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**Michael Clayton**

Executive Chair, IRCO  
Co-Founder, The Rubber Initiative®



**Industry service has run alongside the executive career. Thirteen years as Chair of the Australasian Plastics and Rubber Institute. Sixteen years on the IRCO Council, attending the International Rubber Conferences as the Australian national delegate. Helped develop the modernised IRCO constitution. Conference opener and VIP at RubberCon 2024 in Kochi. Today, Executive Chair of IRCO itself.**

**Through The Rubber Initiative<sup>®</sup>, Michael works with business owners and executive teams to move "Beyond Planning. Doing." The work is building execution discipline, accountability and operational performance inside their organisations.**

**In this conversation, Michael shares his views on operational execution, leadership development, the next-generation leadership gap, manufacturing competitiveness and global industry collaboration.**

## **FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR TO THE EXECUTIVE SEAT**

### **What initially drew you into the rubber industry, and what made you stay?**

The door in was research, not industry. While I was doing postgraduate work at the University of Queensland on polylactic acid and biodegradable polymer systems, the university connected me with a local rubber manufacturer whose technical manager was retiring after over forty years in the industry. The part-time consulting turned into a full-time technical position fairly quickly.

What I loved about the material was that it solves problems. Vibration, sealing, dampening, dynamic properties, abrasion resistance. The applications run across almost every industry that matters. In one week the conversations would move from mining to defence to transportation to agriculture. The work itself was layered. Compound formulation and rubber chemistry. Product design, the shape of an extrusion or a moulding. Then the tooling, then the operational scale-up. As an engineer, it was endlessly interesting. No two days were the same and there was always a problem worth solving.



# IRC 2023

## Haikou, China



INTERNATIONAL RUBBER CONFERENCE 2023 (HAIKOU)  
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People in the industry will tell you the same thing. You never leave the rubber industry. After more than twenty years it was a big decision to step away and pursue something else. The reality has been different. The connections through clients, peers and the professional institutes hold. And the same retiring-mentor cycle that opened the door for me twenty-odd years ago is the thing the industry is now grappling with at scale.

**You spent more than a decade at Allied Rubber Technologies. What did that experience teach you about how a rubber manufacturing business truly operates?**

Allied was a small-to-medium business, around twenty people growing to nearly forty during my time there. In a business that size, the Technical Manager carries almost every facet of the operation in some way. That is what Allied taught me, more than anything else.

The material itself was a constant. Getting a rubber compound right is not a single event. Performance has to hold across batches. Quality has to meet specification. Raw material variability is a constant fight, particularly with natural rubber compounds. Any change at the supply end, or the sub-tropical weather conditions of Queensland, can mean revalidating something that had been stable for years.

Then there are the people. Allied was my first time leading on a production shop floor. The leadership team was very lean. A General Manager, a Technical Manager, an admin and sales role, and the rest of the business out on the shop floor. Working with the people who actually make the product teaches you very quickly that the relationships are the operation itself. The same is true outside the building. Suppliers and customers were not transactional. The good ones were partnerships built over years.

The role also carried the commercial side. Estimates, quotes, onboarding new customers, developing the product alongside them, pricing it, then turning it into reality on the shop floor and tuning it once it was running. Layered on top were the compliance disciplines. HR, workplace health and safety, the regulatory weight that comes with operating heavy plant.

In a small to medium manufacturing business, the technical lead does not get to specialise. Material, people, customer, compliance, cash. They all sit in the same job, and each one affects the others. You learn to balance them, sometimes well, sometimes uncomfortably.

That is the foundation that lets you walk into a healthy business later and recognise it inside ten minutes. You have seen the parts work together. You know what it looks like when one of them is out of step.

***“In a small to medium manufacturing business, the technical lead does not get to specialise. Material, people, customer, compliance, cash. They all sit in the same job, and each one affects the others. Learn to balance them and you can read a healthy business in ten minutes.”***

**Your career evolved from Technical Manager to General Manager, CEO, and now fractional executive leadership. What changed at each stage, and which transition challenged you the most?**

*Four transitions, each one its own kind of stretch.*

The move from Technical Manager at Allied to General Manager at Derby was the hardest. As a Technical Manager I had a heavy reliance on my technical expertise. It was the work I was most comfortable doing. When I moved to Derby, the business already had a very capable Technical Manager. My technical knowledge still gave me credibility on the shop floor and with stakeholders, but it was no longer my job. As the site and business leader I quickly discovered that all eyes looked to me. The mistakes you make as a Technical Manager might cost you some material waste, product outside specification, or a machine breakdown. The mistakes you make as a General Manager play out on a different level entirely. That was the first time I had to identify the gaps I needed to fill as a leader, and the first time I carried responsibility for a P&L rather than sitting alongside it as the second-in-command.

