



IN CONTROL

*Sven Larson, General Manager,
Jaguar Land Rover Anaheim Hills*

*‘I come to work to win. I
don’t come here to lose.’*

When Sven Larson was appointed General Manager of Jaguar Land Rover Anaheim Hills, the first Orange County dealership of the renowned Rusnak Auto Group, one of his top priorities was developing an all-star team in every department of the dealership.

During his first few weeks at the dealership, Larson had heard Greg Suzuki’s name mentioned numerous times by several employees. Suzuki had worked for the dealership prior to Rusnak rescuing it from bankruptcy under the previous ownership group. Suzuki was one of the store’s most successful employees, yet because of the chaos and uncertainty under the

previous ownership group, he defected to another Jaguar Land Rover dealership.

Now Larson wanted him back.

He called Suzuki and requested a meeting. Suzuki was flattered but cautious. He wanted to know more about Larson.

“If I was going to make this move and come back to the dealership, I wanted to be 100 percent certain that it would be a wise move – and the key thing was learning all I could about Sven,” Suzuki says.

“What kind of a person and General Manager is he? How does he treat his staff? What’s his managerial style? Does he say ‘good morning’ to everyone?”

So one day, without Larson knowing, Suzuki stopped by the dealership and asked several employees what they thought about the GM.

“They had incredible things to say about him,” Suzuki says. “It blew me away. They told me that he was the opposite of virtually every General Manager they had worked with.

“I asked the porters, ‘Does Sven say good morning to you?’ They said yes. I went to the mechanics and asked, ‘Does Sven say good morning to you?’ They said yep. That spoke volumes for me.”

Larson makes it a daily ritual to greet his employees – every one of them – with a smile and robust “good morning.” He asks them how they’re doing and encourages them to have a great, productive day – to make a difference. He often asks them if everything is going well in their professional and personal lives and if there is anything specific they need from him. He reminds them regularly that his door is always open to them, no matter what day or time, no matter what the issue is.

Now that Suzuki has worked side by side with Larson for several years, his feelings are even stronger for The Boss.

“He is the first GM I’ve worked with who always there – morning, noon and night,” Suzuki says. “He cares about the store and he wants the store to flourish and it shows.”

What impresses Suzuki even more is that Larson has his office front and center, right off the showroom, right in full view of staff and customers.



Sven Larson congratulates Martin Luna Cendejas, the lead porter at JLRAH, on his award for outstanding service.

“A lot of GMs bury themselves in the back of a dealership, isolating themselves from the staff and customers,” Suzuki says. “Not Sven.”

When Khalid Omar, the dealership’s General Sales Manager, is asked about Larson, he

says: “He’s a perfectionist who expects nothing but the best from himself and everyone around him. He’s among the hardest-working, most dedicated and committed individuals I’ve met.

“No job is too small for Sven,” he adds. “He enjoys working in every area of the store, including pre-owned cars. He’s so detail oriented that he gets involved in every department and every deal. Every pre-owned car we take in, he’s meticulous about its color, condition, everything.”

Larson’s managerial philosophy matches his impeccable managerial skills.

“He’s very engaged with every employee in every department,” says Jay Allen, manager of the store’s Parts Department. “He has his finger on the pulse of every aspect of the dealership.

“Some General Managers spend a lot of time outside the dealership playing golf, but Sven puts in more hours at the store than anyone,” Allen adds. “He’s very dedicated to the performance of the store. He takes it personally to make it successful in every aspect.”

Equally important is the autonomy Larson gives his managers.

“There is a high level of trust Sven has with his department heads,” Allen says. “Because of our experience, he has the trust in us to let us do our own thing and run our departments the way we see fit.

Don’t get me wrong – he’s not oblivious to the things that are going on in our departments. Far from it. He knows exactly what’s going on at all times. Yet there is that trust that he knows we’re going to make the right decision.”

Without results, Larson’s presence at the store would mean less. Yet that’s all his store does – produce glowing results.

Under Larson’s watch, Jaguar Land Rover Anaheim Hills rapidly emerged as one of the region’s top dealerships. Within one year, it catapulted to the top of the charts as one of the highest-performing Land Rover dealers in its region, which includes Southern California, Arizona and New Mexico.

Born in Pasadena, California, Larson graduated Magna Cum Laude from UCLA with a degree in economics and decided to become a lawyer. He planned to attend Loyola University Law School and paid all registration fees.

Yet on the first day of the semester, he changed his mind. His heart was in business, specifically retail – not law.

“I really enjoyed the retail business world – I felt it was my niche, much more than law,” he says.

The retail consumer audio business was booming at that time, a field in which Larson had a keen interest. He was hired by a major stereo



retailer with stores in both Southern and Northern California. Larson quickly rose to an executive position, however, the company was rife with wild escapades that you’d only see in a Hollywood film – so he left to start his own chain of retail stores. He called it Car Fidelity.

He wound up opening 10 stores throughout Southern California. Business was booming.

Then came the Gulf War followed by the recession and the emergence of “big box” retailers like Circuit City, Good Guys and Best Buy. The level of competition eroded profits, knocking out many small local retailers.

“It got ugly,” Larson says. “The ‘big box’ stores were giving away the labor when they sold car audio equipment requiring installation, resulting in margins that became so small that it just didn’t provide a risk/reward ratio that made sense.”

