

# **The World's Greatest Salesman**

**An IBM Caretaker's  
Perspective: Looking Back**

**by**

**Peter E. Greulich**

**Moral Courage**

**Democracy in Business**

**Wisdom**

**Enthusiasm**

**Greater Intimacy**

**The IBM**

**Cooperation**

**Courtesy**

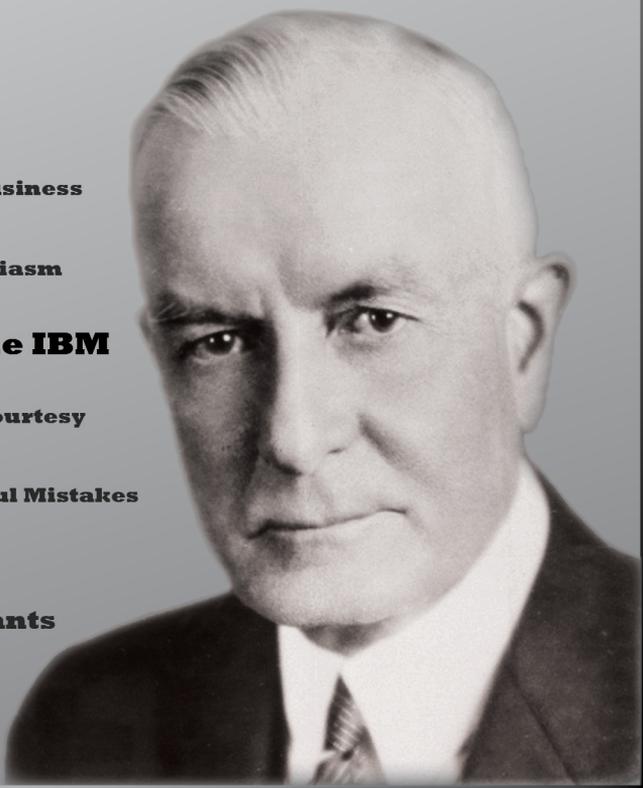
**Simple Honesty**

**Forgive Thoughtful Mistakes**

**Character**

**Executives Are Assistants**

**THINK**



## AN IBM CARETAKER'S INTRODUCTION

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There is a term today used to describe the men and women who call IBM home: IBMer.

I have never uncovered any stories or internal IBM mythology about the exact origin of the term; it probably grew out of daily usage. For most of my career, when asked whom I worked for, I never replied, “I work for IBM,” or, “I am an IBM employee,” but rather, “I am an IBMer.”

To me, “IBMer” is an abbreviation—short for IBM Caretaker. IBMer captures the heart and soul of the person. It has no social standing associated with it, no position of stature, no power ranking within the corporation, no underlying hierarchy supporting it, no social class or pay grade; rather it defines a person’s heart, a person’s commitment, dedication and loyalty.

Most of all, the term defines the person using it as being in a win-win relationship with a company—a company that, in the past, saw itself as a family. For decades, we attended gatherings called “Family Days.” We closed down sales offices when one of our own died and cried together at the loss. We consoled each other.

The closest we came to describing our relationship were single words like loyalty, dedication, trust and confidence. If there was one word, though, that defined IBMer, it was respect. It was the type of respect shown between members of a family.

It was a set of emotions, feelings and camaraderie that was indefinable. The IBM relationship between caretakers felt more in the realm of poetry than prose.



**We have a great family spirit  
regardless of nationality,  
religion or creed.**

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## Learning the Watsons' Belief System



**Experience makes a man valuable  
in setting an example for others.**

I was hired in October of 1980, into IBM's sales branch office—probably one of the last vestiges of the truest, deepest of blue, IBM organizations. I learned about IBM philosophy and beliefs through the experience of others. I went to lunch with “old timers”—the men and women with thirty to forty years of IBM service. I heard their stories over early morning breakfasts, mid-day lunches or in the wee hours of the morning restoring a customer's hardware and applications to serviceability.

