

# The importance of nurturing relationships and soft skills alongside professional abilities



Paul McDade has more than 35 years' experience in the oil and gas industry and is the co-founder and CEO at Afentra. Aiming to lead a responsible industry shift, Afentra seeks to be the go-to for IOCs/NOCs divesting mid-late life assets, ensuring their safe, beneficial management for local stakeholders. Prior to founding Afentra, Paul worked in the UK, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East and was the COO and, later, CEO of Tullow plc. Throughout his career, Paul has navigated businesses through crisis such as an oil downturn, asset failure and political boundary dispute along with managing safety and security crises.

## Who is Paul McDade? Please tell us about yourself.

I grew up in Glasgow and attended a local state school, eventually making my way to Strathclyde University to study civil engineering. While I enjoyed civil engineering, I realized in 1984 it wasn't the most lucrative career. I started looking for something with better prospects and found the oil industry, which was quite buoyant in the North Sea around the mid-eighties. That led me to shift my focus to petroleum engineering. I pursued a master's in petroleum engineering at Imperial College London and started my first job as a Reservoir Engineer with Conoco.

That was the start of my career in Oil & Gas. What I find interesting, now that I've worked in Africa, especially in Ghana, I saw a lot of enthusiasm among the young people there regarding the industry, as it is new. The sector is opening up a lot of new opportunities, much like how I remember seeing in Scotland in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It had a similar atmosphere of fresh possibilities and excitement.

## Please walk us through your career. How did you become the CEO of Afentra?

After studying at Imperial College, I joined Conoco, which was highly regarded for reservoir engineering. Despite enjoying the work, I left after two years, to seek broader opportunities abroad – a decision I later questioned.

I then joined ERC (now ERCE), influenced by a former mentor from Conoco, which broadened my skills and industry perspective. Despite some doubts about leaving Conoco, ERC was a valuable experience allowing me to get a broad view and to see different companies and different assets.

An opportunity with KUFPEC in Kuwait City led me to

move there in March 1990, eager to embark on this new adventure abroad with my wife. It was a significant change for us, which we were excited about. A few months later, that part of the story ended after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and I was taken hostage for three months. After managing to leave Iraq in December 1990, I returned to the UK, where my former director at ERC kindly offered me a job, which I accepted.

In 1991, I joined LASMO in the UK, working in the North Sea. I then moved to Colombia in 1994 where I spent five years, transitioning from technical work to operational management. This also led me to undertake commercial roles, including leading the sale process of LASMO Colombia. After Colombia, I focused on commercial management in Indonesia with LASMO, and later, I decided to go back to the UK for family reasons. I got a secondment with Talisman as Asset Manager, where I learned a lot about M&A and the re-development of mature fields. These particular learnings are a crucial part of Afentra's strategy and directly applicable to what we are doing today, over 20 years later.

A few years later, LASMO was acquired by ENI and this is when I decided to stay with smaller independent companies and joined Tullow Oil, where we set up Tullow UK. From 2001 to 2004, my tenure involved growing Tullow UK and eventually becoming its MD. We then acquired a number of companies at which point I became COO of Tullow plc. We made important discoveries in Ghana, and then went on to oversee significant projects such as the Jubilee and TEN combined around \$10 billion of development investment. As COO and later CEO of Tullow Oil, I navigated challenges such as managing debt and shifting the company's focus. I started pivoting the company away from exploration to



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focus on other areas. I noted a major shift in the North Sea, a region I knew well from the late nineties. It had moved from being dominated by large international oil companies to smaller independents.

This change mirrored trends the industry had seen in Brazil and the Gulf of Mexico, which I found quite interesting. It represented a gradual transition over about 25 years. Reflecting on my experience in Africa, especially in West Africa, I noticed that large international companies still held many assets there. I foresaw a future where these firms might exit, selling their older assets; I was curious about who the new players would be.