He decided to exit the business in a planned fashion, selling and closing the stores as the leases matured.

During the closures, the big question was what’s next for Larson?

One of his most successful audio stores worked closely with the well-known Steve Taub Porsche Audi dealership in Santa Monica -- and Larson had become quite friendly with the store’s General Sales Manager, Tim Rasic.

“I always thought, ‘Tim has a really cool job,’” Larson says. “He’s working around these great, fun cars, he’s always well dressed and he’s always driving a beautiful new car. I could see myself in that scenario and was confident I could learn to run one of those stores.”

When Larson was closing his stores, he called Steve Taub to inform him of what was happening and Taub suggested they meet for lunch. Before the menu arrived, Taub offered Larson a sales position.

The year was 1995. That was the beginning of Larson’s successful career in automobiles sales, marketing and management.

Larson rapidly emerged as one of the store’s top salesman and became an expert in handling every aspect of the operation – from sales to finance. And he loved it.

“I was doing everything on the sales end, I did finance, I was getting deals, I worked with banks, I was helping other guys sell cars -- I’d even wash cars if we didn’t have a porter



handy,” he says. “I did whatever it took to get the job done.”

Larson knew right then and there that he ultimately wanted to be the GM of a dealership.

After four years at Taub, Larson joined the well-respected Rusnak Auto Group’s Westlake Porsche Audi store in 2000. He rose through the ranks, ultimately becoming GM.

When he wasn’t at Rusnak, Larson was flying – airplanes that is. An accomplished pilot, Larson has over 2,300 hours experience with FAA ratings for both multi-engine and instrument flight.

For years, his pilot friends had encouraged him to join their successful aircraft brokerage business at Camarillo Airport. Finally, in 2008, after eight years at Rusnak, Larson decided to switch gears and was made a partner in the aircraft business.

“Unfortunately, the timing was terrible with the great recession, otherwise I would have

stayed in that business for a while longer,” he says. “We had a ton of fun.”

The recession caused a massive decline in value of corporate jets -- and owners were under water just like homeowners were with their homes. By 2009, there was nothing for Larson to do but to leave the business.

“Besides,” he says, “my personality did not mesh with the pace of that business. Every deal is so laborious and dragged out – nothing like the quick pace and excitement of the automobile business.”

Fortunately for him, the auto industry was starting to recover from the tremendous economic downturn. He was immediately hired as the manager of Santa Monica BMW’s Certified Pre-Owned store. Shortly thereafter, he was recruited by the owner of Santa Monica Audi and took over as General Manager in August 2011. Santa Monica Audi was one of the best performing Audi stores in the country, rising to No. 2 in the nation in sales under his watch.

With Larson’s sterling reputation, high performance and success, it was a no-brainer for the Rusnak Auto Group to put him at the top of its

list when the company purchased Jaguar Land Rover Anaheim Hills.

Larson’s former supervisor at Rusnak Westlake, David Pierce, called him and said, “The Boss would like to have dinner with you.” The “Boss” was founder and Chairman of the Board, Paul Rusnak.

“Absolutely,” Larson replied.

When Rusnak offered Larson the Anaheim Hills GM job, “it took me about two seconds to say yes,” he says.

“I saw it as a great opportunity and challenge. I liked the challenge of taking a store in bankruptcy and putting it back in business and back on the map.”

For Rusnak, reeling Larson back into the organization to run Anaheim Hills was important for a number of reasons.

“With Sven, we know that we have someone who truly understands the ‘Rusnak Standard,’” says Victoria Rusnak, President of the Auto Group. “We expect all of our leaders to hold themselves and their teams accountable to the highest possible ethical and legal standards.

“Since the store culture needed to change completely, it was important to me and my father that we had someone we really felt had a high level of integrity and someone who led

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by example.”

Sitting in his office, Larson is asked about his personal and professional characteristics and why he is such good GM?

“There is not a simple answer to that question,” he says with a smile.

He pauses and goes on to say: “I have a lot of qualities that other people and GMs do not have. I am blessed with great health and high energy -- and this is a high energy business.

“I have the ability to get a tremendous amount of work done in a single day. When I come to work, *I come to work*. I have tremendous attention to detail. I know the financial side of running a business; I can read and interpret a financial statement and I can find the snake in grass, if there is one.

“I also have the respect of the people who work with me because I respect them. It is not gratuitous respect. I recognize people who are performing well and I let them know they’re appreciated -- and I do it regularly and it is *sincere*.”

“By the same token, if someone is disappointing me, that means they’re disappointing the organization because we’re one in the same. I don’t have any trepidation in making my disappointment known while making suggestions for improvement.”

Like a Hall of Fame NFL or NBA coach, Lar-



Sven Larson (L) with Rusnak Auto Group CEO Victoria Rusnak

son makes it a priority to surround himself with the right people – Omar, Allen, Suzuki and Service Manager Bob Vusich, to name a few.

“I don’t like to micro manage,” Larson says. “I like to have good horses and let them run. But I’m always watching and if I see an issue, I’ll call it out. I see the big picture and I set tone for the business. Everyone knows I’m extremely competitive. I don’t get a lot sleep because I don’t need it. I come to work to win. I don’t come here to lose.”

— **By Rick Weinberg, California Business Journal**

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