The shift from General Manager to CEO was about strategic oversight. Coming on as a director of the company. Working with the leadership team to shape the strategy and to execute it together. The work moved up a level, from running the operation to setting where it was going.

The move from CEO at Derby Rubber to COO at KELLY Tillage took me out of the rubber industry for the first time. The realisation there was that my transferable skills were not the technical ones. They were strategy execution, running an operational business, leading people, and the strategic rhythms required to deliver against the plan. The decision-making was different too. In a larger organisation I worked with managers who were much more technically proficient than me in their own fields. My role was no longer about making the quick operational calls. The work was asking the right questions, giving direction and purpose, and stepping out of the team's way so they could decide.

The transition to fractional executive at The Rubber Initiative® kept many of the parts of executive work I most enjoyed. Developing strategy. Executing strategy. Laying the foundations for growth. Working alongside bright, forward-thinking business owners and leaders. The change was the focus and the depth. As a fractional executive I work with owners to prioritise the parts of the strategy that need real focus, then take that work out of the business, give it the space and depth to come back highly polished and able to plug straight back in.

The one that challenged me the most was the first. Technical Manager to General Manager. After that, every transition was clearly about identity and behaviour as much as skill, and that recognition is what makes the next ones easier. That first transition is where most technical professionals get stuck.

***"The hardest transition was the first one. Technical Manager to General Manager. As a Technical Manager I leaned on my expertise. As the site leader, all eyes looked to me, and I carried the P&L rather than sitting beside it. That first step is where most technical professionals get stuck."***

***"I learned that introverts lead differently to extroverts and that they can be a quietly powerful addition to executive teams."***



**You also spent time leading a business outside the rubber sector. What lessons did that environment teach you that the rubber industry alone may not have?**

Moving to KELLY was not only a move outside the rubber industry. It was a step up in the size of the organisation, and it added the discipline of reporting to an external board, with the rigour that comes from being majority private-equity-owned. If I had moved to a similar sized business inside the rubber industry, I would still have been pulled back into the technical side. Material development. Compound questions. The comfortable territory. Stepping outside the industry took that safety blanket away.

What was left was the leadership work itself. That meant a much deeper look at integrity, values, and how I actually lead. I learned that introverts lead differently to extroverts and that they can be a quietly powerful addition to executive teams. In a board meeting or an executive meeting where I was typically the only introvert at the table, the work was learning how to contribute as the introvert in the room rather than trying to be someone I wasn't.

The operational lessons were about scale and discipline. With managers across three continents, accountability is the only thing that holds the strategy together. Every manager needs to be clear on what part of the strategy they own and what success looks like for them. The leadership team needs high level data to see real progress without losing time on detail. My role at KELLY was leading the Entrepreneurial Operating System that the business used to execute on its strategy. That was good work. Systems, processes and people in equal measure.

The lessons from outside the industry are the ones we are now bringing back into rubber through the fractional work. Some of them had been missing for a long time.

**When you moved into executive leadership, what assumptions about business or leadership did you have to unlearn?**

*A few assumptions had to be put down.*

The first was that the technical skills that got me here would carry me into the next chair. As a technical expert the work is largely about you. Your knowledge, your expertise, what you bring to the formula, how you fix a compound when something goes wrong. The credit and the responsibility sit with you. In the executive chair almost none of that is true. The work is the team and the business as a whole, the cohesive leadership group, the strategy that sits above any one person. The aim, in an ideal world, is to set the business up so that it can run without you.

The second was that technical authority equals leadership authority. They look the same in a meeting. They are not. Technical authority comes from being right. Executive authority comes from being true to your leadership style and to who you actually are. That requires a lot more inward-looking work than the technical chair ever did. You have to know how you lead, what you stand for, and where your style serves the business or holds it back. Without that work, there is a ceiling on how far you can lead the business before it shows.

