

Gerhard Lauck The Education of an Evil Genius

Part 11

Chapter Five I Become an Executive

You have a Yiddish mind!

The CEO's biggest compliment

The Interview

When I walked through the front door for the first time, I was somewhat taken back by the large Spartan room full of desks and people talking on phones. At the back, a small elderly man beckoned me. I walked over and took a seat.

What he told me sounded promising.

He had founded the company back in the 1940's in his basement as a manufacturing operation. When his business outgrew it, he purchased a brick building. When it grew still more, he expanded the building and built more warehouses.

His company consisted of three divisions. These were essentially three different businesses. They operated under the same roof with an overlapping staff.

There were two senior executives aside from himself: The General Manager,

who ran the "office", and the Vice President of Production, who ran the "shop". Both had been hired right out of high school, stayed on and worked their way up the ranks. They did their jobs well and knew company procedure inside out.

But there was a problem.

He had been diagnosed with an incurable disease. It was one of those insidious diseases that can progress either *very slowly* or *very quickly*. He was preparing for the day when he would no longer be able to run his company himself.

He wanted to hire somebody to gradually assume his leadership role in the company. *And to personally train that person one-on-one!* He stressed the value of this training. I agreed whole-heartedly! *This was the opportunity of a lifetime!*

He had already made *two attempts* to find the right man. Both had failed. The first man had been fired after six months. The second, my immediate predecessor, an *MBA (!)*, had lasted eighteen months before being dismissed. I made a mental note that managers coming in from the outside obviously had a high mortality rate here.

The three top executives pondered how to find the right man.

Then the Vice President of Production came up with an idea: *Instead of hiring an older man already set in his ways, why not hire a young fellow. He'll be more adaptable. Then train him how we do things here.*

I thought to myself: This explains why this opportunity has opened up for me DESPITE my lack of a college degree or ANY formal business education. And why the experience in mail order and publishing listed on my resume made me stand out.

He summoned the General Manager. I was asked to take a test.

For many years now, he had insisted that every prospective employee who passed the initial screening take that test. He put a lot of stock in it. Based on past experience, he explained.

At the time, I didn't know my score or its full significance, but I knew I did very well. It was the kind of thing I'm pretty good at.

At any rate, I was quickly hired.

Training

About a week after I started work, a college graduate younger than me was hired for essentially the *same trainee position*. I was surprised and concerned. Nobody had said anything about *multiple* trainees! I thought I would be the only one!

My younger colleague once told me: *I go to bed late. I don't like to sleep. Sleep is a small piece of death.* That made me feel old. I countered: *I like to sleep. I can*

sleep longer than I can eat. I can eat longer than I can drink. I can drink longer than I can make love. I thought this was a clever reply. But I still felt old.

I later learned the other trainee had actually started interviewing *before* me. After multiple interviews, he had been rejected. But he wouldn't take no for an answer. He was so persistent in his pursuit of the position that the CEO finally relented and hired him.

The Vice President of Production later told me he had actually suggested not *one* but *two* young men. *Two trainees* did not cost more than *one MBA*. This also offered backup in case one didn't work out.

Fortunately, both of us management trainees quickly became comrades-in-arms instead of rivals. Three factors contributed to this:

First, the *shared suffering* of the *chaotic training*.

If I had trained my *non-profit organization's volunteers* in such a chaotic manner, they would have quit....And if we had trained the *underground resistance* people like this, we would have all round up in prison.

Second, our *common foe*, namely a couple of brusque supervisors who sometimes gave the two of us a tough time.

Perhaps they resented the fact that the CEO had given strict orders that both trainees be addressed by "Mister" and last name. This directive applied *only* to the two of us and to the CEO himself. The other two senior executives, who had worked there since high school, were generally addressed by their first names.

Later I accidentally ticked off an assistant. When I asked her to "fetch" something, she shot back: *I'm not a dog! I don't fetch!* This was an innocent mistake on my part. "Fetch" doesn't have negative connotations out west. Nor do dogs. Unless, I suppose, a female thinks she's being called a dog. But this one had a very nice figure...Not that I noticed.

Third, the company was growing. So even if one of us was destined *not* to get the *top position*, he would probably stay on as an executive in the firm.

The CEO told both us trainees: *I know the supervisors are rough on you. If it gets too bad, come to me. I'll back you up!*

I felt he was completely sincere. But I *also* sensed those supervisors were clever enough to undermine us *despite* the CEO's support! My two predecessors had fallen victim to them. I would not underestimate them. I believe this is one of the reasons why I lasted so much longer than any other executive there aside from the "lifers".

Later, when those supervisors' behavior toward us had become intolerable, the CEO gave them a good talking to. After that, they were a little less overt.

Everybody else in the company got along fine.

General Marketing versus Direct Marketing

What is the difference?