We were there, in the wee hours, because in our hearts we were a service organization. Service defined us, drove us and dictated to us who we were as a company. We strove for excellence within our individual organizations.

The Watsons' belief system lived, flourished and was personified in these men and women I found surrounding me. I lived in the midst of their belief system and benefited from it for thirty years. I drove myself to live up to the spotless reputations, spirits and expectations of those I respected working around me.

The Watsons intended for that spirit to extend beyond just the individual IBMer. They wanted it to touch spouses, sons and daughters; to reach deep into individual communities; to be the touchstone against which any Chief Executive Officer would be measured.

But as IBM grows through acquisition, some of the Watsons' history, their beliefs, their background and their spirit has been muted, forgotten or lost by those new to IBM or progressing through its executive ranks. Today there are two companies: There is “IBM”—what it is—and “The IBM”—what it was.

### **Who was Thos. J. Watson Sr.?**

This question, coming from an IBMer in 2009, was the one that put pen to paper, placed fingers on a keyboard and sparked the creation of this book.

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It had never dawned on me that I should explain who Tom Watson was to an audience of IBMers. But the gentleman stood before me, in all sincerity, trying to understand whom he had just seen and what he had heard.

The video he had seen was an aspiring actor playing the part of Tom Watson, recreating some word-for-word conversations Watson had with his employees. They were words to his executives, secretaries, office workers, factory foremen and sales managers.

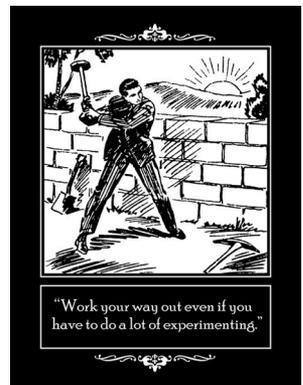
But most of the words on this video were reserved for his beloved salesmen. They were words of inspiration, encouragement and strength. They were Depression-era words of undefeatable audacity at a time when so many companies just like his were failing all around.

These were words our salesmen, after the financial crisis in September 2008, desperately needed to hear.

We presented the videos in February 2009 at IBM Tivoli's yearly sales training for the America's team. At the time, financial institutions were reducing spending, demanding definitive proof of return on their software investments or going bankrupt. These financial institutions had always been the backbone of IBM software sales, so we needed our sales force to be creative, intuitive and not afraid of making mistakes.

Hundreds of Tivoli's top software salesmen and saleswomen were in the audience from the United States, Canada and Latin America. The IBMer who posed the question had recently joined the team through IBM's acquisition of Micromuse. This was just one of more than thirty acquisitions in my division alone. The audience—and IBM—were full of new sales representatives just like him.

After him, a second young man stepped up and said, "My dad always talked about IBM. He retired several years ago. He said it was the greatest corporation on the face of the earth." He hesitated for a second, then continued, "Thanks for doing this today. I think I understand



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now what he had and his passion for that company.”

“Had” and “that company” rang in my ears.

The man smiled shyly and motioned at the collection of posters hanging on the wall, recreations of those images used by Tom Watson in the 1930s, and asked, “May I have one of those posters on the wall? I think it would mean a lot to my dad.”

Could I deny such a request?

### Starting to THINK



Returning to Austin, I received e-mails from first-line managers saying, “I need my team to see this video. Can you send it to me?” In the same collection of e-mails, there were equivalent notes from salesmen in the field saying, “I need my manager to see this video.” I chuckled, but realized that I had accomplished something that day—I had inspired

everyone to think. Or as Tom Watson would have said, THINK.

I also realized that my IBM was no longer connected to its past, its history and its traditions. I pondered all the traditions lost over the years—like the Watsons’ “IBM Family Days.” They are now just the memories of an old man.