Finally, after leaving Tullow in 2019, I took a break before co-founding Afentra with a colleague. Focusing on the African energy transition (AFENTRA) and paralleling the changes in the North Sea, we established Afentra in the early 2020s, aiming to facilitate a responsible industry transition and position Afentra as a counterparty of choice for IOCs/NOCs seeking to divest mid-later life assets to credible independents who would manage them safely for the benefit of all local stakeholders.

**You've outlined three major career shifts: from technical to non-technical roles, from non-technical roles to top management in oil and gas, and finally, energy transition. Which of these transitions was the most defining for you personally?**

The most pivotal moment was my time in the Kuwait/Iraq, which profoundly shaped my outlook on life and various other personal areas. On the professional front, my time in Colombia with LASMO was a turning point. There, I was given an opportunity despite being relatively inexperienced, largely due to my willingness to work in Colombia, a place not many wanted to go to at that time. This experience significantly impacted my career trajectory.

In Colombia, during the tumultuous nineties, I learned to navigate complex security challenges, the criticality of maintaining good community relations, and ensuring safe operations. These skills proved invaluable later in Africa, underscoring the need for strong relationships. In Colombia, I experienced how

strained relationships with local communities could significantly disrupt operations.

Such a strategy of nurturing harmony and mutual benefits was crucial as we grew our presence in Africa. A prime example was in Ghana, where we engaged with the government immediately after making the Jubilee discovery, seeking direction on handling their resources, a move quite distinct from the norm for international oil companies. This approach greatly aided our progress in Africa, teaching me the importance of fostering cooperative partnerships and laying the groundwork for future endeavours.

**You've worked in multicultural environments across Africa, Middle East and Latin America. How have these experiences shaped your leadership style and guided your current role at Afentra?**

My time in Colombia was key to my personal growth, especially in becoming more culturally mature. Before going there, I didn't fully grasp the nuances of different cultures. However, after my experience in Colombia, I developed a better understanding and appreciation for diverse viewpoints.

I've realized the significance of listening actively and viewing situations from others' perspectives, be it in Colombia, Ghana or Africa generally. This mindset is essential for developing effective solutions. For example, on entering Angola with Afentra, we tried to understand the Angolan perspective, considering what was important to them and the root causes of the initial obstacles we encountered. Engaging with our Angolan peers and valuing their input often revealed critical insights, prompting us to adjust our strategies or, sometimes, develop new solutions.

While this approach may seem straightforward, understanding and respecting different cultural viewpoints is incredibly important and impactful in our line of work. It leads to a much more collaborative approach resulting in all parties sharing in the success of our combined efforts.

**What are the key strategies you found most effective for navigating complex situations like oil downturns?**

Reflecting on my journey, a key lesson has been the



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importance of adopting a long-term perspective, especially in an industry like ours that inherently operates on extended timelines. Avoiding short-sighted decisions and focusing on long-term impacts is one critical strategy. Another is simply doing the right thing, regardless of the situation. This approach may not always yield immediate benefits, but it tends to be rewarding in the long run. An example can be 2015 when we faced a significant downturn and significant financial stress. We had to downsize Tullow from about 2,000 to 1,000 employees in about eight months, but we managed it respectfully, taking care of both those who were leaving and those who stayed, thereby maintaining our corporate reputation.

In business, especially among smaller companies, there's often a temptation to chase quick wins. However, those rarely lead to sustainable success. Valuing and respecting your people and nurturing good relationships are fundamental. A good example was when I received a call from ERC, a company I left earlier, offering me a job immediately after returning from Kuwait, a gesture I greatly appreciated. These simple yet effective strategies are crucial in any situation, but perhaps more so in stressful circumstances where the temptation to cut corners can be stronger.

