



Father, Son & Co.: My Life at IBM and Beyond

Thomas J. Watson Jr. , Peter Petre

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In this eloquent first-person account of a family drama that changed the face of American business, the man who transformed IBM into the world's largest computer company reflects on his lifelong partnership with his father--and how their management style and shared dedication to excellence united to create a unique corporate culture that became the blueprint for the entire technology boom.

In the course of sixty years Thomas J. Watson Sr. and his son, Thomas J. Watson Jr., together built the international colossus that is IBM. This is their story: a riveting and revealing account of two men who loved each other--and fought each other--with a terrible fierceness.

But along with the story of a father and son, this is IBM's story too. It chronicles the management insights that shaped its course and its unique corporate culture, the style that made Thomas Watson Sr. one of America's most charismatic bosses, and the daring decisions by Thomas Watson Jr. that transformed IBM into the world's largest computing company. One of the greatest business-success stories of all time, **Father, Son & Co.** is a moving lesson for fathers who dream for their children, as well as a testament to American ingenuity and values, told in a disarmingly frank and eloquent voice.

Promising to remain an important business reference as we move into the next century, FATHER, SON & CO. takes a look at the management insight that helped to shape IBM's course and unique corporate culture. It looks at Watson, Sr., one of America's most charismatic bosses, and Watson, Jr., who spurred IBM into the computer age.

Ten years after its original publication, FATHER, SON & CO. remains a uniquely honest book. Watson's willingness to write about the loving but ferociously combative relationship he had with his father and the turbulent battles behind some of IBM's most far-reaching decisions gives readers rare insights into the realities of leadership. -->

Father, Son & Co.: My Life at IBM and Beyond Details

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Jr. , Peter Petre

From Reader Review Father, Son & Co.: My Life at IBM and Beyond for online ebook

June Ding says

A fascinating read about the life story of two legends in computer history. A father and the son who grew up rich and lived in the shadow of his successful and over powering father. It is a candid account on his lack of confidence , poor grade and rebellious behaviour growing up; his decent into depression and his young brother's breathing problem under the pressure from their father. Not the kind of life you'd imagined for a rich man's kid who never had to worry about money and lived with privileges. Fountune is a curse if you lose the drive to making out your life on your own. Tom Watson Jr was eventually as successful as his father through his hard working and constantly learning from his own mistakes. He retired at early age of 51 after a heart attack. It is also interesting to read how he lived under power , getting the power , yielding it and finally letting it go. He had a marriage crisis right after his retirement because he managed his family life as he was at IBM. He is honest with his faults and his vanity. That is probably what made him a great man.

Nicholas says

A fascinating history of IBM and the development of technology in the mid-20th century, made a much more satisfying read by the concurrent theme of a challenging but ultimately fulfilling father-son relationship in the context of one of the most prominent companies of all time.

KOMET says

This is ONE OF THE BEST AUTOBIOGRAPHIES I'VE EVER READ. Watson --- the son of "the first chairman and CEO of International Business Machines (IBM), who oversaw that company's growth into an international force from 1914 to 1956" --- speaks candidly, and at times, with deep humility, about his life, career and his relationships with his family, IBM colleagues, and friends (many of whom were numbered among the most notable or distinguished scientists, politicians, and artists of the 20th century).

Watson admits that he was a handful for his parents when he was growing up. I chuckled to myself when I read about a stink bomb he created (with the help of a fellow schoolmate) from the stink glands of a skunk, which he let loose in an assembly. As a result, the principal had to close the school for the rest of the day. (Watson subsequently, when asked, admitted -- in accordance with the school's honor code --- that he had committed the foul deed, and accepted his punishment.) He struggled to do well in school. In fact, his grades were so abysmal that his father had him accompany him to visit a friend of his, the president of Brown University in the early 1930s, to help plead his case for admission to the university. Watson continued to struggle, but managed to do well enough to graduate from Brown. Also, during that time, he discovered, upon taking flying lessons, that he was a gifted pilot. This helped to bolster his self-confidence.

Following graduation in 1937, Watson travelled through Europe and China before returning to the U.S. to begin his apprenticeship with IBM in New York City as a salesman. He struggled to learn as much as he could about IBM, but continued to live life as a playboy.

