Alumni Profile: Matthew Levatich

Reflecting on his 18-year career with Harley-Davidson Motor Company—a career that has ranged from project engineer to president, from Milwaukee to England and Italy and back—Matthew Levatich (MMM ’94) finds that his ability to lead positively, even in tough times, was cultivated during his time at Northwestern.

“My integrity is core to who I am and how I want to be, and it was reinforced, refined, and anchored in my 18 months in the MMM program,” he says.

Levatich’s journey from engineer to business leader began in childhood. His father, an architect, was always creating and improving everything around the house. “My childhood was full of mechanical activities,” he remembers. Levatich was especially interested in how things were made; a Sesame Street episode depicting how milk was bottled stands out in his memory. Once Levatich discovered his talent in math and science, an engineering degree was the practical choice; he graduated in mechanical engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Between his undergraduate and graduate studies, he worked as a process engineer for Albany International and in product and process development at another division of the corporation. But after five years he decided he needed to enhance his management and marketing capabilities; “I felt like I didn’t have the skills necessary to do things as well as I wanted,” he says.

The MMM program, a combined MBA from the Kellogg School of Management and a master’s of engineering management from McCormick, impressed him. He liked its integrated nature and team orientation, which weren’t typical of business and engineering curricula in the early ’90s. The program was only in its third year at the time, and the curriculum was still developing—and that appealed to Levatich’s entrepreneurial nature. Students had influence over courses and were engaged in improving the program. “There’s a certain investment that comes with helping to figure out improvements as you go,” he says.

Levatich fondly remembers his time in the program, including great friends, terrific classmates, and insightful instructors. “It changed how I feel and look at the world and think about myself,” he says. “It was fantastic.”

After graduation Levatich was hired into Harley-Davidson’s leadership development program. After a difficult economic period in the 1980s, the company was growing and looking for young management talent. It was the sort of challenge Levatich was looking for.

Harley-Davidson’s management rotation exposed him to manufacturing, strategic planning, project management, and, finally, international marketing at Harley’s European headquarters in England. While there, he helped launch the Buell brand, a racing-inspired motorcycle line, and became director of sales for the company’s distributor markets in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. In 1999 he moved back to Milwaukee to begin the development of the Harley-Davidson Museum before moving into roles ranging from overseeing supply chain to vice president of parts and accessories.
“I was continuing the intensive development education that I started in the MMM program,” he says, getting “the confidence and skills necessary to have the right impact on people and on different parts of the company.”

In early 2008 Harley acquired MV Agusta, an Italian sport bike company, and sent Levatich to Europe to run it. The fit was perfect: He wanted to put it all together and run a company, and he, his wife, and two sons loved to learn about new cultures. He was back in Milwaukee in less than a year, however, as he was named president and chief operating officer of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company.

“The opportunity to run this motorcycle company was a dream come true,” Levatich says. And the recession proved the perfect time to use his leadership skills. Over the past several years, part of Levatich’s job has been to lead the development of a strategy that the company could rally around; now he looks forward to using that foundation to grow. “I’m a forward-looking guy,” he says. “I’m going to continue to learn and grow and develop, and what I want for me I also want for this company and the people who are a part of it.”

As a member of McCormick’s MMM Advisory Board, he enjoys watching the program evolve. “I think my experience is useful in helping guide the program,” he says.

In his work and free time he travels the world, often to motorcycle rallies where he meets riders who connect so strongly to the Harley-Davidson brand. “I love beautiful products that are carefully, beautifully made, that have a big emotional impact on customers,” says Levatich, who himself rides an “absolutely gorgeous” 2013 anniversary edition Road Glide and a sportier 2012 XR1200X. “The connection our customers have with our products and our brand is unparalleled. I wish I had every product we make.”

“What a perfect choice, right?” he says of working at Harley-Davidson. “The product matters to people, and that really matters to us. Every day I think, wow!”