Transcript
Episode 27

Jeff Holcombe

Independent Consultant and Former SVP Southeast Asia for Ralph Lauren

Bio:

Mr. Holcombe is a senior operations executive with over 30 years of supply chain and commercial experience in retail, wholesale, licensing and manufacturing. He has a history of building transformative businesses and routes to market for global consumer brands with outstanding business acumen, strategic agility, and emotional intelligence. He architected and executed long-term roadmaps for Ralph Lauren in Asia that increased revenue and EBITDA performance, provided platforms for long-term growth, and created lasting shareholder value. He recently concluded an eight-year assignment in Hong Kong with Ralph Lauren where he held various operational & commercial roles, most recently as Senior Vice President Southeast Asia. Prior to that, he led Business Development in Greater China. He also has extensive experience in global transport, logistics and distribution with Ralph Lauren, The Home Dept, and Shaw Industries. He has been recognized for the ability to inspire success and alignment from the C-suite to the distribution floor, and has navigated stakeholders on supply chain redesigns, digital transformations, and leadership development.

Intro:

In this episode of the Supply Chain Careers Podcast, we speak with Jeff Holcombe, a senior operations executive with experience in retail, wholesale, licensing and manufacturing, including an 8-year international assignment with Ralph Lauren. Jeff provides his early supply chain influences and career transitions, plus the need to really understand the breadth of the industry you are in by being a true student of the industry. Jeff looks for team players that are passionate, coachable, and teachable. He highly values people who can challenge and ask questions, so he creates an environment that

encourages the ability to fail forward. He believes mentorships are absolutely critical and provides his tips for success as both mentor and mentee. For those wanting to advance, he says be persistent, determined, and communicate your interests through the pursuit of increasingly challenging assignments.

Mike Ogle: [00:01:43] Jeff, we're happy to have you with us today. Welcome.
Jeff Holcombe: [00:01:46] Thanks. I'm excited to be here. My first podcast.
Mike Ogle: [00:01:51] How did you get started on your own career journey? What were some of your greatest influences that got you started and helped you along the way?
Jeff Holcombe: [00:01:59] For me, it really started with my parents. Especially my mom. Her work ethic was unequal to really anyone. I watched her build a career without a college education, raise a family. Love a community. She showed me a much larger world of opportunity. In the summers, when I was out of school, she would take me to events that she was participating in, in New York, with the company she worked for. She was one of the most persistent and determined people that I know. And I've tried to model this in my career. I believe that this is really what's made the biggest difference for me.
The rest was chance and luck. But even luck has a lot to do with persistence, determination and hard work. When I was thinking about a possible careers, you never heard people talking about supply chain and there certainly weren't any degree programs in the field. So, you get an idea of how old I am, how long I've been around. I went to Georgia Tech. I earned a degree in industrial engineering, and once I graduated, my first assignment was with a manufacturing company, a textile manufacturing company. And my manager there decided to take the industrial engineering principles and apply them in the areas of logistics and distribution. And that was actually my first exposure to supply chain.
I spent 26 years working in various capacities for four different companies. In the first half of that time, supply chain began to grow in prominence. I saw a future with the help of a lot of people from a lot of different backgrounds, but those who had come out of the military, out of the supply corps probably had the greatest influence on me. I felt like they really understood the importance of supply chain and they made strong cases for the application in the business world.
Rodney Apple: [00:04:02] Take the audience through some of those pivotal career moves and some of the lessons you learned as you transitioned between them?
Jeff Holcombe: [00:04:11] A little bit of background. I've worked in textile manufacturing. I did a short stint in consulting. I've worked in home improvement. I've worked in fashion apparel with Ralph Lauren. I've supported and worked in retail, wholesale, and licensed environments. I've worked for domestic and then I've worked for multinational organizations.
If you go back to the beginning, I started as a manufacturing management trainee, and most recently I was the SVP of Southeast Asia for Ralph Lauren. I've learned much and each successive role and organization. Some of the early learnings, was how the supply chain skills that I'd acquired could be applied across many different industries.