The third was about where attention belongs. As a technical manager you spend most of your day on today's problems. Product outside specification. Machine downtime. The customer who needs an answer this afternoon. As an executive you have to lift the head and spend more of your time on what is coming. What will affect the business positively over the next three to five years. What could affect it negatively. What you choose to do now to shape either one. The today problems still need solving, but they are no longer where the real impact sits.

You do not unlearn these assumptions in a workshop. You unlearn them in the chair, badly at first, until you stop carrying them. The workshop's job is to shorten that runway and make the unlearning deliberate, rather than something the chair forces on you over years.

## EXECUTION IS THE WORK

**The phrase "execution beats strategy" is widely used in business discussions. Where do you believe that idea holds true, and where does it fall short?**

*The saying has truth in it, but it needs more care than it usually gets. When people say execution beats strategy, "strategy" tends to mean a deck of ambitions and "execution" means people shipping the work. That comparison is rigged. Real action beats PowerPoint every time.*

Real strategy is different. In Roger Martin's *Playing to Win*, it is a cascade of integrated choices: where you play, how you win, what capabilities you need, and what systems make those choices stick. Defined that way, strategy and execution are not in competition. Strategy decides whether your execution compounds or just keeps people busy.

The saying holds true in the territory most of our fractional clients sit in. Owner-led businesses where the proposition already works in the market. The owner roughly knows what to do; the organisation cannot get it done. They are execution-bound, not strategy-bound.

It breaks down in businesses making category-defining decisions. A start-up that has not proved its market. An incumbent staring at disruption. There, no amount of execution rescues a wrong choice. Kodak executed beautifully for decades in the wrong direction. So did Blockbuster.

AI sharpens this right now. Some businesses are being disrupted, some are on the fence, some have no position on it at all. That is exactly when stepping back to scan the external environment matters. A model like PESTLE surfaces the disruptions you have not yet named. Skip it and you can execute hard for two more years in the wrong direction. Strategy sets the ceiling. Execution determines how close you get to it.

***"The reason our customers and suppliers stayed with us through the crisis was the strength of the relationships built when nothing was urgent."***



### **In your experience, where do most businesses get execution wrong?**

The biggest one is execution that is not connected to a purpose. The work becomes standalone activity instead of the delivery of a strategy. People hit the goal in front of them without knowing why it matters or what it connects to.

EOS, the Entrepreneurial Operating System, is useful here. I ran it as Integrator at Derby Rubber and KELLY Tillage for four and a half years. When vision, people, data, issues, process and traction are all running together, execution becomes the natural output. When one or two are weak, the team is still busy but the business does not move.

A lot of leadership teams also confuse hitting KPIs with executing strategy. The dashboard numbers are necessary, but shown without the why behind them you get effort without alignment.

Execution that works is people connected to purpose, with clear ownership and the discipline to keep going when the work gets boring. The frameworks help. The conversations about the why and the who matter more.

### **When you walk into a company, what signs immediately tell you whether the strategy is genuinely working or simply existing in presentations and meetings?**

The clearest case I have seen was earlier this year, at an Open Day for a structural steel fabrication business based in regional South Australia, and the signals were showing from the moment I drove into the car park.

A worker directing visitors to their parking spot, doing it with pride and energy. The greeting at the front door, warm and assured, from a person who clearly understood what their company was about. Walking the shop floor, every point of contact was the same. People talked about their work, the projects they were on, the customers they were building for. The CEO was on the floor too, knowing every person by name, knowing every project, and treating a potential boilermaker recruit like a future colleague rather than an applicant. She was approachable, enthusiastic and clearly part of the team rather than above it.

The strategy was on the wall in their building, and just as visible in how every person spoke about the business. Values were defined and lived. The vocabulary was "us" and "we", not "the company" and "they". Everyone understood the piece they were playing in delivering the bigger picture. Ownership was distributed and shared rather than held at the top.

The failure mode is just as visible. Businesses where the strategy lives in the boardroom and stays behind closed doors. The result inside the business is distrust, uncertainty and gossip, because people fill the silence with their own version of what is happening. When strategy is talked about openly, values are lived, the meeting rhythms are in place, and every person can articulate what they own and why it matters, what you get is momentum and positivity. People build the business with you rather than waiting to be told what to do.

