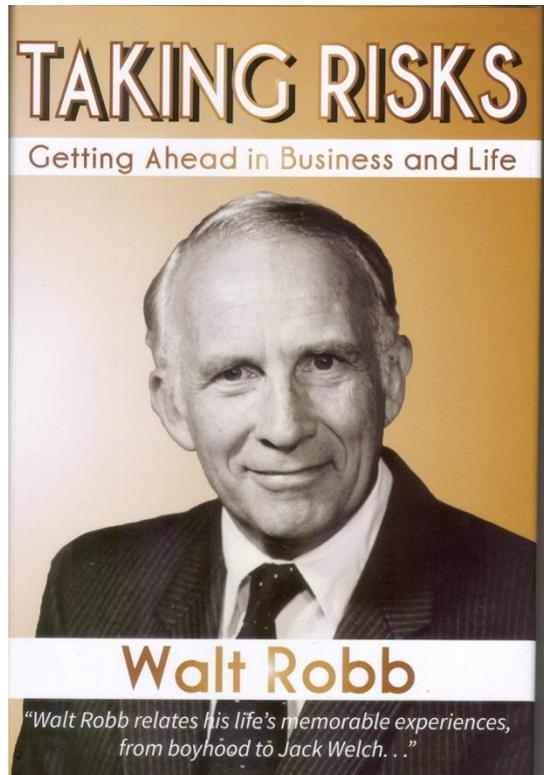


The Consummate Entrepreneur

By Edwin D. Reilly, Jr, Schenectady County Historian



“Never get too relaxed. Never stop thinking about what else you can do to achieve more than is expected.”

–Walt Robb

I begin with one of the many cogent epigrams from Walt Robb’s fascinating book, *Taking Risks—Getting Ahead in Business and Life*. The book, available from the Open Door Bookstore in Schenectady, the Book House of Stuyvesant Plaza in Albany, or Amazon.com, has a second subtitle — “Walt Robb relates his life’s memorable experiences, from boyhood to Jack Welch” — a clue that the book is at least a memoir. But it is far more than that, just as this report transcends a book review in order to cover some significant GE scientific and engineering history.

Walt Robb, or more formally Dr. Walter L. Robb, is well known to many Capital District residents as the former owner of the Albany River Rats hockey team, but better known in the world in general and in Schenectady County in particular as the Director of the General Electric R&D Center, now GE Global Research, from 1986 until he retired in 1993. Walt was born in a small town in Pennsylvania, earned his B.S. at Penn State in three rather than the usual four years. He then went on to earn both an M.S. and Ph.D in chemical engineering at the University of Illinois in an additional three years, six years in all, as compared to the usual seven or eight typically needed to do so, even by Jack Welch, who also earned a Ph.D. in chemical engineering at the same university.

After earning his doctorate, Robb began the first of what would eventually be eight consecutive job assignments over a 42-year career with General Electric. His first began at the Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory in 1951 and concluded when he transferred to the GE R&D Center in 1956, the year in which I started at KAPL upon my return from Air Force service, so we did not meet there. Nor did we meet in 1954 while Walt was still at KAPL and I was at R & D for my first GE job, the very same year in which Walt and Anne were married in Troy and Jean and I were married in Watervliet. Ships passing in the night!

In the early '90s, while I was Niskayuna Town Supervisor and Walt was back at R&D as its 6th Director and a GE Senior Vice President, we finally did meet. All nine of the men who have served in that category have been both noted scientists and highly competent leaders of our local world class research institution. The first three, Willis Whitney, William Coolidge, and C. Guy Suits are legendary figures whose history I have written about. The tenures of the next four—Art Bueche, Roland Schmitt, Walt Robb, and Lonnie Edelheit—partially overlapped mine as Town Supervisor, so I had occasional contact with all of them.

My preparation for this review included the reading of Walt Robb's *Taking Risk*; the skimming of Jack Welch's autobiography, *Straight from the Gut*; an interview with Walt in his office at Vantage Management (now MeOH Power) near the Albany airport in Colonie, and considerable Internet research. During that last endeavor, I was quite surprised to learn that Welch is seven years younger than Walt and three years younger than I am.

Both Robb and Welch earned Ph.D degrees in chemical engineering at the University of Illinois. And as is reported in both of their books, Jack was hired by GE upon the strong recommendation of Walt, who had been sent to Illinois by GE to interview graduates with Ph.Ds in engineering or science.

During my interview of Walt, he said that Jack Welch was "tough." "But," I asked, "could he be tough without being mean?" Walt said "Yes, when he deemed subordinates performance below par, he would tell them how to shape up and give them a reasonable time to do so. Those who did were retained, and those who did not were dismissed."

