

Managing Risk in an Unpredictable Environment

Laurent's starting point on risk is "de-risking" the end-to-end supply chain, not just garment manufacturing, but the fibre, trims, and materials that feed into it. Disruption itself isn't new, he noted, recalling anti-dumping embargoes and quota changes earlier in his career. What's changed is predictability: geopolitical shifts and tariff changes now happen overnight, making multi-sourcing more essential.

He walked through a recent example: new US tariffs that suddenly shifted duty rates on goods from Vietnam and other countries. His approach was to stay calm, assess quickly with the right people in the room, and model scenarios rather than react impulsively. Because some previously duty-free countries became newly subject to a 10% tariff, his team shifted volume between regions, moving some sourcing from the Middle East back to Asia and vice versa, effectively building a different supply base for the US market than for Europe.

His broader lesson: don't rush overnight decisions, but don't sit idle either. The practical work is measuring financial impact, understanding what the business can absorb, and building contingency plans, recognising that stock already in production or in transit can't simply be redirected on a whim.

Sourcing's Rise Within the Business

Paul raised the shift in how sourcing is perceived, from a background service function to a strategic voice in the boardroom, particularly since the pandemic forced CEOs to ask pointed questions about commitments and exposure. Laurent agreed the function's visibility has changed: businesses now expect real-time accuracy on critical path and production status, not answers that take two weeks to compile.

He also pointed to the value of getting senior leaders, CEOs, founders, marketing colleagues, onto factory floors directly. In his experience, executives find these visits a source of inspiration because they're different from the usual competitor store visits, and meeting the people running supplier operations changes how they understand the business.

On investment, Laurent noted that logistics and distribution centre operations are a relatively easy sell, since inefficiency there has an obvious cost. Sourcing investment has shifted in nature rather than disappeared: fewer large in-market sourcing offices with local intermediaries, and more investment in teams that travel, understand supplier capability directly, and can advise buyers and designers on what's achievable, partly because supplier communication no longer requires the local intermediary layer it once did.

Team, Talent, and What He Looks For

Asked about building high-performing sourcing teams, Laurent prioritised the ability to collaborate over ego, alongside genuine curiosity. Assumptions about a market or supplier can go stale quickly, he said, describing how he once dismissed Morocco as a sourcing option after an early visit, only for a colleague to later find that a new generation had taken over local factories and built fast-turnaround capability comparable to what Zara was using. He'd missed it by not going back to check.

Technical knowledge, in his view, can be taught: he started at Carrefour knowing nothing about the products he was buying and learned from suppliers directly. What can't easily be taught is the willingness to travel to difficult places, work long hours, and sometimes discover a sourcing trip won't lead anywhere after weeks of preparation.

On career paths into sourcing, Laurent noted there's no formal academic route, unlike buying, merchandising, or marketing. He sees that as both a gap and an opportunity, pointing out that sourcing careers have historically been open to people starting from almost anywhere, provided they're willing to travel internationally.

Artificial Intelligence: Useful, But Know Your Process First

Laurent's view on AI is pragmatic. He's already seeing it used effectively in factories, fabric defect detection being one example, and believes brands should encourage suppliers to adopt it. For internal teams, his condition is that AI should be applied to a process the team already understands deeply: critical path management, planning consolidation, and costing were the areas he flagged as good candidates for accuracy and speed gains.

He was cautious about protecting proprietary know-how, citing Lacoste's automated production of the polo shirt placket as manufacturing IP that needs careful handling once AI tools are introduced, since information fed into external systems can become effectively public. On whether to build AI capability in-house or through partners, he considers it too early to have a fixed view, arguing brands first need to establish whether a given application genuinely solves a real pain point before deciding how to resource it.

Near-Shoring and Speed: Not a Universal Answer

On near-shoring, Laurent was clear it isn't a one-size-fits-all strategy. Luxury and premium brands often need to slow production down for the sake of detail and craftsmanship. He also flagged a practical trap: near-shoring production while still sourcing materials from Asia can erase any lead-time benefit, since the fabric or trim delay may exceed what's saved on final assembly.

Drawing on his own career, he traced sourcing's geographic pendulum, from France, to Spain, Portugal, and Morocco, to South Asia, to China, to Southeast Asia, and partly back again, noting that at Tesco a portion of womenswear was deliberately sourced from Turkey, Morocco, and Eastern Europe to stay closer to fast-moving trends. Post-pandemic logistics inflation also made near-shoring more attractive for European sourcing for a period. His broader point: near-shoring functions best as one lever within a de-risking strategy, not a standalone solution, and shifting toward it is typically a company-wide project rather than something sourcing can execute alone.

Advice to Suppliers

Asked what counsel he'd give suppliers navigating this environment, Laurent's advice was to build long-term loyalty with a manageable number of brand partners rather than spreading thin across too many customers, and, where possible, to avoid ending up in the same facility as a direct competitor of an existing client.

Closing Reflections

Reflecting on his own career, Laurent pointed to his move to Bangladesh as the pivotal moment, an entrepreneurial leap into a market Carrefour barely had a presence in. He also spoke about the satisfaction of watching people he'd worked with, and the suppliers themselves, grow over the years. His closing message centred on mentoring the next generation into sourcing roles, noting that younger talent typically brings a stronger, faster grasp of new technology, something he sees as important for the industry going forward.