Roughly half the businesses I walk into have some real alignment. Maybe ten per cent of them get it really right. The ten per cent are unmistakable. They know what they are. You feel it from the car park.

**Through The Rubber Initiative®, how does the fractional executive model translate into practical day-to-day execution inside client businesses?**

It depends on what the client actually needs. Sometimes it is fully embedded executive bandwidth inside the business. Sometimes it is project shaped, where a piece of the strategy is pulled out, worked on with focus and depth, and plugged back in.

The project shape is often the most valuable. Inside an executive seat there are always operational and people issues taking the day. There is rarely time to step back and work deeply on one part of the business. I can take that piece out, give it the headspace it needs, and bring it back ready to act on. It does not sit in a report that needs translating or socialising first. It plugs straight in.

A second part of the role is being a sounding board. Most owners have no one inside the business they can talk a hard problem through with. Because I sit outside it, I carry no emotional ties to the issue, so I can strip the emotion back and offer a response built for the long-term good of the business, not just the next decision.

The work also partners well with strategy facilitators. Many engagements start because a business has just had a strong strategy day and the owner has no bandwidth to action it while running the business. I carry the strategy forward so they can keep running growth and operations. When the model works, the client does not need us anymore. That is the success measure.



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## In manufacturing businesses, where do you most commonly see hidden inefficiencies that leadership teams underestimate?

Hidden inefficiency usually lives in the gap between what the operators know and what the leadership team measures. The shop floor can almost always tell you where the waste is. The leadership team is often looking somewhere else. A few places I see it most. Inventory first. Comfort stock that is really fear stock, working capital tied up in safety quantities nobody has challenged in years. Alongside it, obsolete stock sitting through three changes of customer specification, taking up space and quietly losing value.

The most expensive habit in manufacturing is "this is how we have always done it." It blocks new compound additives, new processes, new ways of running a line. Innovation is one of the strongest efficiency levers a business has, and the one most often deprioritised because the leadership team is too busy with today. Matthew runs a full workshop session on this. The businesses that keep improving treat innovation as a disciplined ongoing activity, not a project for when there is time.

The third is decision drag. The floor sees a problem early, but the information takes weeks to climb to where the call gets made. The cost is in the delay, not the original call. What fixes it is a clearer strategy. When the values, goals and accountability are defined well enough, the people closest to the work can make the call themselves, as long as it fits the financial constraint, moves towards a goal and serves the purpose. The inefficiency in the old model is the people who could be deciding but are waiting for someone else to.

## LEADERSHIP, HONESTLY

### How would you describe your leadership style today, and how has it evolved over the years?

*My leadership style today is a blend of authentic and authoritative.* The *authentic* side leads with transparency and honesty. Setting a clear vision and connecting every person to the "why" behind it. Building strong teams and strong relationships with stakeholders both inside and outside the business. The *authoritative* side provides clear direction in the form of strategy, defines accountability, makes the difficult decisions when they need to be made, sets expectations and boundaries, and lets the team know I have their back when something goes wrong.

The combination builds trust and certainty in the business. It also creates room for people to make decisions at their level, because the framework around them is clear. How did I get here? Honestly, through a passion for learning and by making mistakes through the move from Technical Manager into General Manager and executive seats. The other ingredient was resilience. Bringing a generally positive outlook to whatever the role demanded, and doing the reflective work to understand who I am, what I stand for, what my strengths are, and what my values are. The most effective version of me as a leader is the one that is true to myself, not the one trying to imitate a leader with a completely different value set. That recognition does not come quickly. It takes years of being in the chair, paying attention, and being honest about what you see.

## What do you believe the rubber industry still gets wrong about leadership and people management?

*This is a tough question, and the honest answer might be uncomfortable for the industry.*

The biggest blind spot is the assumption that you have to be a technical and chemistry expert to lead a rubber business. That belief has run through the industry for decades. It built a generation of strong technical CEOs and GMs who knew the material inside out and ran their businesses on that authority. The trouble now is twofold. The technical authority that earned that generation their chair is walking out the door with them as they retire. And the role itself has changed. A modern executive seat in a rubber business needs commercial discipline, financial literacy, people leadership and the ability to navigate a far more complex regulatory and customer landscape than it used to. Technical depth is one part of that. It is no longer the whole job.

