

LEADERSHIP STORIES

BY CAROLINE WILSON



'I've learned to trust my judgement'

Caroline Wilson, MD and founder at The Recruitment Story, meets **Martin Dean**, MD of Go-Ahead's regional bus division

► Explain your role in 100 words or less.

I'm the Managing Director of Go-Ahead's regional bus division, everything outside London but within England. That means around 4,000 vehicles, 9,500 colleagues, and seven operating companies, from the Northeast to the Southwest. Although we're known as a bus business, around 10% of our fleet is now coaches, making us one of the largest coaching operators in the UK. My job is to bring all of that together, commercial networks, franchising opportunities, school services, long-distance coaching, and the day-to-day reality of keeping towns and cities moving and to support the brilliant leaders who run each business.

Tell me about a moment where you saw great leadership in action?

Last week on the Isle of Wight, I witnessed leadership at its purest.

Every year, the team delivers the huge transport operation behind the Isle of Wight Festival, 30-40 buses, temporary bus stations, shuttles from ferry terminals, volunteers from across Go South Coast, and a population that almost doubles overnight.

What struck me wasn't the scale. It was the spirit. Engineering managers, operations managers, senior directors - all mucking in. Driving buses. Selling tickets. Solving problems at midnight. My EA even stayed on to help at the ticket booth. No hierarchy. No egos. Just a community of people who care

deeply about making something work.

It was leadership from the front, calm, committed, joyful and it made me incredibly proud.

What's a leadership moment you're not proud of, but grateful for?

It wasn't one dramatic moment, more a slow, uncomfortable realisation that built over the early years of my career. I spent far too long making decisions I thought others would approve of. I listened to every voice, every opinion, every "when I did it..." story, and gradually let all that noise drown out my own instinct.

And every time I ignored my own instinct, I regretted it. It's incredibly easy to get your

mind scrambled by other people's views especially when you're still finding your feet. At some point, you have to clear the noise, steady yourself, and make the decision you genuinely believe is right.

The turning point came when I read a piece from a sports captain describing the paralysis of trying to please everyone. It hit me hard. Advice is valuable, essential even, but the decision has to be yours. Your instinct is shaped by your experience, your context, and what you can see in front of you that others can't.

Since then, I've learned to trust my judgement with confidence. And it's changed the way I lead.

What's the most 'Martin' thing your team would say you do?

They'd laugh and say: "He's always on a train!" It's become a running joke, if I'm actually in the office, people comment on it.

But underneath the humour is something important: I believe leadership is done in person, in people's environments, not from behind a desk.

I travel because I want to see networks with my own eyes, meet teams where they work, understand their challenges, and stay connected to the reality of the operation. Visibility matters. Accessibility matters.

And being present, really present, is how I lead.

And finally, why should people join public transport? Why do you love it?

Because it's not just a job, it's a vocation. Public transport gets into your bloodstream. It matters. It connects people to their lives, their families, their opportunities. And the people who work in it are passionate in a way you rarely see elsewhere.

You're not persuading someone to buy something they don't need, you're providing something essential. You're part of a community with a shared sense of purpose, heritage, and pride. You can build a career, shape cities, and make a real difference. The industry "envelops you".

You don't leave transport behind at the end of the day, it stays with you. It becomes part of who you are and that's why I love it.

Maybe people would have the same passion for selling shoes... but I doubt it! ■



Martin on holiday in Bosnia

