

Lessons learned through Ford's 'glocalism'

By [Neale Hill](#)

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The fact that I lived and worked in four countries - China, Thailand, New Zealand and Australia - in five years proved very beneficial when I returned to South Africa at the end of 2015 to take up my new position as director of marketing, sales and service at Ford's head office in Silverton.



Neale Hill

I was very pleased to have the background of nine years' working at various Ford subsidiaries in four countries around the world before I assumed my current posting. I had the opportunity of learning in the hard school of first-hand experience at these Ford subsidiaries and I know this has been very fruitful for my all round development in my chosen career in the automotive industry.

Among the biggest lessons I learned came in 2012 when I was in New Zealand at the time Ford announced that in 2016 it was to terminate its long period as one of the leading vehicle manufacturers in Australia. It was a traumatic time. I then had to get to grips with public criticism and a demotivated dealer network when I was appointed general manager of sales at Ford Australia in 2013. It was a tough time, but I believe it was beneficial to my skills and personal development in the long term.

"Think global, act local" is what Ford calls "glocalism" and the company sees it as an important mindset for its executives when operating in foreign markets.

From SA to Oz and back

Coming from South Africa, which is a multi-cultural country with a great deal of diversity, particularly in the business world, I fitted in well in the various, different working environments.

I joined the Ford Motor Company of Southern Africa in 1991 from the University of Natal in Durban as a graduate trainee in the marketing and sales department at its Silverton head office. I then went on to hold a variety of positions at Ford over the ensuing 15 years, including advertising manager, regional sales manager and marketing manager.

In 2006 I was transferred to Ford's Asia Pacific and Africa (APA) regional office in Bangkok, Thailand, as the regional launch manager for all passenger cars. Three years later I relocated to the regional office in Shanghai, China, as the APA Cross Carline brand manager.

This was followed, in 2011, by a two-year stint as managing director of Ford Motor Company of New Zealand, reporting to the president and CEO of Ford Australia. The next move was to Australia in 2013 where I had responsibility for dealer sales as well as fleet and government sales operations. This was followed by my return to South Africa to take up the position of director of marketing, sales and service from the beginning of 2016.

Global view

The extensive spell working in overseas markets encouraged me to look at the motor industry in a global space with inter-connectivity between the various regions, after coming from South Africa where the focus was rather narrow and scope limited with the industry largely protected by the Motor Industry Development Programme (MIDP).

I have an adventurous spirit and when I left South Africa it was a case of going with no regrets. My vision grew immensely

in the period I was based in Asia, especially when dealing with the very different countries and cultures which make up this vibrant region. I developed a global view and was amazed at the number of opportunities I found existed out there.

Adaptability is key

Even in one region there are countries where one finds huge differences in business culture from one country to the next. For instance, there were three political coups in Thailand while I was there, which was stressful.

My two years in Shanghai were particularly exciting as the Chinese economy was in a steep growth curve and we had to keep pace with the rapidly changing economic landscape. It was the time that Ford was increasing its manufacturing capacity in the world's largest vehicle market which included developing joint ventures with Chinese companies - Changan Motors for passenger cars and JMC for commercial vehicles.

Adaptability is one attribute that is vital when one is faced with challenges in foreign lands. This even included undertaking "a day in the shoes of Chinese women" to ensure the new Fiesta would fulfil her needs. This strategy of shadowing and interacting with a group of people for a whole day was also used in other countries, including India, in a bid to ensure customer requirements were met.



I met up with a very different trading environment when I had my spell working in New Zealand because this is an open market with no barriers which has resulted in a 50:50 split between new and used car sales.

Moving to Australia meant sometimes having to adopt a different thought process to understand what dealers required. The upcoming change where the dealers would sell only imported vehicles required transformation in the way Ford positioned itself in the market, which sometimes required some tough decisions. Among the changes made was a restructuring of the dealer operating system while a concentrated effort was made to market Ford vehicles to the so-called "new pioneers" which make up about a third of the population in Australia.

The overall programme improved brand perception and with the aid of important new products such as the Ranger there was a strong rebound in Ford's market share in a country which has 66 automotive brands and annual sales of more than a million vehicles.

One benefit for Ford and its dealers is that the internationally-acclaimed Research and Development facility is still located in Australia where it is the biggest operation of its type in that country, with 1,500 employees.

I was fortunate that while I was overseas the One Ford plan was being rolled out. This included impressive new vehicles such as the Ranger and Focus which brought efficiencies and the benefits of economies of scale on a global scale.

While there were many challenges and stressful times during my term overseas I contented myself with the realisation that these experiences were providing valuable lessons that would stand me in good stead in the future and this is proving to be the case as I approach the end of my first year in my current position.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neale Hill, director of marketing, sales and service at the Ford Motor Company of Southern Africa