The second blind spot is the promotion decision itself. The best compounder in the room is not automatically the best general manager. We promote people for what they have done well rather than for what the next chair will demand of them. Without a deliberate development pathway for the gap between the two, the technically strong professional ends up underprepared and the business carries the cost.

The third is the imbalance between technical training and leadership development. The industry is rich in polymer science, compounding and process courses. There is almost no executive development that knows the industry from the inside. The result is that technical professionals are well prepared for technical work and underprepared for the leadership work that follows it.

Leadership in this industry is now a deliberate development question. Pretending it is something people pick up on the way is what is going to cost the industry its next decade.

***“For decades this industry believed you had to be a technical and chemistry expert to lead a rubber business. That authority is now walking out the door as that generation retires, and the chair has changed. Leadership here is a deliberate development question, not something people pick up on the way.”***

CREATING  
INDUSTRY'S  
FUTURE  
LEADERS



"This award recognises the leader that I am today and is an investment in what I can achieve in the future. The best leaders never stop learning."

**Michael Clayton**  
CEO, Derby Rubber  
Industry Leaders Fund Scholar 2022



**Was there a moment when you stopped trying to be the smartest person in the room? What changed in your leadership approach after that realisation?**

This is a place a lot of CEOs and general managers find themselves stuck in, particularly in smaller businesses, and even more so when the leader has come up through a technical background. You walk into the room as one of the smartest people in it, and you lean into that as part of your leadership authority. It feels right at first.

It is also exhausting. You are holding onto a lot of the decision-making yourself, because you can. The technical authority lets you make the call quickly. The business keeps moving. While things are going well it feels like effective leadership.

The trouble shows up as the business grows. You become the bottleneck. Decisions wait on you. The team is not empowered to make calls because they have always seen you make them. The leader who used to be the energy of the business becomes the brake on it.

The realisation came for me when I moved into a medium sized business with more people, more structure, and a leadership team who were smarter than I was across most of the parts I needed to know about. The role had to be redefined. My managers were not looking to me for a person who would tell them what to do. They were looking for someone who would set the direction, ask the right questions, and trust them to do the work.

What changed in practice was simple to describe and harder to do. I stopped solving and started asking. The questions I now bring to a meeting are more useful than the answers I used to bring. In hiring, I look for people who are stronger than me in their domain. The instinct to hire down for comfort is real and has to be fought every time. The role of the executive is to engineer the room, not to dominate it.

**What does authentic leadership look like at the executive level, and where are its limitations?**

Authentic leadership at the executive level leads with transparency and honesty. It looks like setting a clear vision, connecting every person in the business to the "why" behind it, and building the teams and stakeholder relationships that carry that vision into the work. It is open. It is considered rather than performative. It treats the people in the business as adults who can handle the truth about where things stand.

Part of the executive role is also holding the longer lens. You see further than the people doing the day to day. The job is to turn what you see into direction and purpose the team can act on. Sharing your concerns and your excitement openly is part of building trust. Reacting to every short-term swing with the team is not.

The limit is that authentic leadership is the default, not the only mode. There are moments where the room needs to know who is making the call, and that the call has been made. Crisis is the most obvious one.

The clearest example for me was the fire that destroyed the Derby Rubber manufacturing facility and the operational rebuild that followed. That was not the time for collaborative decision-making on the operational call. People had just lost their workplace. Customers needed answers. The supply chain needed to know what was happening. Authoritative leadership in that situation does not mean dictatorial. It means a clear call has been made, the responsibility for it has been taken, and the team knows the leader has their back through the consequences.

What is interesting in that story is how much of the rebuild rested on the authentic leadership style we had been running for years before the fire. The reason our customers and suppliers stayed with us through the crisis was the strength of the relationships built when nothing was urgent. The work of long-term, considered, transparent leadership had earned us the trust we needed to spend in a critical moment.