With the coming of the Second World War, Watson entered the U.S. Army Air Corps (via the National

Guard), where he learned to fly many of the latest combat aircraft. The Army, Watson maintained, was the making of him. As an officer, he was free, for the first time in his life, from his father's shadow and had to learn to assume a wide range of challenging responsibilities. Watson was part of a team that helped to organize the Lend-Lease ferrying of U.S. military aircraft to the Soviet Union during 1942.

"Toward the end of his service Watson worked for Major General Follett Bradley, who suggested that he should try to follow his father at IBM." He had thought of going to work for the airlines because flying was one area in which he excelled that made him feel good about himself.

Anyway, upon his discharge from the Army with the rank of colonel, Watson went back to work at IBM, this time with a renewed sense of purpose. He spent almost 25 years there, first working with his father til his death in 1956. Thereupon Watson, as President of IBM, helped to make the organization one of the world's most reputable producers of computers, which helped revolutionize the workplace the world over during the 1960s.

Watson, following a heart attack, retired from IBM in the early 1970s and later served as U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union during the Carter Administration.

Before reading this book, Watson Jr. was for me merely a name I glanced at once or twice in a newspaper or magazine. But, after reading this wonderful book, he comes across as a basically decent person, who, despite his faults, always tried to do good. The enlightened, liberal capitalist.

R.D. Greenfield says

Should be mandatory reading for business students.

Evan Crane says

Good read if you currently or have worked at IBM. Outlines the development and evolution of company culture and rise of a great American Company. Identifies some early pitfalls and how they got around them.

Christopher Stengel says

A compelling interweaving of classic American business history with the tale of growing up as a rebellious son of a frequently overbearing father. If you're into American tech/business history, this book is a must!

Hardy says

This might be the best autobiography of a businessman.

Thomas Watson Jr was the CEO of IBM because his dad was the CEO of IBM. He lived between 1913 and 1993, so nepotism was normal and expected.

This book reveals that the burden was very heavy. As a child, he was intimidated by the success of his father (who picked up the boy up from school in a chauffeured limo). He was an indifferent student, and only went to Brown because of his father. After graduating, he briefly worked as a salesman at IBM before becoming a pilot and flying supply planes in WW2.

After the war, he returned to IBM and became president 6 years later. However, he realized that punched card machines were an archaic technology and that computers were the future. This was a very bold idea at the time (mid 1950s) because there were only 12 computers in the world. Many technical experts disagreed with him. (Looking back people tend to have a narrative bias, where they see things as inevitable, when they were not at the time).

Unfortunately he had a heart attack in 1971, possibly due to the stress at work. He served as Ambassador to the Soviet Union for President Carter, and did some negotiations to reduce the number of nuclear weapons. He recognized that nuclear weapons is a much more difficult problem to solve than building computers (the humility is genuine).

There are things more important than business success and Thomas Watson recognizes that. He doesn't talk much about his family, and it's probably because he didn't have much of a relationship with them. He spent most of his time thinking about business. I wonder how they are dealing with the burden of inheriting so much money without any of the responsibilities.

Note:

There are some books that claim IBM sold technology to the Nazis. This is probably true, although I have not read much about it. But historians to avoid narrative bias. Perhaps it was not possible to tell how evil the Nazis were at the time (I don't know because I wasn't around). Unsurprisingly, this autobiography does not mention it.

sima says

Watson Jr.'s tale of discovery is honest and telling, but the description of IBM's development reads like a staid chronology than a personal recountment.

Darby says

My dad worked for IBM for 25 years beginning with the time when TJ Watson Jr ran the show.

An interesting read if your life included IBM in the 70s.

People who are also sons/daughters in a family business would find it an interesting read as Watson illuminates his challenges of living in the shadow of the founder of IBM.

Nathan Davis says

Not bad. More of one man's memoir's and his coming to terms with his relationship with his father. Still, got

it for \$1 at a book fair and it was a fairly interesting yarn.

A little depressing to read about the opulence that is afforded a man who heads a billion dollar company.

Though, at the cost of alienating his entire family and pushing his wife out the door.

Buggz79 says

You've probably heard of IBM's Watson super computer. This is the story of the gentlemen it was named after.

Mark Bunch says

Get book.