There were holes, giant vacuums of empty space in IBM’s past. I started to wonder what else we are losing that will become, to a new generation, just irrelevant ruminations of old men or bygone beliefs of out-of-touch dinosaurs. What if “Watson” becomes synonymous with the Watson of *Jeopardy!*—a supercomputer without heart, soul or conscience? What if the Watsons, one of the most amazing business families in American history, are someday seen for nothing more than founding a computer and technology company?

We would not allow the Kennedy family to be remembered as just “legislators.” The Kennedys were a political and social force. Similarly, the Watsons were more than businessmen. They were to American business what the Kennedys were to American politics.

Who would stand for the Watsons?

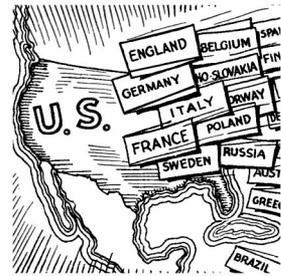
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So the journey started. I wanted to understand, articulate and capture The IBM, as Watson referred to it, on paper. And as I saw it, it was a journey to understand one man, the founder of The IBM.

Unfortunately, Thos. J. Watson Sr. died in 1956, three years after I was born. I never met him. I could have never met him, discussed business philosophy with him or heard him speak in the Headquarters “home office.” I did, however, know him, as well as his son and successor, from my thirty years of living, breathing and experiencing their spirit, their drive, their determination, their strength of character and their enthusiasm imbedded in those IBMers around me. I felt I could write a book, but something was missing.

Of the books I had read on his life, few were written by an IBMer. All people, including myself, bring some perspective to their writings; they are affected by who pays them, their history, their goals, their position in society, their knowledge and understanding of a culture—or worse, their lack thereof. And the perceptions in these books were those of a “work for hire.”

Then I discovered Tom Watson’s series of books entitled *Men-Minutes-Money*—a collection of almost 900 pages, some 300,000 words of his speeches and writings, most of which span the Great Depression. These speeches, editorials and publications were delivered to an eclectic set of audiences all over the world, including the United States, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia (Czech Republic), Austria, England and more. During this time, he spoke as if he could almost, through pure force of will, carry The IBM through the Depression.



**The IBM spirit, The IBM heart and The IBM language are the same in all tongues and in all countries.**

It was him—his beliefs, thoughts, determination and drive—captured word-for-word for more than eighteen years, and with it were 300 individual drawings with captions, each illustrating in its own way Watson’s unique brand of optimism.

I had found what I needed.

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## Adding the IBM Caretaker Perspective

This book is narrated from the perspective of an IBM Caretaker. I introduce each chapter with my own IBM Caretaker thoughts and insights. Sometimes these introductions provide a historical context. Sometimes they provide a precursory look at the chapter. Hopefully they will support you in working through the material and inspire you to THINK.

Maybe, by combining this IBM Caretaker's perspective with Tom Watson's words and spirit, we can define the word IBMer anew for a new generation. It will require the combined efforts of a great many,



**Strength of character is the one basic trait, which will be found in people who achieve greatness.**

dedicated to a great cause to renew that energy and vision of The IBM's founder. But as Tom Watson was known to say over and over again, "The IBM did not grow and survive from any great genius." It grew from the great thoughts, the great efforts, the great perseverance and the great cooperation of a great many working together to construct a whole that was bigger, better and more dynamic than just the sum of its parts.

Thos. J. Watson Sr. would not want to be remembered as "the leader" who led this charge forward but rather as the "spark plug" that ignited something in the men and women of the time. That something found its way into each of us as IBM Caretakers—as IBMers. I hope it is never corrupted by anger, frustration or hatred. I hope it is never suppressed by apathy. That is not our character; and as you will learn from this book, it is not our heritage.

