



Make It Up As They Go

By James E. Lukaszewski

JAMES E. LUKASZEWSKI is a White Plains, N.Y.-based management consultant. From Why Should Your Boss Listen to You?: The Seven Disciplines of the Trusted Strategic Advisor (Jossey-Bass). ©2008

One of the greatest surprises about leaders is that much of what they do is more or less made up on the spot. I discovered this early in my career, when I had the chance to coach the CEO of a large insurance company in the Midwest. To coach at this level, you have to meet the person you will be coaching ahead of the scheduled session, and there has to be an almost instant chemistry: Can you work together? Do you have the feeling that you are both on the same page?

My “beauty contest” interview with this CEO took place in his wonderful, exotic office on top of a very tall building. The view was amazing. The office had three full window walls; it was awesome.

It was also really intimidating.

As we began talking, it was pretty evident that he had a “visitor management approach,” no doubt because visitors asked the same questions about the view every time. The moment I started to speak, he took my arm, led me first to window number one, then around the perimeter answering all the questions about each wall—pointing out landmarks, history, useful detail—at about forty-five to sixty seconds per window. As he began explaining the third window view, my brain was screaming at me: “Say something really important, real soon. Only one wall left, and that one has the door you came through.” My mental voice commanded,

“If you want to get this job, you’d better ask an important question now.”

So I managed to interrupt the CEO with a question: “Tell me something: Do you always know what to do? You run a company of fourteen thousand employees; I have a company of fourteen employees. My people expect me to solve today’s problems and move ahead for tomorrow, following a plan. Do you know what to do every minute?”

He looked at me, smiled, and said, “Don’t ever tell anybody this, but I think the board actually hired me because I had a good sense of where we would have to go or need to go, and because at least half of my decisions would be carried out by people who really knew what they were doing. They felt that I could estimate, and make the right decisions in the gray areas at least 25 percent of the time. The remaining 25 percent they sort of left to me. They didn’t have the answers for this either. For that part of my job, I am on my own.

“But I’ll tell you something,” he con-

tinued, pointing at the door. “Every employee in this company thinks I have the answers. They think that I have a plan. I’ve got news for you: There really is no grand plan. We have only partial knowledge of how it is going to go. But if I told this to the people who work for me, they wouldn’t believe it for a minute.”

What I learned from that encounter, and it has stayed with me ever since, is that CEOs in particular are making it up about 25 percent of the time. They have to create what is next. They are making it up based on their experience or lack of it, on their concerns or their fears, and oftentimes on the perceived opportunities as well. This is an extremely interesting and powerful tool for advisers to have. When I am in meetings, and the meetings are wandering around off the track, once in a while I will turn to the CEO and ask, “Is this the part we know how to do or the part we are making up?” It is amazing how stunningly accurate this question can be.

Short Story

By Greg Niemann

After years of resisting change, the company yielded to the drivers, and the famous UPS shorts came into being. In its usual methodical manner, the company selected a few test locations—Sacramento, Tucson, and Hawaii—and supplied some of the drivers with shorts. As a member of management, I interviewed the drivers of one Tucson center who were wearing the “experimental shorts” and learned not only that they loved them—they were fending off questions from other Tucson drivers, who kept asking when the change would include everyone. Our reports confirmed what was suspected and was already set in motion: *The driver would wear shorts.*

The new uniform recast the UPS driver from a tired, traditional serv-

ice-worker image to one a bit spiffier and more upbeat. Shorts. Polyester. Built-in collar stays. Reinforced stitching, pocket-within-a-pocket for a pen, glued-on gold crest, long shirt-tails that would stay tucked in. Drivers, whose whole day is an aerobic workout, sometimes roll up their sleeves and wear shorts whether by sleet or by snow or by hail . . . and gratefully.

Many customers have commented that the shorts and the legs that fill them have made driver-ogling that much more gratifying. Competition between UPS and FedEx extends to their uniforms. Many drivers and the public too find FedEx’s fashion sense a bit flashier than Big Brown’s. Still, it’s all in what you’re after. So what if FedEx drivers have ten mix-and-match options? UPS drivers deliver one-third again as many packages every day, and they generally make more money and enjoy better benefits.

Unlike Army-Navy surplus, UPS uniforms are a tightly controlled commodity. The uniform belongs to UPS. Shirts, shorts, even logo-embroidered socks are allocated—five outfits, one for every workday. UPS washes and presses the shirts and shorts, and reclaims the uniforms for replacement when they wear out.

Management guards these items closely because the brown UPS wardrobe has become synonymous with service. They don’t risk a uniform’s misuse. Selling used uniforms on eBay is against company policy. Worn-out uniforms must be destroyed. Even the American flag, subject of legislation, doesn’t have this kind of protection, maybe because the American flag isn’t a pass-card to every business and household.

GREG NIEMANN is a California-based travel writer and former West Coast editor of UPS’s employee publications. From Big Brown: The Untold Story of UPS (Jossey-Bass). ©2007