The says

The son of IBM's founder, Thomas Watson Jr.'s "Father, Son & Co." is many things: a collection of folksy business wisdom passed down by his father, memories and recollections of his participation as an airman in World War II and later a US diplomatic career in the USSR, a story about the challenges of growing a global business, lessons in leadership and team building, the pitfalls of transforming an business organization from small scale to large scale and, most importantly, a personal reflection on the value of family. It was most interesting and entertaining for me to read when it dealt with business and some of the personal issues of the author in trying to prove himself in the shadow of a legendary father; I found it less enjoyable and less authentic when the author dabbled in politics or retold sappy anecdotes about popular political figures of his era with whom he had had personal relationships.

The Business of IBM

The axis around which the story revolves is not Tom Watson, Jr., and it's not Tom Watson, Sr. It's the company which Senior grew and transformed into IBM, and which Junior effected the change over to actual computing technology in the 1960s, that the book is really about. But because Junior's and Senior's personalities, families, fortunes and lives were so wrapped up in the affairs of IBM, it becomes about all of those things in turn as well. That is somewhat surprising because the book is ostensibly a memoir by Junior, yet the gravity of IBM is hard to ignore in nearly every chapter of the book.

When Senior joined on with the company as general manager and, shortly thereafter, president, IBM (then Computing-Tabulating-Record Company) was an important concern but not necessarily a large one. Senior had a vision for it and something of an indomitable will, and he had experienced enough success and failure on his own in other ventures that he had an idea of what it would take to create the vision he had for the company. He built a large, organized and polished sales force, instilled high morale and unity of purpose by creating training programs, achievement awards, national sales team conventions and even company songs that everyone had to sing. He also, like many strong-willed founders, created something of a cult of personality around himself, putting his picture up at IBM offices and facilities, writing memos that were distributed widely to all staff and constantly visiting field offices and manufacturing facilities and "pressing the flesh" with company men and their wives and children, creating a kind of endearing aura of patriarchy.

In later years this intuitive, personality-driven approach was deemed problematic by Junior and other successor senior executives who believed that Senior had created a culture and cadre of Yes Men and hadn't implemented enough standards and professional protocols that could create stability for growth. But for decades of the company's history (essentially the first half, to date) this approach seemed to work, and fantastically so. Company publications like "Business Machines" and sales achievement distinctions like the "Hundred Percent Club" put the company's focus on employee well-being and professionalism and incentivized outstanding achievement in the dawn of the era of lifetime commitment to big companies.

Something that shocked me as I read was how much of IBM's growth could be attributed to solving statistical problems for the US and other national governments:

IBM more than doubled in size during the New Deal... Social Security... made Uncle Sam IBM's biggest customer.

Wow! I suppose someone else could've come up with the technology as well, but it is kind of amazing to think that the evil New Deal and the disastrous Social Security pyramid scheme would have been too burdensome to administer without the existence of IBM tabulating machines which were a major time saver. It reminds me of Palantir Technologies, which helps the NSA, CIA and other foreign governments conduct surveillance work on target populations, another way to profit off of coercive interference in society's affairs.

This trend didn't stop with the New Deal but only started there. During WW2 the company converted many of their factories to help produce armaments (a fairly common industrial practice during the time, but still remarkable) and after the war one of the big incentives (and indeed, initial sources of research funding) for switching the company's focus to electronic computing solutions were the ongoing "national defense" needs of the US military as the Cold War wore on.

Words of wisdom

I enjoyed the many old-timey nuggets of wisdom and rules about manners sprinkled throughout the book which were mostly remembrances of Junior of things Senior had said to him as he raised him or mentored him in the business. For example, Junior talks about the first time he rode a cross-country train with his father on a business trip and the way his father taught him to clean up the wash basin in the bathroom of the railroad car to be considerate of others. "The person coming after you will judge you by how the place is left," he tells him as he uses a towel to wipe down the basin before and after shaving in it. He talks about the importance of leaving the basin in a clean state so that the next person will have "the same chance you had". There is a deep moral lesson here that goes well beyond the world of men shaving—this is a version of the Golden Rule, not just considering how upsetting it would be to have someone leave a place in a state of disarray for you, but then following that logic through to performing a service voluntarily for other people in trying to leave the world a little bit nicer than you found it.

In another instance, Senior lectures Junior about the practical reasons for treating even the "lowly" members of society in a kindly and generous fashion:

There is a whole class of people in the world who are in a position to poor-mouth you unless you are sensitive to them. They are the headwaiters, Pullman car conductors, porters and chauffeurs. They see you in an intimate fashion and can really knock off your reputation.