This made it even that much more interesting to me as a career. The idea that I could work for any company anywhere. In addition to that, supply chain was integrally connected to the business and you can't run an effective supply chain without understanding your customer's business.
More recently, about eight years ago, I moved to a Hong Kong as the APAC supply chain lead. This was really my first time outside of the U S in a work capacity, but it showed me how various functions like compliance, transport, distribution could vary within different regions in different countries around the world. And it showed me the importance of understanding the details. To listening to those that were on the front lines and really approaching challenges with great flexibility.
The last thing is it can open doors into other areas. Five years ago, after being in Hong Kong for about three years, I moved to the commercial side. I initially ran a business development and later oversaw regional business operations. I was really able to do that because of my connection to the business and all the learnings that I'd acquired while working in supply chain.
Rodney Apple: [00:06:20] You hear about ex-pat assignments, but this is a bit of a different story when you're over there for that many years. Would love to hear more about your experience there in Hong Kong.
Jeff Holcombe: [00:06:29] It was an interesting time. My wife and I had always said we wanted to do an international assignment. I'd applied for a lot of opportunities. By the time this one came along, I had a son who was a freshman in high school and when I came home and told them we were moving to Hong Kong, none of them believed me. When they found out I was serious, my eldest son, he was a little upset. But once we got there, we looked at this as, we didn't want to be 20 years down the road and thinking, gee, I wish we had done that assignment in Hong Kong. All of my children, my oldest son included, made the very best of it. And I guess we were probably 18 months in and we were having a coffee and he said, dad, this is the best thing you've ever done. Not just from a work perspective, but from a family perspective and how they view the world and, how small it really becomes once you're out there. If you had the opportunity to do it, to absolutely take advantage of it, it was a fantastic experience for me professionally and personally, and a fantastic experience for our family.
Mike Ogle: [00:07:40] Jeff, what is important to you for early and mid-career professionals to think about as they develop their careers?
Jeff Holcombe: [00:07:48] A lot of people might say it depends on your interests, but within the supply chain, you're likely going to be working across international boundaries no matter what you do, no matter where you're based. I'll mention something that I said earlier. You really need to understand your industry and the business you're working in. I think that's paramount. Be a student of the business. Supply chain is so closely linked. You can't run on effective supply chain without understanding the business you're supporting. And I think that's really the single most important piece of advice I can offer. This understanding of the enterprise, how it functions in total as an organization. I'm talking about how your company operates and really diving into that and knowing the details, what are you doing to reach your customers? How has digital in the mix there.

It's critical to understand your marketing strategy. All of these things are going to help you do a better job in supply chain. You're working across international boundaries, whether you're sitting in Atlanta, Georgia, or you're in Hong Kong or you're in New York. It doesn't matter where you are. You're going to be working with people in different countries. It helps if you can travel there, if you have the opportunity to really experience it firsthand, but no matter where you are, you're crossing international borders and you want to make sure that you understand how the different countries that you're supporting operate.

Rodney Apple: [00:09:21] When you look at supply chain, there's a lot of change going on. How should future leaders prepare themselves for these changes?

Jeff Holcombe: [00:09:29] This is an interesting question. If you'd asked me this a few years ago, I probably would have had a much more straightforward answer, and that answer would have likely been wrong. But if we think about today's environment, it's crazy. The pandemic and the world's response to that has really changed everything. Who would have ever thought container rates would be where they are today? They're astronomical. I was speaking with a logistics company telling me their budget. They were double the budget they had for this year. And it was all related to rates and what people are having to pay to move goods. There's really not a single supply chain that hasn't been impacted.

In addition to that, we've seen a rapidly growing social and environmental component where people are expecting companies to be very, very transparent. I think it's a good thing. But it's gonna require a lot of work in the supply chain. Beyond that, there's digital commerce and the way we are engaging with consumers today. it's tremendously different than it was even thought a short five years ago. We're still in an environment where we need to maintain reasonable cost and hopefully we'll get back there at some point. But at the same time, we are looking for greater efficiency, greater flexibility, speed, and agility, greater inventory management. How do you better share inventory between your digital business and your brick and mortar business? All this is coupled with that social and environmental stewardship that I mentioned.

So, lots of change. The one thing that's really clear to me is that while certain industries may have discounted supply chain, we are now seeing with every passing year, how critical these functions are to the life of the business. It's great news for those who choose a career in supply chain.

Mike Ogle: [00:11:37] Supply chain careers need continuous improvement. How do you keep up with the changes yourself and advise others to keep improving?

Jeff Holcombe: [00:11:44] This is a great question. I would say the answers are reasonably simple. First and foremost, I'd say, be curious, ask questions. No matter what environment you're in, this is not just about understanding supply chain. This is about understanding the industry you work in, the people you work with. So, you may be talking with someone that works in finance, or you may be talking with someone that works in a marketing, or business development, there's a lot of different areas outside of supply chain that are linked and, and you've got to be curious. You gotta ask questions. You gotta want to know what people are doing and why. Beyond that, I read a lot of