Over the course of Walt's first four GE positions, he and Anne lived in East Glenville, so the first two, at KAPL and R&D, were an easy commute to the Knolls in Niskayuna. Three of the next four—to Waterford, to the GE main plant in downtown Schenectady, back to Waterford, and then to Pittsfield, MA—required longer commutes, but were deemed preferable to moving, something that was not necessary until 1974 when Welch promoted Walt to manage GE's Medical Systems Division in Milwaukee, his seventh GE position. After almost 13 highly successful years there, he began to think seriously of running for Governor of Wisconsin! Jack Welch, either via extra-sensory perception or more likely from a mole in Milwaukee, got wind of this and sprung into action. He called Walt and asked him to return to GE R&D as its Director and serve as Chief Technical Officer for all of GE.

In *Taking Risks*, Walt writes that in pondering the pros and cons of moving again, he considered how much he loved the Northeast in general and Schenectady and Lake George in particular: "I thought back to my days as a first-level manager at the R&D Center and my conviction

that an engineer could never become the laboratory director. I would be the first to test whether an engineer can direct research efforts. It also meant Anne and I would be getting back East, nearer our three sons, now settled in the Boston area, and our cottage on Lake George. There was a lot to attract me to the idea of moving back to Schenectady....One disappointment was that I would not become the board chairman of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, but... I could come back and join the board of the Schenectady Symphony Orchestra..."

To the great benefit of all of us, Walt and Anne did in fact come back. Since 1987, the first year of Walt's second tour of service at GE R&D, the Robbs have lived in Niskayuna. Walt retired at age 65 in 1993. Retired from General Electric, that is, but certainly not from continuing as the consummate entrepreneur that he still is. He is on the board of Mechanical Technology, Inc., several other local private companies, the Union College Graduate School, and was recently elected as a Clarkson University trustee as that school prepares to merge with Union's Graduate College next year.

Walt and Anne are widely known for their philanthropic support of Capital District arts and science, medicine, music, education, the Schenectady and Niskayuna Community Foundations, and a multitude of not-for-profit organizations. Indicative of their support for Ellis Hospital, there is a "Walt and Anne Robb Auditorium" at its McClellan Campus. All those who walk from the service area of Proctors into its GE Theater pass through Robb Alley, so named because the Theater would not exist but for the generous support of the Robbs and GE and other donors listed on the plaque that rides high up the side wall, and appropriately so, right up Robb's Alley.

Throughout *Taking Risks*, Walt Robb's principal emphasis is on the importance of promoting entrepreneurship for the sake of the economic health and growth of our nation's economy. Of the many dictionary definitions of "entrepreneur," the one most consistent with his thesis is "An energetic person who organizes and manages any enterprise, especially a business, with initiative and willingness to face the associated risk of doing so." The key word therein is "any". During my interview, I asked Walt why, given his Scientific, Technological, Engineering, and Mathematical education and experience, he had not mentioned the intense current national and local emphasis on STEM in his book. MiSci, the Edison Tech Center, and SCCC promote its importance, and News Channels 10 and 13 beat that drum constantly.

Walt's instant reply was that STEM, though certainly important, is not sufficiently broad. We need good entrepreneurs in all occupations—welders, electricians, carpenters, and shoemakers included, whether there is a touch of STEM involved in them or not. The lowest rank employee in any business operation up through its CEO should have an entrepreneurial attitude, taking reasonable risks and "Thinking outside the Box" to find solutions to difficult problems.

"Thinking outside the Box" is a metaphor for using one's ingenuity to devise a solution to a particular problem that differs from usual practice even though there is risk of failure if implemented. The expression recurs throughout *Taking Risks* in support of Walt's opinion that U.S. companies have become too risk averse. Walt acknowledges that when taking risks, something might break, but just as there is in life in general, there are good breaks as well as bad. "Breaking news" is usually bad, but "lucky breaks" are often good. On December 2, 2015, the *Cryptoquote* in the *Schenectady Daily*

Gazette and other newspapers throughout the English speaking world, when deciphered, revealed a similar sentiment expressed by Mark Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook:

“Move fast and break things. Unless you are breaking stuff, you are not moving fast enough.”

Taking Risks, Getting Ahead in Business and Life is an excellent primer on how to counter risk aversion, replete with detailed examples of how that was done throughout Walt Robb’s career at GE. Professors should make it required reading for the incipient young entrepreneurs in their charge, and it is the ideal holiday gift for students who show interest in learning how to succeed in business while really trying.