General Marketing: A fancy advertising agency dreams up an advertisement for a well-heeled corporate client. It is witty, gorgeous, funny and sexy. It is quite entertaining. Everybody loves it. There's just one hitch: nobody remembers the client's product. Only the humor...and the cleavage.

Direct Marketing: Mail order campaigns that actually work! Everything is designed to *sell product!* Sales are recorded, measured and analyzed. New test ads are tested against the control ad.

I was trained in direct marketing!

Writing Copy

The CEO spent a lot of time teaching us how to write good copy. We were printing at least three or four different catalogs for the different divisions each year. The press runs went up to *one million copies* for just *one* of our multiple full-color catalogs.

A lot of money was at stake here. Optimization was essential.

We often agonized over the tiniest little detail in meetings attended by three or four executives.

This wasn't a "Thank You" note to grandma for the \$5.00 she gave you for your birthday!

Demographics

One of the main reasons the CEO had hired me was that he figured I'd be good at what he called "demographics".

By today's standards, that is akin to calling a school nurse a brain surgeon.

Customer sales were recorded on oversized index cards. Analysis required weeks of manual compilation and computation. I welcomed the task of "demographic analysis" despite all this. It fitted my skill set and provided an excellent opportunity to definitively prove my value to the company.

My "demographic analyses" proved *extremely profitable* for the company already in the first couple years. This greatly increased my job security and my annual bonus.

The "Pass Through" Blunder

Here is an amazing true story:

For years, the CEO had been including TWO full-color catalogs in every mass mailing!!!

His explanation: "pass through".

I knew this was nonsense!

But in the beginning, I was still way too new to openly question this. He might be offended and I might become unemployed.

The first time I brought it up later, I took great care to be very tactful. And to prove my case with numbers.

After patiently listening to me, he replied: *I understand everything you've just* said. It makes sense to me. I don't see anything wrong with your reasoning... But I don't feel comfortable giving up the second catalog.

I didn't push. At least he had listened to me and acknowledged my logic. And I still had my job.

Later, when I was starting to establish my reputation in the company, I brought it up again. This time, he went along with it. Our selling expenses dropped by *six digit figures* each year without any noticeable impact on sales.

Computerization

When I started at the company, it still did not have a computer.

We did have one machine, almost as big as a piano, which performed some of the tasks later computerized. But it was so complicated that only one employee other than the General Manager knew how to use it. (I don't remember what it was called.)

The first inventory system I encountered there was still in the development stage. Designed for only the *one* division with the *fewest* products, it consisted of oversized index cards with charts that had to be filled out by hand.

But it didn't work right. The numbers sometimes refused to balance!

The CEO said he couldn't figure out why. He asked me to try. The solution finally dawned on me that evening. The next morning, I explained the reason to the CEO. Together we fixed the system.

The second year I was there, the CEO decided to computerize.

Nobody in the whole company knew anything about computers. Let alone have

any experience with them. Except for the other trainee, who had taken a computer course in college.

After him, I probably had the *most* experience. As a child, I had used big piles of discarded computer printouts as drawing paper. My father had brought them home from the university. Occasionally, I heard words like "Fortran" and "Cobalt". They were something called "computer languages."

The CEO told us straight out that he didn't like IBM. I never learned why.

The IBM sales team delivered a formal presentation in front of our whole executive staff plus the office supervisors. The salesman spoke first, then their tech guy. He rubbed me the wrong way. Rightly or wrongly, I had the impression that he had an "attitude".

When he finished, I humbly asked him if I had understood him correctly. Then I presented the "equation" - as I had understood it from his presentation – and asked if this was right.

He confirmed my equation was correct.

Then I entered the numerical values for that equation. And asked if they were right.

Again, he confirmed everything was correct.

Then I ran the numbers through my head, speaking them aloud. Kind of like "If a = b and c = d then e = f" etc. etc....

But the two sides of the equation didn't equal!

Then I innocently asked: What am I doing wrong?

Dead silence. You could have heard a pin drop.

IBM didn't get the sale. We purchased a computer system from a different manufacturer. The hardware, which included a 40 MB central processing unit the size of a small refrigerator, some work stations and big wide-frame dot matrix printers, cost around \$70,000. We also had to hire a programmer to write the software at an estimated cost of about \$30,000.

Afterward, the other trainee told me: You don't need a computer. You ARE a computer.

When the CEO asked the General Manager to use the calculator to run up some figures during one staff meeting, I was doing the math in my head faster than the machine. Then the machine would confirm my answer. Finally, our results didn't match: "You're wrong, the answer is X!" – "No", I replied, "Your machine truncated to two digits. It went three digits." Re-adjusted, the machine confirmed my answer.

The reorganization of our operations during computerization occupied all of us for months. It forced us to reevaluate our procedures. Looking back, I would call it very educational. But at the time, I would have called it something else.