industry news.
At a minimum, you need to read your company's annual report cover to cover. And not just once, but every quarter, every year, you need to know what's going on within the company. When you're earlier in your career, and maybe you don't have as much exposure to what's going on behind the curtain, this is a great way to get insights into that. Minimally, you ought to read your competitors reports as well. And this is going to give you really a step up on most people. Most people aren't out there reading their annual reports, reading their competitor's reports, and you're going to have a lot of great insights based on doing that.
Participate in industry forums, listen to podcasts. Supply Chain Careers. This is a great thing for people to listen to. You're going to get insights from that. And that's going to be important. Use your network of the relationships that you've cultivated and continue to do more of that, both inside and outside the supply chain. I've emphasized being in contact and communication with people outside of supply chain. It's very, very important, because that's where some of your most critical insights are gonna come from. You don't want to have this myopic supply chain approach to gathering your information. You want to get it from a lot of different places, a lot of different resources. I would be pushing for more and more challenging assignments as you demonstrate you're capable of more, because you can learn a lot from those assignments. Early in my career, I also attended every conference and training opportunity that was possible. I did this not so much for the content, although there's great content there, but to have the opportunity to network with others from other businesses, other industries, and these have actually become experts that I've called upon in the future. And I think that's crucial. You want to keep those networks alive and functioning.

[BREAK at 14:37]

Rodney Apple: [00:15:02] We'd love to hear your perspective on talent. When you look at leadership, when you're looking at recruitment and hiring, what are some of the soft skills, hard skills that you like to look for, and then what do you personally do from a leadership perspective to bring out the very best in your employees?
Jeff Holcombe: [00:15:19] When it comes to the hard skills, I would typically assume that we're starting with a qualified applicant pool. They've got the requisite experience. They've met certain educational requirements. Depending on the role, they demonstrated leadership, and communication skills that are really critical to do in the job. Beyond that, I'm really looking for someone who has demonstrated, they're passionate, they're coachable, they're teachable, and they're really a team player. This is a tricky one to try and identify, but I'm interested in a person's willingness to challenge and to ask questions. It's difficult because that really begins with me creating an environment where that person feels safe enough to ask the questions. And really, it feels like they can fail, but they're failing forward. You hear all the examples of different creators, Thomas Edison, how many times he failed at making the light bulb. You want people to feel comfortable failing. I always tell people on my team, I'm just looking for

people with good batting averages, because if you never make a mistake, you're really not pushing hard enough. One of my favorite quotes is by Winston Churchill. It says if two people agree on everything, then one of them is unnecessary. And so, you never want to be redundant.
For me, finding someone who's willing to challenge and ask those questions, certainly in a respectful way. Because you need diversity of thought. It's critical to running a successful business to get to the back half of that question and once someone's hired and you've built some trust around their capabilities and their approach, once you've established those, you really want to give them some challenging stretch assignments. I want people who feel engaged and enabled, giving people the autonomy to do the job. And you really have to be careful because when you're challenging someone on how they're doing their job or the approach they're taking, is this a preference or is this really critical to the success of the project? And if it's just your preference, you got to let that person have the autonomy to do the job the way they see fit to do it. If the end result is going to get you to the right place, the best answer, then you gotta let them go. Because the moment you start stepping in every time, they're gonna become disengaged. At some point began to look for something else to do.
Mike Ogle: [00:18:09] Do you have one or two major challenges that you've faced in your career and how did you go about solving the challenge, and provide some of the lessons that you learned from the experience?
Jeff Holcombe: [00:18:20] Over my career, I've faced a large number of challenges. If you choose a career in supply chain, that's really what it's about. You're solving problems and it's not like you get to a certain point, you say problem solved, done, because it's going to change and you're going to be right back at working the same problem. Supply chain is constantly evolving and we're always facing new challenges. A lot of times in the same space.
When I think about ones specific to supply chain. I think about my time when I was working in the U S in fashion apparel. One of my responsibilities was supporting our wholesale customers. We had two separate supply chains, but they had to work together. And there were issues between these two supply chains. We both had our SOPs on how we're supposed to operate and they didn't always align. And in many cases, this led to some large expenses being passed on from our customers back to us around service and compliance issues. What was interesting was if you thought about the business that we supported directly through our supply chain, we had great metrics, but when you compared it to what we were doing in our wholesale business, it looked atrocious. We were scratching our heads as to why this was.
As we started to dig into it, we believe that we had met the requirements. In some cases, we recognize that we had missed the requirements just because they were inconsistent with how we operated. Our initial approach to the problem was to dispute all of these and say, no, we're right. We presented what we felt like was very strong evidence. At the same time, the customer was presenting just as strong evidence to say, no, you didn't do it. We struggled with this problem for several months, trying to figure out how we were going to crack this nut. We had dialogues going on with all of