Those who enjoy shows like Downton Abbey are familiar with the idea that the "servants" of the world end up having an interesting amount of power and leverage over those they serve because they are so familiar with them they know their weaknesses, secrets and bad habits. There is something noble and self-aware in Senior's advice here— a cultivated awareness of the reality of power and influence, mixed with a genuine empathy for treating even the relatively less fortunate with respect and concern. It might be read as "These people could really knife you if you don't pay attention" but I think it is also honestly read as "Don't forget these are people, too, and they want and need kindness regardless of their station in life."

Another endearing moment comes when Senior teaches Junior about how he manages his executives:

“Well, I haven’t shaken up So-and-so for a while. So I’ll get him in and ask some questions about his department and in the process part his hair a little. He’ll get a pat on the back if I find something good or a kick in the tail if I find something bad.”

The imagery of “parting someone’s hair” says a lot about the relative authority of the two people in this “process” and while kicking someone in the tail sounds like bullying, it was clear that Senior gave quite a few pats on the back, as well, and when he dished out the ass-kickings, they might have been deserved—these were grown men dealing with a multi-million dollar business, after all, and if they weren’t bringing their problems to Senior’s attention but rather waiting for him to discover them, shame on them.

In teaching Junior about how to be an executive, Senior advised “what a chief executive does outside his business is just as important as what he does at his desk”, which was another idea I found interesting. I’ve been skeptical in the past of chief executives who seem to spend more time glad-handing than running the business. But I’ve come to appreciate that a lot of running a business simply is taking care of relationships—with customers, employees, vendors and even members of the local community. IBM’s business was dependent upon political grace, so there is perhaps a more sinister side to this advice from the standpoint of simply being a businessman but it was an interesting idea to ponder, nonetheless, that the chief executive’s identity and role extend beyond his office hours.

Senior was clearly a hard-driver and a hard-charger himself. So I was interested to hear about his daily routine:

He had his day set up so that he got up at seven, played tennis from seven-thirty to eight-thirty to stay in shape, got to work on time, did his work, went home, read great books for an hour, had dinner, listened to classical music for a while, and went to bed.

Senior ended up dying of starvation; his stomach was so scarred from stress-induced ulcers that it essentially closed up and wouldn’t let enough food in, and he didn’t want to go under the knife and so chose a fairly painful death by starvation (more on health issues in a moment). But despite this, he lived to age 82! I think that’s still considered a long time to live and I am always curious what a person’s habits were when I hear of such longevity, so it was pleasing to see that he put emphasis on daily physical activity as well as daily relaxing, contemplative activity (reading and music listening). Interestingly, breakfast didn’t seem to play a large part in his routine although Junior recounts many times when he had lunch brought in despite it being ignored in this telling.

A few other choice ideas, on restraint:

What you haven’t said, you can say anytime.

And on the value of friendship:

Don’t make friends who are comfortable to be with. Make friends who will force you to lever yourself up.
The son also rises

So, Senior had a knack for keen insight, but what about Junior?

While Senior was the builder, Junior was the administrator and manager. He seemed to take what he learned from Senior and build on it, so many of his notions seemed like continuations of the thoughts of Senior. For example, consider Senior’s advice about how chief executives should behave as Junior extemporizes about the relationships of businessmen:

A good businessman needs a lot of friends. Cultivating them is a laborious process, and how well you succeed is a direct result of how much effort and thoughtfulness you bring to bear.

He isn't talking about friends in the business. He's talking about friends outside of the business, which to me sounds like an echo of the idea that the chief executive's job extends well beyond life in the office.

Similarly, he recounts a tale about the importance of making good introductions,

I stuck out my hand and said to him, "I'm Tom Watson Jr."

Offering one's name with a hand shake ensures that the other person is not put in the uncomfortable spot of being expected to remember people he's only met once before, which engenders a sense of gratitude and respect immediately. Consider that this was the practice of an individual leading one of the largest and most well-known companies in the world and he still made the effort to be forward about his identity like this.

I also made a note of Junior's characterization of the political structure of business:

The government has checks and balances, but a business is a dictatorship, and that is what makes it really move.

I think there is consensus building in business, too. It's hard to keep a team cohesive and productive over a long period of time if people don't feel like they contribute ideas and that those ideas get seriously considered. But I do understand the idea that ultimately decisions have to be made by somebody, that is, one person, and a business with a strong will behind it can make those decisions more effectively because everyone may be listened to but they don't necessarily all get a vote. In the business world, people tend to vote by exit which is rarely an option in the world of politics.

