

Building capable teams and robust operating systems that perform under pressure



Phil Church

Phil Church is a director at Gekko and Bedrock Drilling, in Reigate, England. He has 25+ years in the drilling industry, and specializes in delivering successful offshore and onshore projects, leveraging expertise in well design, remote operations, contractor management, factory drilling, rig technology, and risk management.

At Gekko, he focuses on applying data-driven solutions and innovative technologies to enhance performance, safety, and efficiency.

Who is Phil Church? Please tell us about yourself.

(Your '30-second' story: where you started, what you do today, and what you're known for)

I started my career as an avionics apprentice in the British Army, learning engineering discipline in genuinely safety-critical environments. After leaving the Army, I returned to university to study geology at the University of Leeds. Being slightly older, I chose not to pursue a PhD, and instead joined Shell International as a drilling engineer—a role they felt suited my personality and allowed me to combine engineering with geology.

I built my technical foundation at Shell and later in a technology and automation role with Schlumberger, before moving into senior drilling leadership positions across Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

Today, I'm best known for delivering wells in West Africa for smaller operators—where judgement, pragmatism, accountability, and cost control matter as much as technical excellence. What defines my work is building capable teams and robust operating systems that perform under pressure.

For the past five years, I've also been leading Gekko as founder and managing director, helping evolve its drilling analytics and vessel-tracking platform, scale the business, and embed the technology into real operations.

You began with a three-year avionics apprenticeship in the British Army (Germany and Canada). What did that chapter teach you—and what has stayed with you ever since?

(The mindset, standards, and habits that carried from helicopters to drilling.)

It was a long time ago, and I wouldn't describe it as a particularly positive period. I struggled with the lack of ability to question decisions or challenge authority, and I was very clear by the end of it that a military career wasn't for me.

What it did give me was discipline—particularly around studying, turning up prepared, and finishing what you start. Completing a demanding engineering apprenticeship also built a level of resilience and self-reliance that's stayed with me. You learn to operate in uncomfortable environments, deal with uncertainty, and get on with the job without much support.

It also exposed me to working overseas in places you wouldn't normally choose to visit, which removed any fear of unfamiliar locations. That carried directly into my later career and made working in remote or challenging oil and gas environments feel normal rather than exceptional.

At Shell in Oman (PDO), you stepped up from well engineer to drilling supervisor across multiple rigs and well types. What was the biggest leap in responsibility?

(The moment the job stopped being mainly technical—and became about judgement and accountability.)

There were no night drilling supervisors—it was just me on the rig with a graduate wellsite drilling engineer, and limited support from town because so many rigs were running at the same time. You were effectively on your own for long periods, responsible for decisions with real safety and cost consequences.

That environment very quickly taught me to analyse the facts in front of me, use the data available, and make informed decisions—and to back myself. I also learned early on that having 25 years of experience doesn't automatically make someone smarter, or mean they're right. What mattered was the quality of the thinking, not the length of the CV.

Thinking back to early in your leadership journey: what did you believe made a 'great engineer' and a 'great leader' then—and what do you believe now?

(How your definition of excellence evolved as your scope and stakes increased.)

Over time, I realised that in drilling, engineering is only a small part of the job. As projects get bigger, it becomes much more about risk and project management—understanding the uncertainty in the input data, knowing the error margins, and focusing on the few things that actually matter.

Today, I think great engineers bring clarity to complexity, and great leaders know what questions to ask and where to focus attention. It's less about having all the answers, and more about recognising what's critical, what's uncertain, and making timely decisions that manage risk rather than chase technical perfection.

At Senergy, you built a London wells team from zero to 15+ professionals. What did you prioritise in the first 90 days—and what would you change if you did it again today?

(How you build credibility, capability, and culture from scratch.)

The priority in the first 90 days was winning work. Without projects, you don't have a business, and without delivery, you don't build credibility. My focus was on securing contracts we could execute well, setting clear technical standards, and bringing in people who could deliver from day one.

If I were to do it again, I'm not sure I would change very much. The approach worked because it was grounded in commercial reality: win the work and deliver it well.

You've repeatedly built well management systems and operating models. In practical terms, what does a 'strong wells organisation' look like - and what are your non-negotiables?

(The few processes, behaviours, and indicators that protect safety and performance.)

A strong wells organisation is boring in the best possible way. Plans are clear, roles are understood, risks are actively managed, and people speak up early. That said, what 'good' looks like does differ depending on context—drilling a single well for a small operator in West Africa is very different from running multiple rigs for a major operator over several years

In both cases, process is key—but it has to be a process that can actually be implemented and adhered to. Over-engineered systems don't survive contact with operations. What matters is having the right people in the key operational roles—particularly the drilling supervisors, drilling superintendent, and senior well engineer—with clear authority and accountability.

My non-negotiables are transparency and disciplined change management. If changes aren't visible, understood, and controlled, safety and performance will erode very quickly.

You authored the Schlumberger Stuck Pipe Manual. What did turning field experience into a playbook teach you about how expertise is built? (And how you now help others build that expertise faster—without learning everything the hard way).

It taught me that expertise isn't intuition—it's pattern recognition built from experience and structured reflection. Turning field lessons into a playbook forced clarity about why things fail, not just how.

At African Petroleum, you delivered three deepwater wells offshore Liberia while also owning contracts, logistics, HSE, local content, and government liaison - on time and on budget. What single lesson did that experience leave you with? (One takeaway that still shapes how you lead high-stakes delivery.)

Ownership and teamwork. When you own everything—technical delivery, contracts, logistics, HSE, and government liaison—there's nowhere to hide, but you also quickly learn that you can't do it on your own.

That was my first full leadership role in drilling, and it reinforced how critical it is to have a strong team around you. High-stakes delivery works when accountability is clear, communication is constant, and decisions are made early rather than perfectly. Just as importantly, ownership combined with the right team is what allows you to recover when things don't go to plan.



Gekko | Applied Drilling Intelligence sits at the intersection of operations and decision-making. What pushed you to build it—frustration with how decisions were made, or a clear vision of what drilling could become?

(The problem you wanted to solve, and the shift you believe the industry needs.)

It started with frustration—but it was frustration grounded in opportunity. I kept seeing that the daily drilling report—the single richest source of operational data on a rig—was hugely under-utilised. So much information was captured, yet what we actually used after the fact was only a tiny fraction of it.

At the same time, I felt the industry was fixated on real-time data and micro KPIs, without enough emphasis on overall trends over longer periods—which is where many of the real performance insights lie.

On the vessel tracking and fuel side, it also frustrated me that fuel was generally treated just as a cost line item, rather than something you could actively manage and optimise if you had good, meaningful data.

Gekko was born from all of that—a belief that the data we already collect could be aggregated, contextualised, and presented in a way that helps teams make fewer, better decisions at the moments that matter most. It's about closing the gap between information and decision-making without losing operational realism—and doing it in a cost-effective way.

If you could give one piece of advice to today's petroleum engineering students, what would it be—and why?

(A principle they can carry through their first roles and into leadership.)

Learn how to think—that's what leads to real problem-solving. Don't just arrive with a problem; come with a proposed solution and be ready to explain how you got there. Showing that you've thought an issue through, understood the trade-offs, and formed a view is far more valuable than simply pointing out what's wrong.