## How to Read This Book

In sales we say, "Right or wrong, my customer's perception is my reality." And for all of his strengths, Tom Watson wasn't the most dynamic of speakers. So one of the challenges for me in compiling this book was to take Watson's words—sometimes a bit dry and archaic—and present them in a way that's compelling to a twenty-first century audience. With your perception in mind, therefore, I have made some modifications:

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First, I have taken those places where Watson referred to “the IBM” and made it “The IBM.” The first time I read *Men-Minutes-Money*, “the” in front of IBM jumped off every page every time I saw it. I could almost hear the emphasis he would place on the word. This is what Tom Watson Sr. wanted to build—The IBM. He intended it to be a company set apart, a company of distinction, a company of excitement and enthusiasm, a company of character and a company representing the best of a philosophy where sentences always started with “we” and ended with “us.”

Second, Tom Watson Sr. earned his legacy as “The World’s Greatest Salesman.” His charisma and charm were legendary. He could talk up a storm and as we say in the United States, “charm the birds out of the trees.” As such, every time he spoke to an audience he displayed supreme knowledge of the immediate topic of concern and interest. He did this to capture attention. He built rapport from the outset. As an example, when he spoke before the Binghamton Chamber of Commerce, he exerted the greatest of effort and time to discuss the history of Binghamton. He took interest in his audience so they would take interest in him and his words.

Salesman can still learn something from this, but although interesting and educational, I have deleted such material to get to the core purpose of this book—expose the heart, soul and belief system that Tom Watson brought to The IBM.

Third, I have preserved the original images from Watson’s *Men-Minutes-Money*, removing some that are dated and moving some images within the work. I have updated some captions—still using his words but pulling from elsewhere in the book’s text. I believe these updates will shorten your journey to understanding Tom Watson Sr. and the company he built. My hope, in honor to Watson, is that this book will cause everyone to stop and THINK—and THINK as individuals.

One change I didn’t make was in what some may perceive as a gender bias. The word “men” will appear so often that women may feel excluded from his comments and observations.

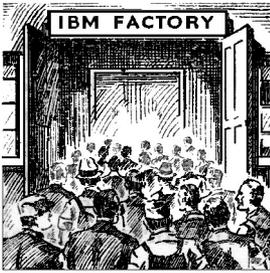


**We want you to cultivate and  
develop the spirit of democracy—  
democracy in business.**

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To this I would say, “Please don’t.” It is a function of the times. Tom Watson, after the Depression, would move The IBM forward to be one of the most progressive and considerate businesses in the world in the hiring and promotion of women. He would establish a women’s sales school alongside the men’s. Then, when meeting management resistance in hiring the first women graduates, he fired the entire competing class of newly trained men, leaving only women to be placed and hired.<sup>1</sup>

This was certainly not fair to the men he fired, but he made a point about his philosophy of “democracy in business”—it included women. When the time came to make that fundamental organizational and cultural change, he did it with flair and determination, and he made sure that it happened not eventually, but right then.



**The sales organization keeps our factory people's pay envelopes full.**

These words, however, are from the early 1930s. At the time, when he looked out over his sales force at his engineers, his shop foremen and his executives, all he saw were men. So I beg your indulgence in this matter, as you join me on this journey to understand the heart, soul and inspiration behind the great man who founded this great company and great culture.

We will start following Watson on October 30, 1929—the day after the Stock Market Crash known as Black Tuesday—and we will conclude four years later in 1933, three days before Christmas, as he stands before a gathering of IBM employees and declares that, “We have seen industry rise from virtual prostration and start forward again.” Don’t expect utterances of anger, frustration or hatred; this man of character would shine throughout in the darkest and most desperate of times.

With a few exceptions, this book preserves the chronological order of Tom Watson’s recorded words. By and large, his speeches in a given time period would carry over a certain theme—character, or motivation, or determination—making the building of these chapters a relatively straightforward process. Although I have chronologically moved a few speeches to fit, strengthen or build logical chapters, on the whole, if you start at the beginning of the book and work through

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to the end, you will journey through the Great Depression as seen through the eyes of Tom Watson.

Or pick a chapter, the subject matter of which you find appealing, and read it. THINK on it. Take your time. Jump around. Put it down. Come back to it.

If you THINK, you will be doing Tom Watson Sr. justice.

If you THINK as an individual, you will be doing yourself justice.