

“Jacked Up”
Bill Lane
Notes by Dave Kraft

Jack regarded Bruce highly and hated to lose him, but he always said that an employee should never stay in a bad situation and die a little bit every day, just to keep a “good job.” (5) ...a wonderful maniac named Jack Welch blew up communications and banished boredom for good. (14) Some of the best and brightest understand instinctively how crucial to a career the ability to do a great pitch is; but others in “the brightest” category—particularly engineers, scientists, environmental people, and lawyers—do not. (31) But I have always refused to kiss ass, and I have observed over the years that ass-kissers fill the legitimate big players with disgust. “...we had to see if he could *transfer his ideas and practices to other people in a useful way; and he did.*” “You can’t be a leader if you can’t stand up and present, and we are only interested in leaders.” (32) There is one simple message you need to understand from this: No matter how important or unimportant your audience is—whether they are aspiring ninth-grade writers (to whom I have spoken), big shots, or customers—never, ever, convey the impression that speaking to them is a duty, a pain in the ass, or something other than what you would rather be doing at the moment. (38) He had decided, in a vague and not-yet-focused way, to make communications—oral and written—a critical lever in the operation of the company. (41)

“Do I have a good pitch? And, if the answer is ‘maybe not,’ they would need to ask themselves, ‘What do I plan to do to get better?’” ...the ability to stand up and present, powerfully and persuasively, is one of the two skill sets you absolutely must possess if you are to move into the upper echelons of GE. (43) But if you lack the ability to deliver a galvanizing presentation, your talents will effectively be hidden under a bushel basket, and you will be labeled a bore, an idiot, deadly, and much, much worse; (44) Mark walked off that stage knowing he did well, while the others limped off with holes they had shot in their own feet; some of them, intelligent people, just stupidly unaware. *You’re going nowhere in GE unless you can do a great pitch.* (46)

What jobs are you disqualifying yourself from because of poor presentation skills? (47) Never, ever, make a presentation you do not feel is excellent—a home run. If you don’t spring up to the podium because you can’t wait to do it, something is probably wrong. (50) ...insist on total candor in every presentation, beginning with your own. (59) No one would have suspected at the time that, within three years, the new chairman would vaporize the entire strategic planning apparatus; an undertaking Welch felt was impossible, stupid, and even dangerous. (69) ...that strategy was not a “lengthy action plan,” but rather “the evolution of a central idea through continually changing circumstances.” (83) Welch, incidentally had to be the most responsive CEO in America to notes sent to him. (87) A question like this marked the anonymous questioner as a member of the undead, lurching spasmodically down the tracks behind the train that had pulled out of the station several years ago. I am not implying that Welch was intolerant of what is annoyingly called “pushback.” He simply could not restrain himself from delivering a sarcastic “shot” when the questioner’s argument was, in Jack’s view, patently stupid or implied an inability to change, or to look forward. (95)

Once, in the fairly early days of the laptop, I politely kicked the CEO of a newly acquired company out of the room for noisily pounding away at the keyboard on something unrelated to the meeting. I mentioned to Welch that I had done this, without giving the name, and he demanded to know who it was. Uncharacteristically, I told him, and he smiled faintly and said, “Well, that asshole’s not going to be around here long anyway.” And he wasn’t. (97)

You, as the boss, need daily immersion in the “grunt stuff” if you are to claim that you really run your operation. “You’ve got to smell the shit,” they told all the lieutenants at the infantry basic course. If you don’t see what the men see and understand what they understand, you’re kind of a fake, a figurehead, a guy walking around with the trappings of an officer taking salutes but knowing you’re not a real leader. (105) Welch talked for years, in the early days, about *self-confidence* being the indispensable ingredient of leadership. I nodded. I agreed with it theoretically, but never really grasped it until later, as *the* key attribute of a leader. Some are born with it; some develop it; some fall on their faces, their self-confidence undeserved. But I’ve never seen a real leader without it. (108)

Make sure what you plan to present is spectacular. Try it out on smart people. Get help from somebody who has presented to this individual before. Ask an opinionated jerk like me for a view and some help. This may be the only chance you get to pitch to this individual, and you need to walk in the room loaded for bear and knowing you have a great pitch. (122) Don’t talk about anything you don’t really care about—care passionately about. (125) I’ve never heard a GE pitch criticized for being too specific. “Too complex,” often, but never too specific. “*Conclusions people can walk out the door with!*” (126)

