

Li|ber|tad

[liβer'ta(ð)] *f*, liberty: self-reliance, independence, self-determination

Six decades ago, the Seat car maker mobilized and motorized the Spanish people, providing a taste of freedom in the Franco era. Today this Volkswagen subsidiary is freeing up new areas for itself. A broad-based program is giving all of its departments space to address future-oriented fields.

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The SEAT car maker has survived turbulent times. The Sociedad Española de Automóviles de Turismo was founded in 1950 by the Spanish government under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. Its first models were based on those of the Italian manufacturer Fiat, which owned a share of the company. In 1957, the Seat 600 city car became an immediate success. At 71,000 pesetas it was not exactly cheap. But Seat offered an installment plan, which gave vast numbers of Spaniards a sense of freedom. They drove to the sea, visited friends and relatives, and some even made quick trips over the border to France to see movies that were banned in Spain.

Seat built 10,000 cars in 1957. In 2016 it made more than 449,000 at its site in Martorell near Barcelona. In 2015 the company reversed a lengthy period of loss, and in 2016 posted an operating profit of 153 million euros. Its sales have risen, especially on the German market. And its product range now includes an SUV: the Ateca, which was introduced in 2016. But the brand is best exemplified by the compact Leon model. “We sometimes even talk about leonization,” says Holger Kintscher, Seat’s Executive Vice President for Finance. By that he means the considerable rise in appeal the brand has enjoyed over recent years. Seat now

stands for sportiness and fresh design, and is also considered a good choice for families. That has not always been the case. The brand struggled for quite a while to find its place. “The Leon has enabled us to successively improve our results since 2012,” says Kintscher. “That is a reflection of what is happening with our customers.” Xavier Ros, Executive Vice President for Human Resources, adds: “The success of this turnaround is a completely new feeling for us.”

A surge of energy is evident throughout the company. And it is being applied directly to future-oriented fields. “Like all car makers, we have to address the major trends in our society,” says Kintscher. Seat wants to become a provider of mobility solutions, and play a leading role in automotive connectivity. Electrification and autonomous driving are on the agenda as well. To tackle future-oriented fields from e-mobility to connectivity without inflating its organizational structure, the company has launched the “ViaSeat+” program. That translates to “Seat way plus.”

The main focus of the program consists of liberating the members of all departments from lengthy decisional processes, superfluous hierarchies, tedious coordination hurdles, duplication of work, and administrative burdens. Each

department may then reinvest the capacities it frees up into new job profiles. The only condition is that these new positions must be in future-oriented fields. “It was clear from the start that the capacities we released would not be eliminated but instead placed in the service of the individual departments,” says Ros. “And that, of course, was a very motivating factor.”

Enthusiastic support by the workforce was anything but a foregone conclusion. After all, Seat had just worked its way through several efficiency programs. “We had been working hard on our profitability,” says finance head Kintscher. “You can always keep trying to lower costs a little more. But efficiency is just a means to an end. What we now want to do is put Seat in a strong position for the future.”

Together with Porsche Consulting, Seat worked on defining the core areas of expertise it wants to focus on. The company’s available resources will now be consistently placed at the disposal of these core activities. “Obviously, you can’t calculate with people like you can with numbers,” Ros notes. “The employee skills that we free up generally do not transfer one-to-one to job profiles in pioneering fields.” This is why Seat is now helping its employees obtain the specific qualifications they will need for their new responsibilities. Let the future come. ←

THE SEAT WAY: VIA SEAT +

THE AIM: Around 5,000 employees in the indirect departments of purchasing, finance, development, sales, and personnel are to become ten percent more efficient. The departments will invest the capacities thereby freed up into future-oriented fields such as connected cars and electrification.

THE TEAM: Experts from Porsche Consulting worked together with the Seat organizational team and with employees from all the indirect departments on the “Via Seat+” program.

THE PROGRAM: Departments were analyzed successively in a series of waves, and optimized in accordance with three principles:

1. AGILE

- fewer management personnel
- flatter hierarchies
- fewer committees

2. FOCUSED

- defined priorities
- stronger core areas of expertise
- fewer auxiliary activities

3. ORGANIZED

- digitally networked processes
- streamlined work processes
- trans-departmental cooperation



Executive Vice President for Finance Holger Kintscher (left) and Executive Vice President for Human Resources Xavier Ros share a mission: clearing space for Seat employees to focus on future-oriented fields.

THE SEAT STORY

With 14,000 employees, Seat is the largest employer in the Catalan region. Counting supplier and aftersales companies, some 100,000 jobs throughout Spain depend on the car maker. Seat has played a key role in the country’s development from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Key milestones in the company’s history:



Seat 600

In **1953** the first Seat plant in the region produced five cars a day. The first model, the Seat 1400, was similar to a car from Fiat. In **1957** the legendary Seat 600 came onto the market. It sold out rapidly in its first years of production. Many Spaniards had to wait several years for a car. In **1974** Seat sold its two millionth vehicle. In the meantime, nearly half of all Spanish households had acquired a car—and half of those sported a Seat logo. In **1984** the first Seat Ibiza was made, which enjoyed international success as well. It was the result of collaboration with Porsche and the Italian designer Giorgio Giugiaro. In **1986** Volkswagen acquired the Spanish company. In **1999** Seat introduced a sporty model: the Leon, with 180 hp, six speeds, and all-wheel drive. In **2016** the Seat Ateca, an SUV model, joined the range.