The wealth of health

As mentioned earlier, Senior ended up choosing death by starvation when his health maladies caught up with him, though he made it to age 82. I noticed that both Junior and his younger brother (who headed up IBM's non-US business) suffered heart attacks in their middle-age, attributed to the high stress of their positions.

Junior describes a life of almost continual travel and social functions, not just for himself but for his father and his brother. It was clear reading the book that the Watson clan and IBM executive leadership in general were part of the "global elite", they knew dignitaries and heads of state from around the planet and were deeply connected to American political figures as well, a confusing blending of public and private prerogatives and relationships. There were many chapters where Junior described so many different locales and travels simultaneously that is almost seemed as if he was everywhere at once— at the very least he would spend long stretches of time away from home engaged in high level networking. It was a fascinating glimpse into "how the other half lives."

But it was also terrifying from a health point of view. It is just hard to imagine this high-paced lifestyle allowing one to live with optimal health and longevity. Along with suffering a heart attack, his brother seemed to be frail enough to die from a "fall" at age 55. Junior ended up quitting his official business responsibilities following his heart attack which he reflects on with positivity in the book, saying it was a relief to have an opportunity to look critically at his life and get out while he still could. It seems to say a lot about the lifestyle he was living that he could so clearly connect his longevity to his work and chose the former over the latter.

Working with family

At the beginning of the book, Junior says that if you have the chance to go into business with your father, know that it will be difficult, but do it. I was fascinated by this strong suggestion given that he spends much of the rest of the book relating all the violent disagreements he had with his father, their latent power struggles, the continual struggles with self-esteem and even depression that he experienced living and working under the shadow of his successful father and so on.

There were many touching moments in the book where the reader is afforded a look at the parenting practices of Senior, who was truly from a pre-modern era. But there were also many that shocked my sensibilities of the proper relationship between parent and child, such as when Junior recalled how Senior handled tax documentation of his personal trust:

Each year his accountant would come around and have me sign income tax forms that were blank. He'd make an excuse that he hadn't had time yet to fill them out. This kept up not only through college but ten years beyond, until I was a grown man with children of my own.

How would hiding this information from a child do anything but stoke their curiosity, fear and self-criticism? Why did this practice continue on even when he was a man with his own family (at which point he had long been a part of the business in a senior role)?

While the book offered many such puzzles and glimpses into family life for the accomplished Watsons, I couldn't help but wonder how people who had achieved such greatness in so many areas had completely neglected to resolve interpersonal emotional conflicts and instead struggled with this source of unhappiness for decades. What is family for?

For me, reading about the early struggles and the early attempts at growth are always the most interesting parts of a story like Thomas Watson, Jr.'s, and IBM's in general. I found myself less interested in what it was like being Bobby Kennedy's friend, or getting tapped for the ambassadorship in Moscow. You can look at the history of the company and of the family and think, "It could've been anyone else, it's not clear what they did that was special or unique beyond being lucky" but you can't say they didn't work hard, or purposefully. There's no simple recipes or formulas for success in this book when it comes to business, family or life, but there are a number of things to think about, struggles that turn out to be common to all of us, great or small in our vision or accomplishments. I think that is where the value in this book lay for me.

3/5

Christopher Lewis Kozoriz says

In hard times, he saw opportunity. ~ Thomas J. Watson Jr., *Father, Son & Co.*, Page 33 (Speaking of his father Thomas J. Watson Senior, founder of IBM)

I found this book to be an honest account of the son of the IBM founder Thomas J. Watson Sr.

Thomas J. Watson Jr. shares with his readers what it was like to grow up with a father who owned a company that provides business machines to the world.

He takes his readers through the journey of his younger years, to becoming the head of IBM, to retiring and then to becoming Ambassador to the Soviet Union.

This book gives insight in to the early management of IBM and the changes that took place when the computer industry was building momentum.

Brian says

I found it to be a very honest documentary. A little bit long, but had some very interesting sections. Watson Jr.'s role in WWII was very interesting. The race to get to market with the latest and best technology set the pattern that future market leaders still fight with to this day. Watson's work as an ambassador to Russia after his time at IBM and slightly before the Afgan war was very interesting.
