



Book Jacked Up

The Inside Story of How Jack Welch Talked GE into Becoming the World's Greatest Company

Bill Lane
McGraw-Hill, 2007

Recommendation

Jack Welch was the most famous CEO in the U.S. when he ran General Electric. During the Welch era (1981–2001), GE’s value skyrocketed, making millionaires of employees with stock options. CEOs across the globe adopted Welch’s strategies for streamlining operations, reducing payrolls and dominating markets. Welch retired super-rich (current estimated net worth: \$720 million) – not bad for a short, stumpy, middle-class guy with a lifelong stutter and an explosive temper. GE staffers called Welch “Neutron Jack” because of his temper, his pettiness and his heavy hand with firings, more than 100,000 during his first four years as CEO. In this book, Bill Lane, Welch’s speechwriter for two decades, reveals the true man, warts and all. Despite his singular accomplishments, Welch comes across in Lane’s book as an abusive tyrant and a bully. Lane doesn’t make himself look much better, from commenting on a female stockbroker’s “great legs” to throwing around expletives. He paints an unattractive picture of overpaid, self-indulgent, immature executives, pitching things at each other and acting, as Lane puts it, like “little boys competing for attention in the schoolyard.” *BooksInShort* finds that this book is a top-notch primer on executive communication and recommends it for that purpose. Just don’t pay as much attention to the way its stars comport themselves when they’re not in public.

Take-Aways

- Always present your company in the best possible light.
- As a CEO, take charge of your meetings. Make them your bully pulpit.
- Banish boring speakers from company meetings.
- Speechwriters should polish your thoughts, not create them.
- The more you cut and “red pen” your presentation, the better it will become.
- Make every presentation short, sweet and to the point.
- Most presentations should not take more than 10 minutes.
- If you are not excited about what you have to say, get off the stage.
- Rehearse your presentation in front of colleagues who will judge it objectively.
- Don’t use PowerPoint or any technology that requires a screen.

Summary

“Neutron Jack” Blows Up GE

Before Jack Welch became General Electric’s CEO in 1981, the company’s oral presentations were bloated, windy, pompous and overproduced. Each year, GE spent millions on presentations, many involving a dozen slide projectors and computers that flashed bright images on a giant screen in a flurry of multimedia glory. The more garish, elaborate and costly the communication experience, the better.

“Jack Welch is a flawed, but good man, and possibly the best CEO ever.”

At GE, the medium was usually the message. Company presentations were kaleidoscopic events, Hollywood-like productions, gorgeous eye candy – but little more. They functioned as infomercials. So, they didn’t generate much credibility. The speaker and content were almost superfluous afterthoughts. Certainly, that is how

audiences regarded them. Despite all the expense and effort, these presentations communicated only a minimal amount of information.

“The classic bureaucrats were not uncommon at GE; but, after the ascendancy of Welch, they quickly became an endangered species.”

Of course, not all GE presentations were elaborate multimedia events. However, the simpler presentations were, in their own way, just as bad as the staged productions. Most were “boring spewings.” Typical GE speakers (or “gasbags”) would drone on interminably. These speeches’ purpose seemed to be to put the audience quickly to sleep. The company’s written presentations weren’t much better.

“A forceful leader can turn a culture on a dime.”

The presentations were a metaphor for GE itself. Indeed, before Welch, GE was a “supertanker of a company,” slow and ponderous. The executives who preceded Welch liked the grandiose imagery, as did their business colleagues. GE was “profitable [and] competitive” and “had the healthiest balance sheet in big business.” But Welch, an iconoclast, did not want to pilot a supertanker. He had something quite different in mind.

“You need to walk up to the lectern with a serious face – even a scowl is okay.”

Thus, as CEO, Welch quickly refashioned the company into, as he described it, a “cigarette boat,” which was superfast and agile. Under Welch, GE became a highly adaptable firm that could pivot “on a dime” and immediately strike out in brand-new directions. To change things, “Neutron Jack,” as the GE workers called him, blew up everything. Then, he rebuilt GE from scratch, just the way he wanted it to be.

The New Communications Order

Welch decided that a primary area of change at GE would be its corporate communications, including its company meetings, oral presentations and annual reports. At the time, this priority was highly idiosyncratic for a *Fortune* 100 company. In the future, Welch dictated, all oral presentations would be short. No more elaborate slide shows. Woe betide any GE executive who didn’t get right to the point at the podium or who blathered for more than 10 minutes. Welch would get up and angrily walk out of any presentations he did not like. Further, he quickly fired GE executives who could not present as effectively as he demanded.

“Never stand up and tell a joke you heard somewhere, no matter how funny you think it is.”

Bombastic and confrontational, Welch radiated energy “like a thundercloud.” From his first days as CEO, Welch made it clear to everyone at GE that he would not tolerate what he called “the corporate crap that had enslaved and bored GE, not to mention the entire capitalist organizational structure, for more than a century.” Company presentations quickly became “succinct, focused and to the point.”

“It is women who have the toughest job of all in scoring high marks in presentations.”

Neutron Jack radically changed GE’s corporate communications, including its typical style of oral and written presentations. The business world quickly followed his inspired lead. As a result, corporate communications will never be the same.

Ten Presentation Tips for CEOs and Senior Executives

Here are 10 suggestions, tips and techniques for developing and delivering a great presentation. They represent the essence of Welch’s philosophy and the wisdom of more than 20 years of top-level, hands-on experience in the areas of speechwriting, meeting planning, and executive and corporate communications at GE. These tips are primarily for CEOs and senior executives.