our customers, all of our wholesale customers. We were going through these problems and trying to understand how we could correct them. We were visiting each other's operations. From that, we began to share best practices across all the various customer groups.
We'd have learnings. The customer would have a learning and there'd be a modification to how they operated or there'd be a modification to how we operated. We were able to further standardize some of the methods that we were using in serving these customers and then in how they were operating. Through that process, we learned a lot about communication and sharing of ideas and talking with one another, because, you can run two supply chains, separate and apart from one another. You can never have those critical conversations and inevitably they're going to fail.
By the end of this, we had been able to reduce those expenses that were coming back from our customers to us by 80%. We saw greater speed to shelf and there was just an overall warming between the different entities and sharing of information. Which I think made us all stronger and made the businesses stronger.
Rodney Apple: [00:21:50] We'd love to hear your philosophy on mentorship and what would you recommend to someone early on in their career as it relates to seeking out mentorships?
Jeff Holcombe: [00:21:59] When you think about advice for any professional, I think having mentorships are absolutely critical. Someone told me a long time ago that you should have at least one mentor and you should be mentoring at least one person. You can learn from both. What I've tried to do is maintain an experience differential of about 10 years. It doesn't have to follow that model. It could be someone your own age, but I'd say, especially earlier in your career, seeking a mentor that's about 10 years more experience would be a good start. And then, seeking out to mentor someone who is maybe 10 years junior.
These mentorships, they're hugely important. You lose ground when you don't have them. I know firsthand how easy it can be to deprioritize doing this, given all the demands of everyone's daily life. But it's kind of the frog in the boiling water. Initially, you're not really going to recognize a difference, but you'll see the impact over time if you're not seeking out these mentorships and you're not mentoring as well.
Those that are earlier in the career, I would encourage them to seek someone out that's roughly two levels up from where they are. Try and get outside of your direct chain of command, because there's going to be things that you want to talk about that may not be appropriate to be telling your boss or your boss's boss. Get outside your chain of command, and maybe even outside of your own organization. Look for people that you believe have strong character. And strong values.
The other thing I would say about mentorships is don't go and ask someone to be your mentor. I think in a lot of cases, people don't feel like they're up to the task. They may feel overwhelmed by the responsibility, but ask them to lunch. And then to a meeting and then do it again. And then over time, you build a relationship to a point that when you need advice or you need guidance, you can pick up the phone and just call them. You don't really have to make this very formal. This is about relationships, and you're

looking for people who have more experience than you have. Make it as natural as possible. Try and stay away from making it too formal. Feedback is a gift no matter how it's packaged. Don't overlook the people that you're interacting with every day, and the feedback that they're giving you, reflect on what they're telling you and work to increase your own self-awareness through these interactions.
Rodney Apple: [00:24:58] What advice would you have to professionals that want to make pivotal move in their career?
Jeff Holcombe: [00:25:03] I'd point them back to things I've previously mentioned, be persistent, determined, communicate your interests. Be curious, be a student of the business, seek out increasingly challenging assignments. Maybe some of those can be connected to the areas that you're interested in and build partners across the business that through the work you do, they can see your potential. In my case, when I transitioned to the commercial side five years ago, the process actually started a few years before that. I first expressed interest in running a business with my manager and continue to have a regular dialogue about those interests. I sought roles and assignments that allowed me to develop needed skills and gain greater insight into the business. I accepted an international assignment to further increase my knowledge of the greater business. All those things are greatly important. There's nothing greater though than true persistence and determination. You just gotta keep pushing.
Mike Ogle: [00:26:04] Can you also share some examples of some of the best supply chain career advice that you've received? And do you have a couple of your own that you'd like to share?
Jeff Holcombe: [00:26:15] I don't know if these are my own or if they're from someone else earlier in my career, but I'll give you some that are important to me and, I believe they would cover most any career choice you would make. This one most especially, and that is do the jobs no one else wants to do. This shows passion, this shows commitment. And at the same time, I think it also helps keep you humble and grounded. Be willing to do what no one else wants to do. Jerry Rice has a quote, I do the things I don't want to do today, so I can do the things I want to do tomorrow. I think that lines up with that quite well. Look beyond your current role. Someone told me one time you don't get the next role until you're already doing it. I think is crucial. Let people know how valuable they are. This is up and down the organization. These are the guys out on the floor, all the way up to the C-suite. Everyone is doing a job and they have value. You've got to demonstrate your appreciation for people and all the roles within your organization. Be prepared when that opportunity presents itself, do your homework, know your business, be ready for that next crucial assignment before it comes along. There's a few things that come from historical greats. My favorites are Theodore Roosevelt, it's not the critic who counts. It's not the person who points out how the strong, if stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better, the credit belongs to the person actually in the arena. I think that's important to remember. Grover Cleveland talked about persistence and determination and how they're omnipotent. Nothing in world in the world will take the place of persistence. Talent won't. Genius will not. Education will not. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. I've got

these quotes hanging in my office and I read them often when I am feeling a little defeated and I need a little bit of inspiration, but those would be the things that I would offer today.
Mike Ogle: [00:28:25] Jeff, thank you for a great conversation and your insights about supply chain careers.
Jeff Holcombe: [00:28:30] Thanks, Mike. I really enjoyed it. Thanks Rodney.
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