That is the deeper point. *Authentic and authoritative are not in tension. Authentic is what you build with. Authoritative is what you draw on when the situation demands it. Both rest on trust. Without trust, neither one works.*

## THE NEXT-GENERATION LEADERSHIP GAP

**What important topic in the rubber industry do you believe is not being discussed enough today?**

The biggest one is the generational shift at the top of our industry. It is happening across every region, and it is not being talked about anywhere near as much as it should be. The cohort that built the modern rubber industry will retire in the next five years. They hold the senior leadership seats across global compounding, manufacturing, distribution and the trade bodies. What they take with them is more than their job titles. Decades of customer relationships, technical judgement and institutional memory of how the industry actually works.

The cohort behind them are technical professionals in their thirties and forties. Strong on the science and the operations. Many of them have been held in technical roles for too long, because that is what their businesses needed and what their managers understood. The executive seats they are about to inherit demand a much wider skill set than the technical career has prepared them for. Most are not yet ready. That is not a criticism. It is a fact about what the industry has invested in developing and what it has not.

The third part of this, which nobody is talking about, is that the generation that is retiring are not the right people to prepare the generation that is about to step up. Leadership in the rubber industry has changed. The job they trained for is not the job they are handing over. Commercial complexity is higher. Customer expectations are higher. Regulatory and sustainability obligations are higher. AI is in the room. The executive seat is now a much more demanding chair than the one they sat in when they took it on twenty or thirty years ago.

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# IRC 2

## BANGKOK, THAILAND

### International Rubber Conference

Theme: Balancing Nature and Development

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While the industry focuses on sustainability frameworks, materials science breakthroughs and circular economy models, the leadership bench that has to deliver them is thinning. The frameworks need leaders to implement them. Those leaders are not yet ready.

Every other conversation in this industry depends on this one. The reason it is not being had is that the people who would naturally start it are themselves the people retiring.

### **What do you think the rubber industry is still unprepared for over the next five years?**

*A few things stand out.* The first is the institutional knowledge void that follows the leadership transition we have just talked about. Most rubber businesses do not have a deliberate process for capturing what their senior people know before they leave. The tribal knowledge of who to call when a customer's compound is misbehaving. The judgement about which raw material substitution will actually hold under load. The supplier relationship that has been carried by one person for twenty years and is not written down anywhere. When that person retires, the void is real and the cost of rebuilding from scratch is much higher than the investment in capturing it ahead of time.

The second is what is going to disrupt the industry next. Most leadership teams are running on the assumption that the next five years will look like the last five. The discipline of stepping outside the day to day and scanning for what is actually changing in the political, economic, technological and regulatory landscape is not built into most strategic conversations. The businesses that are scanning are the ones that will be ready. The businesses that are not will be reacting late.

The third is AI. The rubber and polymer industry is traditionally hands on and heavy. Equipment, materials, plant, people on the floor. That has shaped how the industry thinks about technology. Most technical businesses are still treating AI as a curiosity for the R&D team and for light admin. It is going to remake operational decision-making, customer interaction, supplier intelligence and quality systems first. Five years is a short time to build that capability inside a business that does not see itself as a software business. The advantage will compound for those who engage with AI now. The ones that wait will spend years trying to close the gap.

The industry is preparing reasonably well for material science questions. It is not yet preparing for the people questions and the operational questions sitting underneath them.

***“The industry is preparing reasonably well for the material science questions. It is not yet ready for the people questions sitting underneath them. The senior knowledge walking out the door, the disruption nobody is scanning for, and an industry still treating AI as a curiosity for the R&D team. Those are the real risks.”***

### **What advice would you give to a strong technical professional who is suddenly pushed into a general management role?**

First and most importantly, you have got this. The fact that you were chosen for the role means people see the leadership in you, even if it does not yet feel obvious to you. The work ahead is real but doable. A few specific places to focus.

Do the personal work alongside the professional work. The transition is identity work, not skill work. Understanding who you are, what you stand for, what your values are, and how you naturally lead is what lets you build a leadership style that is sustainable. Trying to copy a leader you admire with a completely different value set is exhausting and does not stick. Start with yourself.

Be clear about what the role is and what it is not. A general manager in most businesses sits in the second-in-command seat, or what some frameworks call the Integrator role. The work is structure, rigour, process, financial discipline, and the people leadership underneath all of it. It is not the role that holds the long-term vision for the business. That sits with the owner or managing director. Understanding that boundary is what makes the partnership work.

That partnership with the owner or managing director is one of the most important relationships you will manage in the role. The dynamic between the person setting direction and the person making it happen is where the difference is made in a business. Get that relationship right and the business has the energy of both sides working together. Get it wrong and the business spends years working at half capacity.

