

A Driving Force

Cited as one of the top business leaders of the 20th century on multiple lists, Lee Iacocca, now 90, has a gift for problem-solving.

So it doesn't seem all that surprising that this former CEO/president of Chrysler and former president of Ford has a master's degree in mechanical engineering or that he started his career as an engineer. Though he soon traded in that focus for the ladder pointing to the leadership top, engineering proved a base he can still appreciate.

A Teen Can Dream

"I knew as a teenager, I wanted to be part of the automobile industry and I figured engineering was the best way to get in the door," Iacocca recalls.

In fact, he pursued his master's in mechanical engineering at Princeton University and, in this passage from his autobiography, recalled an intriguing exercise from those days: "My project was to design and build, by hand, a hydraulic dynamometer. A professor named Sorenson offered to work with me. Together we built it and hooked it up to an engine that General Motors had donated to the university."

He did give up the mechanical engineering side not long after joining the automotive industry, but Iacocca found value in the early experience. "I was hired by Ford as an Engineering Trainee right out of college," he says. "I was part of a team. That experience has stuck with me my entire career. We are always part of a team; no one does anything completely on their own."

But did he have a different appreciation for how mechanical engineers affect a car company when he became a CEO? "I've always had a healthy respect (for) how engineers (both mechanical and automotive) make the cars work," he says. "The production of automobiles is a multi-billion dollar business—close coordination with all departments are required to make any vehicle a success in the marketplace."

Something to Build On

When asked why he thinks pursuing mechanical engineering knowledge is important and how it can help the country's workforce today, the present state of building comes to mind. "In my last book *Where Have All The Leaders Gone?* I talk about how our country has moved away from building things," he says. "America's success was in manufacturing and creating new and better products, the automobile being just one of many. If we stop building, we stop being a country that leads the way for others."

For a man who led both Ford and Chrysler to prosperity, it's a statement that can't easily be ignored.

Sidebar

Iacocca on choosing the best engineered car models of his lifetime: “Impossible to really answer as this is a very personal opinion but something comes to mind. In 1966, Ford came out with the GT Racing Car (edition) which shocked everyone in the industry at Le Mans in France which felt Ferrari and Euro car makers owned this venue...However, I am prejudiced about the Mustang, of course.”