For instance, in Ghana, we faced a difficult situation with our primary revenue source, the Jubilee field, when the turret on our FPSO malfunctioned. Despite the pressure, we took a calm approach, assembled a team, and developed a plan. This strategy, coupled with the competence of our team, allowed us to manage the crisis without losing production, which was vital not only for us but also for Ghana's energy needs. This experience reinforced the idea of taking a step back, thinking things through and planning effectively, especially when you have a strong team to support the work.

### Did you see any changes within your approaches from your technical management and top management roles to when you became a founder of Afentra?

Reflecting on the early stages of founding Afentra, now nearly three years in, I find certain aspects reminiscent of the experience in 2001 when we

started Tullow UK. It's fascinating to undertake a similar venture but with a different team and under entirely different circumstances. This time, there's a sense of familiarity but also a greater level of knowledge and confidence. We learned a lot from our experiences with Tullow – both from our successes and but even more from our mistakes.

Now, with Afentra, I hope to replicate the successes with fewer missteps, drawing on the lessons learned over the past 23 years.

One key similarity, however, is the importance of a strong team. Just like our earlier success with Tullow was largely due to a phenomenal team, the same principle applies to Afentra. It is a key skill to know how to grow a team and a company responsibly to ensure you have the bandwidth and capabilities to match your growth ambitions. You also need to have the right strategy, at Afentra we feel we have a growth strategy tailored to the new world in terms of focusing on proven reserves, reliable cash flow and a robust financial footing.

So the success we're experiencing at Afentra is not just attributable to the management but to the entire team. We have 12 people, each with complementary skills, working cohesively. Their ability to maintain a positive attitude, remain calm under pressure, and work effectively together, even when things get tough, has been pivotal. The team dynamics, combined with our collective experience, shape Afentra's current narrative.

### Based on your experience, what advice would you give to young professionals who aspire to leadership roles in oil and gas?

In my personal philosophy, especially in terms of the guidance it is the same as I give to my children, I believe in the principle of committing fully to whatever you do. My kids, who are now grown up, often remind me of this advice I've given them: to do things well or not to do them at all. They used to find it amusing but now acknowledge its value in a positive way. It's about taking the time to do things properly, which is essential.

Regarding career advice, particularly for my 27-year-old daughter and 29-year-old son who are navigating their professional lives, I emphasize the importance



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of ambition and the natural desire to progress. However, I also remind them they are always under observation, not just during formal appraisals or presentations. This was a lesson I learned early in my career; it's not just the high-profile tasks but everything you do that gets noticed. My success at LASMO, for instance, came from simply enjoying my work as a young engineer and making an effort, which led to the trust and opportunity to work in Colombia.

My advice to young professionals therefore revolves around two key points: strive to excel in whatever you do and be mindful that your overall behaviour is being observed. These factors play a significant role when companies make decisions about promotions or select representatives for overseas assignments. Demonstrating consistent dedication and respect in all aspects of your work can significantly influence your career progression.

**How do you think this has changed? Do you think the companies are still willing to send outstanding young professionals abroad to gain more experience and exposure?**

To be honest, I'm not entirely certain about the current landscape, especially since I'm not involved in the larger companies that offer these opportunities. However whether it is Afentra or one of the larger IOC's a key role and challenge for the

CEO and senior management is accessing and developing young talent. It is such an important part of any industry to give young talent the platform to grow and showcase their ideas and capabilities as these perspectives might be totally different to the view of management and that collaborative engagement helps inform more effective strategies and decision making.

Observing my own children as they have started and continue to advance in their careers, it seems that it's much tougher nowadays. The process of landing a job has become quite complex. They have to go through several stages before they even get the chance for a face-to-face conversation. It's hard to showcase your true capabilities without that direct interaction.

**It's the personal interaction that often makes a difference. While evaluating someone's skills and suitability is crucial, young professionals might not yet fully realize the importance of their personal qualities and soft skills, along with their professional abilities. So, while I can't give a definitive answer to this question, I feel that it's probably much more challenging for young professionals today than it was back then. Nurturing relationships with other people and soft skills is, therefore even more crucial.**



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