*Find a peer group.* An executive leadership roundtable or a learning group that meets regularly, ideally once a month. The work of being a General Manager is also the work of your own development. You need a room of people who are doing the same job, learning from each other, hearing from mentors and presenters, and willing to be honest when something is not working. That kind of peer environment is one of the few places this transition actually accelerates.

Treat it as a learning curve, and you will get there.

### **How is leadership development for technical managers fundamentally different from generic management training programs?**

I want to start by saying that generic management training is essential, not optional. I have done a lot of it across my career and almost all of my growth as an executive leader has come from learning alongside business leaders from other industries. Sitting in a room with leaders from financial services, retail, construction or technology forces you to see your own thinking through a different lens. If you only ever surround yourself with people from your own sector, you close off a huge part of what you can learn.

So, the question is not whether development specific to the rubber industry replaces generic management training. It complements it.

*"Strategy sets the ceiling. Execution determines how close you get to it."*



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What Matthew and I are building with the workshop programme starts from the broader principles that any good executive development covers and distils them down to what works specifically for the rubber and polymer industry. The case studies are recognisable. The frameworks are presented through examples that people in the industry have lived themselves. That makes the learning land faster because there is no translation step in the way.

It is also a focused space for rubber industry leaders to work through this leadership transition together. Talking about it openly. Sharing what works and what does not when you are the technical professional who has just been pushed into a general management seat. Hearing other people in similar roles, in the same industry, navigating the same challenges.

The combination is what we are recommending. The generic programmes for breadth, perspective and learning across sectors. The work specific to the rubber industry to distil those principles into something immediately practical inside the business you are actually leading. Both serve the leader who wants to do the role properly.

## SERVICE, SCALE AND WHAT COMES NEXT

**Industry service has clearly been an important part of your journey. What has that contribution meant personally and professionally to you?**

A sense of community service has been with me from a very young age. Giving back, contributing, mentoring, staying connected to people. It has shaped how I have thought about my role in the rubber industry. Thirteen years as Chair of the Australasian Plastics and Rubber Institute. Now in my fourth year as Executive Chair of the International Rubber Conference Organisation, alongside a seat on the IOM3 Elastomer Group Committee. The intent behind all those roles is to leave these places in a better state than I found them.

The commitment that has come through most strongly is fostering the next generation of rubber technologists. It is one of IRCO's central pillars and one of the parts of the role that means the most to me. It shows up in concrete work. Recognising student talent through the posters and presentations programme at every International Rubber Conference. Sitting as a judge on the student award panels. Spending time at RubberCon 2024 in Kochi talking with school students about why a career in the rubber and polymer sector is worth taking seriously, in an industry that needs them.

The professional value of industry service is real. It builds the relationships and the standing that the executive career on its own would not have built. The personal value sits underneath that. Staying connected to why this work matters beyond any single business. Conferring professional qualifications on people who have given the industry decades of their working life. Recognising contributions that often go unseen. This is work I will continue doing for as long as the industry will have me. It is one of the parts of my career that has meant the most.

**As Executive Chair of the International Rubber Conference Organisation, what perspectives do you now see across the global rubber industry that previous roles did not expose you to?**

The clearest way to answer this is to compare it to the seat I held before it. Chairing the Australasian Plastics and Rubber Institute gave me a national vantage point at a difficult time for our industry. The offshoring of automotive manufacturing pulled out a huge volume of supply chain demand. Chemical and petrochemical plants closed across Australia. The local rubber industry contracted significantly. From the APRI chair I had a wider view of how the industry as a whole was responding, business by business, and what was being lost as the local manufacturing base narrowed.

The IRCO seat opens out the same kind of view, but at a global scale and with the added complexity of culture. Each conversation around the IRCO table sits inside a different national context, a different industrial history, and different commercial priorities. Leading a meeting that involves all of them means leading with respect for those differences rather than assuming a single way of doing things. The brand of the International Rubber Conference Organisation itself is one of the most valuable assets the industry has. Maintaining it, growing it and modernising it is something I am quite conscious of as part of the role.

