

Best Advice: What I Learned From Jack Welch Hanging Up on Me

February 26, 2013



One afternoon over ten years ago, I was talking on the phone to my boss, former GE Chairman and CEO Jack Welch, when the line went dead. I called his assistant Rosanne Badowski to say we had been disconnected.

“No you weren’t,” she said. “Jack hung up on you.”

"Huh?"

"He wants you to know that's what it's like to be in a meeting with you, " Rosanne said. "You're too abrupt."

We both got a good chuckle out of that. Point well made, and with humor as the tutor. Jack himself had been pretty abrupt a few months previously, when he called me into his office.

“You have to wallow in it.”

That’s what he said. I had just left a decade-long run in media to hop to the corporate side of things at GE, working with Welch on communications strategy.

My life in media—especially network news—had been an adrenaline rush, racing from deadline to deadline. If you don't make it to air, there is nothingness. You're dead. And making it to air

first brings an added sense of accomplishment. Not to mention bragging rights. For me, it was a constant whirl: making sense of the constant stream of information coming in, calling reporters covering us to tell them what was happening and why we were doing it best. I'd think sometimes, if only I could field phone calls with both hands and both feet, all would be good (we didn't have email yet, but the newsroom did have an archaic forerunner of instant messaging that satisfied my need to multitask).

Moving fast and being organized were my strong suits. The more there was to do, the more I felt alive. Productive. Efficient. Every to-do list item was checked, with urgency as my soundtrack. I loved the thrill, and I was good at keeping up with it.

Who better than me, then, to land a plum assignment working for Jack Welch, Mr. Speed and Simplicity.

Imagine my surprise when he called me into his office that day and admonished me for being *too* efficient. My zeal to do everything on my to-do list—along with my reserved, even shy nature—made me come across as abrupt and cold. I started every meeting by jumping right in and left with every action under control.

"You have to wallow in it," he said. "Take time to get to know people. Understand where they are coming from, what is important to them. Make sure they are with you."

At best, my colleagues didn't know what to make of me—and I certainly didn't give them time to find out.

I heard Jack loud and clear. But honestly, it took a long time for the impact of his words to sink in, and even longer to change my behavior. After all, those same attributes had led to my being in the role in the first place.

I cringe sometimes when I think of how I must have come across at times, and how long it took me to change my ways. And even now there are times when I forget Jack's advice (it is a decade old). But yes, I've learned to not only wallow in it, but to enjoy it. Time to think and time to connect with people are as important as getting everything done. Sometimes you have to go slow before you go fast.

I will be forever grateful for the time and humor Jack invested to teach me these important work and life lessons. Many happy returns.

Photo: Bloomberg via Getty Images