1. **At your company, you are the person in charge** – Whether you’re at a meeting of a work group, a division or the entire company, demonstrate your authority when you walk into the room. Assume control. Make sure everyone knows who is running the show.
2. **Make all company meetings your meetings** – In this area, micromanaging is the way to go. Indeed, it is essential. Plan and orchestrate company meetings so they deliver the message that you, the company’s leader, want to communicate. Make meetings your megaphone. This is the most effective way to ensure that everyone in the company is signing off on the same sheet.
3. **Honesty is the best policy** – Insist that everyone within your organization be candid in their presentations. Tolerate nothing less than superior presentations from your management team.
4. **If a presentation is poorly done, show your displeasure by leaving** – If someone subjects you to obvious dissembling, smoke screens or fakery, walk out. By doing so, you send a clear message to the organization: You will not put up with any nonsense.
5. **Clearly communicate that you want presentations to be interesting and useful** – Keep boring speakers away from the podium.
6. **Vet presentations in advance** – If something a presenter says surprises you, you did not do your job.
7. **Comment when the spirit moves you** – Do not hesitate to speak up while your managers deliver their presentations. This is the best way to underline important presentation points and to keep speakers on their toes.
8. **Never simply read a speech that someone else wrote for you** – You completely abrogate your responsibility when you do so. Play an active role in all content planning, and in the polishing and editing process. Handle annual reports, letters and other executive communications in the same manner.
9. **Don’t overaccentuate the positive** – A presentation that lists one success after another is simply not credible. Pepper your speeches with anecdotes about how things occasionally went wrong.
10. **Don’t hire a speechwriter only on the strength of his or her résumé** – That’s not enough. Ask candidates to draft a speech for someone within the organization before letting them join the firm.

Helpful Tips for Anyone Involved with Presentations

These 25 techniques became popular at GE during the Welch era. They are useful for any presenter, as well as for public relations professionals, meeting planners, speechwriters, and specialists in executive and corporate communications.

1. **Cut, cut, cut!** – Trim “with a cleaver rather than a scalpel.” Usually, the first draft gets the heaviest edits. Make sure later drafts receive the same treatment.
2. **Don’t waste time** – Be serious. Start right into your speech. Sell it up front by stating why your audience needs to hear what you have to say.
3. **Be brief** – The best presentation you will ever give is the one that will seem too short to audience members.
4. **Stay engaged** – If you’re not excited about your presentation, your audience and the points you want to make, you should not be standing at the podium.
5. **Get nervous** – Nerves show that you do not take the audience for granted and that you want to do well.
6. **Just the facts** – Without solid information, your presentation is worthless. Focus on content, not theatrics.
7. **Stay strong** – Each of your colleagues may ask you to highlight a pet project or an accomplishment. Don’t do it. Laundry lists put audiences to sleep.
8. **Seize the day** – If you are confident in your abilities as a presenter, jump at any opportunity to speak in front of an audience of executives who can promote your career. However, if you are a weak presenter, feign a heart attack. Delivering a poor presentation can kill your career.
9. **The 10-minute limit** – Presentations that are part of a series, for example, at a company meeting, should be no longer than 10 minutes each.
10. **Avoid the committee approach** – A group-written speech is sure to be flatter than a pancake.
11. **Planning is crucial** – Pretend you’re a technician figuring out how to dismantle a ticking time bomb.
12. **Once is enough** – Never make the same pitch twice to senior management.
13. **Find out whom you’re talking to** – Before your presentation, learn as much as you can about your audience.
14. **Have backup** – Speechwriters should interview the CEO or the senior executive before an upcoming presentation, and tape his or her remarks about it on two tape recorders simultaneously. This protects the speechwriter in case one of the tapes fails.
15. **Practice, practice, practice** – Rehearse in front of others. Include in your audience at least one cynic or an executive who is senior to you within the company. Find people who are not afraid to point out your weaknesses. Listen closely to all criticisms and learn to read between the lines. For example, “It was great but I thought it was a little long in places” is a polite way to say that you were boring. Make sure the people who critique your presentation clearly grasp its main points. If they do not, rewrite. Ambiguity is great for murder mysteries, but not for presentations.
16. **Tell a good story** – Anecdotes add spice to your presentation. The right one “lights up the issue like a flash of night lightning.”
17. **Don’t pretend to know more than you do** – Never attempt to answer questions regarding subjects about which you do not have specialized knowledge or expertise. Never “wing it” – it’s disrespectful to your audience and is a recipe for failure.
18. **Avoid visual aids** – If you must use them, make sure in advance that everyone in the room will be able to see the screen clearly.
19. **Focus on the audience** – Your speech is about them, not you. Make sure that your presentation fulfills their needs. Address the issues that are on their minds.
20. **Speak plainly** – Communicate clearly and from the heart. Avoid business-speak, pomposity and jargon. Don’t use acronyms. Anyone who uses such phrases as “24/7,” “think outside the box” or “metrics” should have his or her lips sewn shut.
21. **PowerPoint is evil** – PowerPoint is boring. Avoid complicated charts and graphs. As in so many other areas of life, the “KISS” rule – “Keep It Simple, Stupid” – is the one to follow.
22. **If you must use slides, keep them brief** – Their design should be clean and unadorned. Bullet points must never be longer than eight words. Use large, clear type.
23. **But try to do without them** – Avoid distracting the audience with “a screen full of crap behind you.”
24. **Don’t get trapped by the conference program** – You don’t need to speak for 20 minutes just because that’s what the agenda says. Deliver a succinct speech and then get out of the limelight. Inevitably, someone else will talk past his or her allotted time (which is the biggest presentation mistake anyone can make).
25. **Sexism lives** – Women presenters have a higher bar to clear than men do. Women speakers should maintain self-assurance, coolness and authority. Be friendly, but limit your smiles to the audience. If you speak loudly or aggressively, male audience members may decide you are “shrill.”

About the Author

Bill Lane was General Electric CEO Jack Welch’s speechwriter for more than 20 years.