A core part of the work right now is expansion. In December 2025 we welcomed Southern Africa into IRCO. The ambition is to keep extending that reach so the organisation becomes a truly global body. With that comes the responsibility of distributing the conferences fairly across regions, giving emerging member countries a real voice in how the programme is shaped, and holding the quality bar of each conference high. None of that happens by accident. It has to be planned and protected.

The other perspective the seat opens up is continuity. I have been part of the IRCO committee for sixteen years now. Every conference cycle brings new and interesting ideas into the industry. Sitting in the chair lets you see how the conversations have moved over that time. Innovation, sustainability, new materials, circular economy. The seat is also a platform for those topics. Part of the responsibility is making sure the industry has a space to come together and engage with them seriously.

The IRCO Executive Chair seat does not come with authority over the national bodies. What it gives you is a vantage point. The job is to use that vantage to ask the questions that the national conversations may not yet be asking, and to give the industry a platform where those questions can be worked through openly.

***“The IRCO chair does not come with authority over the national bodies. What it gives you is a vantage point across cultures, histories and commercial priorities that no national seat can see. The job is to use that vantage to ask the questions the industry is not yet asking, openly.”***

# You mastered the material. Now lead the business.

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**Vienna**

10 June 2026

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**Louisville**

30 September 2026

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**Kottayam**

20 January 2027

MORE DETAILS AT

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**From your current viewpoint, what are the major executive-level questions the rubber industry will need to answer in the coming years?**

There is a layer of questions that I think now sits above the commercial and operational ones. They are about how the industry operates rather than what it sells. Energy use and carbon footprint. Circular economy, particularly the work being done to recover materials from end-of-life tyres. Governance and compliance, where the regulatory weight on a rubber business is materially heavier than it was a decade ago. Customer transparency, where major customers now expect supply chain visibility that they did not previously require.

These are not technical questions. They are leadership questions. They will reshape the competitive map of the global rubber industry over the next decade. The executive teams that engage with them seriously will be the ones that lead it.

This is exactly the territory Matthew leads on within TRI. He has worked across the science, the compliance and the commercial side of sustainability in advanced materials for most of his career.

**How does The Rubber Initiative® fit into that future industry landscape, and how does your collaboration with Matthew work in practice?**

The Rubber Initiative® fits into the future of the industry in two distinct places.

- The *first* is the workshop programme. Next-Generation Executive Leadership for the rubber industry. The first delivery is at Rubber Week in Vienna in June 2026. Then Louisville in September 2026, and Mahatma Gandhi University in Kerala in January 2027. The programme is purpose built for technical professionals moving into executive roles in the rubber and polymer sector.
- The *second* is the fractional executive practice, described earlier. Embedded executive bandwidth for businesses that need executive-level work done but cannot justify a full-time hire. The clients are typically owners and executive teams who have a clear strategy on the page and need help turning it into delivered outcomes.

How Matthew and I work together is by bringing different muscle to different parts of the brief. Matthew runs the innovation strategy, R&D, scale-up and technical due diligence side. I run the operational and people leadership side, the embedded executive work and the workshop facilitation. We refer between us inside engagements when the brief calls for it, and we deliver the workshop programme together.

Between Matthew in the UK and Europe, and me in Australia and the Asia Pacific, The Rubber Initiative® has global reach.

***“Energy, circular economy, compliance, customer transparency. These are not technical questions. They are leadership questions, and they will reshape the competitive map of the global rubber industry over the next decade. The executive teams that engage with them seriously will lead it.”***



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**After readers finish this feature, what is the one thought or reflection you hope stays with them most?**

Twenty-five years in, the most valuable lesson has been to lead as the person you are, not as the person you think a leader should be. The biggest unlearning was the assumption that becoming an executive meant becoming a different version of yourself. The opposite is true. The leaders worth following are the ones who are most clearly themselves. The work of leadership is the work of becoming more honest with yourself over time.

The other reflection sits alongside that. The rubber industry has given me a career, a community of peers, and work that has stayed interesting at every stage. The question worth holding now is what the industry will have when this generation has stepped back, and what each of us does today to shape that. That is the question I would invite anyone in a senior seat to sit with.

***“Twenty-five years in, the most valuable lesson is to lead as the person you are, not the person you think a leader should be. The leaders worth following are the ones most clearly themselves. Leadership is the work of becoming more honest over time.”***