A culture of excellence was growing all through the ‘80s, and pathetic, boring, and pointless presentations stood out more and more. (129) ...GE began, more and more, to assume the character and personality of its leader: aggressive, hands-on, mercurial, impatient, and loathing of anything that smelled of mediocrity, dishonesty, bureaucracy, or lack of a “110 percent” passionate effort. “...no man is totally worthless. He can always be used as a bad example.” (137) People working in an atmosphere where they feel assured in knowing that only the limits of their creativity and drive, their own standards of personal excellence, will be the ceiling on how far and how fast they move.” (156) In any presentation to any audience, you must “season” a success story—even a triumphant success story—with some commentary on “where we came up short” or “where we could have done better” or “if we had to do it over, we might have taken a slightly difference approach.” These are enormous credibility-enhancers. An unalloyed “success story” sounds like a “blow and go,” and causes any audience to switch on its BS detectors. (157) But I do know that he could move the stock, almost at will, because he could present better than any business leader I have ever seen. (160) It was not: “Bill changed the course of GE communications forever,” or something like that—because I didn’t. What it *did* say was what kept me employed for 23 years working next to the third rail: I deeply, fanatically *cared* about everything I did for GE: annual reports, meetings, letters, speeches, whatever. (173)

He only wanted fanatics, nuts, and true believers near him—people that were willing to give everything they had in their beings to produce excellence. (176) He would tune out, and write-off, people who made presentations that had an air of “going through the motions” or “reporting” rather than passionately advocating some course or other. He loved the latter even if he disagreed with the course being suggested. (177) The power was not in arm-waving and dramatic gestures, but in the quality of the thought, the organization—the urgency and polish of the delivery—and, most important, the point of what they were telling their mates. (199) The thought of Jack jacked up on cocaine does not even compute. I’m not sure you could tell the difference from what he was like normally. (203) Never tell them how much work you have done

on the pitch. Simply make that evident from its quality. (210) Welch demanded the best effort from all GE people, at every level, on *every single thing they did*. (225) Rehearse any life-changing conversation like this, at least in your mind, and have a pad in front of you, if on the phone. Never hang up and think “Why didn’t I say this?” or “I forgot to tell her that.” (231) But, I am also someone who *bore* easily and will never allow a client of mine, or an audience of mine, to be boring or to be bored. (234) The question always in your mind must not only be, “Do I care about this?” But, “Will they care about this?”; “Should they care about this?” Don’t walk out there and bore people. (238) My friend and college classmate and GE mate John Connelly, describes his view of the secret of Welch’s success as “fanaticism.” And that may sound crazy, but it’s simply another way of saying what I’ve already said: never do anything you don’t really care about. This is particularly true in communications, where not caring quickly becomes obvious to the people with whom you are supposed to be communicating. (241) “Why are you telling me this? Why should I listen to you if you are not ‘feeding’ me, giving me something I can take back to my business or my job, and use?” (249) Any presentation that does not give the people in the audience something they can take out the door with them and use is a failure and a waste of their time. (250) “The ultimate competitive advantage” a company can have; “the ability to embrace great ideas from anywhere, spread them across the organization and get them quickly into practice.” (252) Teach them something; give them something they can use, and you will never do another bad pitch. (262) You simply cannot get a job at this level if you can’t stand up and teach, and persuade, excite...and lead. (273)

You make it, or lose it, in that first thirty seconds, or minute, you are up there. (277) Start off strongly, with a hint of urgency in your voice. Memorize your opening. Sharpen it like a spear and then fire it into the hearts of the audience after you bound up to the lectern to do your pitch. And, if there is a particular anecdote that set you off on this subject and frames your thinking on the subject you are about to present, tell it. The dramatic effect of a powerful anecdote is immense. Grab them by the throats; pique their interest and their curiosity in those first seconds. (279) Use your own words, your own emotion, your own passion for what you want to say. And say it simply, and briefly, from your soul. (309) He was, and is, a Darwinian capitalist, to be sure, but with an intense love of General Electric and the people it needed to make it work. (312)