Sales Projections

When the computerization process was finally complete, sales projections became even easier for me.

Once a week, I would line up two thick stacks of computer printouts. They showed product sales in units from the previous week, and year to date for that year *and* for the previous year. Each division had its own set of columns, because each had a different seasonal pattern. There were two divisions on each printout. We tracked *four* separate markets, because one division had a large and *unique* "sub-market". [Note: The *manufacturing division* and one other division with a small product line were *not* included here.]

Then I calculated sales projections for every product *in my head*. Always on a Monday morning, because I was often a bit tired after the weekend and wanted an *easy task*.

These projections were then used to make – handwritten (!) - entries on charts for *every product* AND for *every individual part* used in that product. (Some parts were used in *multiple* products being sold in *multiple* divisions.)

Then I reviewed the re-order points. (The daily reorder list and the daily open purchase order list were two of the things that had been computerized.)

Finally, I'd write up the purchase order requisition forms. The clerical staff would enter them onto the computer and print out the actual purchase orders.

All this usually took about half a day.

Executioner at Long Last

By the time the CEO had decided to start interviewing for *still another* manager, I was sitting on the *opposite* side of the hiring desk. I had become the *executioner* instead of the *condemned man*.

This was enlightening. The *initial resume purge* made Attila the Hun look like Mother Theresa! We were less interested in *finding good candidates* than in *weeding out bad ones*. Any reason to reject an applicant was welcomed.

Two interviews in particular still stand out in my mind.

The first interviewee was an MBA. He knew the buzz words. Whenever the CEO asked him a question, he gave a fancy answer. Unfortunately for him, one question really just came down to plain old-fashioned common sense. He flunked.

The second interviewee was a graduate fresh out of college. He was asked to come up with a marketing plan for one of our products and come back with it the next day. When he arrived, he smugly informed us that he would *not* provide such a plan, because he didn't think we should take advantage of his *expertise* for *free*. The CEO kept a straight face and told him he understood his position. But after the youngster left, he declared: *There's no way in hell I'd hire that guy!*

I thought to myself: *A college degree is not the COMPLETION of an education. It is just the BEGINNING. College is only basic training. Not the high command!*

Missed it by THAT Much!

One thing peaked my curiosity. That candidate had gotten *right* the *only* question I had gotten *wrong* on that test during my first employment interview. When I asked him, he said he had just guessed.

I took another look at the test. This time, I actually *read the instructions* instead of just looking at the sample question. The mystery was solved in an instant.

My FIRST mistake was not reading the instructions!

Like many human beings of my gender, I have a natural aversion to reading instructions. I had just glanced at the sample answer and *wrongly* presumed that *only* a 4/1 pattern was an acceptable answer. Therefore, when I recognized a 2/2/1 pattern, I *rejected* it outright. (Heck, I even thought it might some kind of sneaky trick, because it so obvious.)

My SECOND mistake was not applying "game theory"!

FW had long ago taught me a very basic concept from a type of math he called "game theory".

I have found "game theory" extremely useful, especially in *strategic planning, decision making* and even *life in general*.

When confronted with variables impossible to gauge, simply assign them a value of "very high" (95%), "very low" (5%) or "50/50" (anywhere between those two extreme) as best you can. (When in doubt, use "50/50".)

I still should have picked the correct answer! Despite my first mistake!

Theoretically, I would have had a 50/50 chance instead of a one out of four chance from picking one of the other four options at random. (This is based on the presumption I would assign a 50/50 value to the question of whether or not my rejection of the 2/2/1 ratio was correct.)

At any rate, *I often applied this concept when dealing with complex problems as an executive*. Sometimes I would even phone FW for confirmation I had applied it correctly.

This tactical error on my part had cost me a perfect score by one point. I had meanwhile learned more about this test:

The highest possible score was 60.

My fellow trainee scored 51.

The previous highest score in company history was 53.

The company that provided the test claimed the genius level was 55.

I scored 59.

In my case, I believe "pattern recognition" or "abstract thinking" would be more accurate than "I.Q." or "intelligence"...All of us are good in some areas and not so good in others. Scores depend on how well the test aligns with those areas. *I know for darn sure that I'm a COMPLETE IDIOT in some areas! And I can* prove *it. I can provide plenty of witnesses.*

Frankly, even if I had gotten a perfect score, my only correct self-appraisal would have been to tell myself: *If you were so darn smart, you would have done the same thing in HALF THE TIME and with HALF THE EFFORT!*

Don't get smug and cocky! Always strive to do even better!

FW had told me a story about one of my sibling's sports teams:

His sports team became very good. It beat everybody. I thought they were getting a little too cocky. In the next game, I put in the second stringers for the first three quarters. I put in the first string only in the last quarter. By then, the opposing team had a big lead. The first string quickly racked up the points. But they lost the game by ONE POINT!



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