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Inside CAS: GE's Leadership Factory



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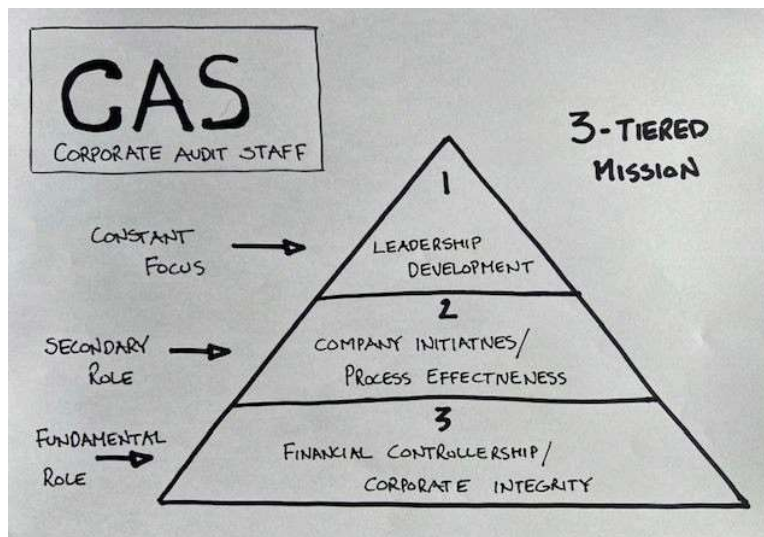
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Jack Welch called it "the best training program in the history of corporate America." Business Insider described it as "an insanely difficult 5-year program to develop executives," with only 2% reaching the finish line. For 114 years, this mysterious program minted thousands of executives for [GE](#) and the Fortune 500. This program was called the Corporate Audit Staff (CAS), and it was successful because of three key factors.

1. **GE hired the best.** The most admired company of the time attracted the best talent. Then, the best within GE were interviewed, field-tested and admitted into the program.
2. **Leaders set high expectations.** The job tested members for two to five years, where they traveled constantly, worked long hours and were expected to produce high-quality work quickly.
3. **Members walked through fire.** CAS members experienced three distinct assignments each year, with three managers and three teams. Structured feedback was given six times a year!

What was the CAS experience like? The opportunity to join CAS was a chance to accelerate your trajectory. The trade-off was that you paid a high price for it. It was not unheard of to work until 2 AM and then present to a company officer at 8 AM. If you were lucky, you got every other weekend off to unplug.

Every Thursday, there was planned social time with the team where you could let off steam. Mandatory fun took some getting used to if you were an introvert or preferred spending time with family. Most liked the intent, and it went a long way to build camaraderie. Many CAS grads remained close friends in their 40s, 50s and 60s.



The CAS culture valued high standards, intellectual horsepower, honest feedback and concise communication. Getting formal feedback six times a year helps you grow, but it can also be ego-bruising and soul-humbling. You were constantly tired at some level, and your feelings got hurt (even if you didn't show it), but you were exposed to so much and grew personally and professionally. It's hard to think a program like CAS can exist in today's work culture.

CAS graduates received the most coveted jobs within GE. They were sought after by private equity firms and big tech companies, sometimes getting offers with a 200% pay increase. At its height, GE was a factory that minted future C-suite executives and board members. Here are some examples:

- Bob Nardelli: Former CEO of Home Depot and Chrysler
- Bob Swan: Former CEO of Intel
- **Brian Doubles**: CEO of Synchrony Financial
- **Dan Janki**: CFO of Delta Airlines
- **David M. Cote**: Former CEO of Honeywell
- Charlene Begley: Boar Director for NASDAQ
- **Jamey Mock**: CFO of Moderna
- Jim McNerney: Former CEO of Boeing and 3M
- Joe Hogan: CEO of Align Technology. Former CEO of ABB and Ingersoll Rand
- **KC Sullivan**: President of CNBC
- **Khozema Shipchandler**: CEO of Twilio
- **Mark Begor**: CEO of Equifax
- **Scott Strazik**: CEO of GE Vernova

In 2020, the Chairman and CEO of General Electric, Larry Culp, announced the decision to end this storied leadership program. He was the first GE CEO hired from outside the company and did not have an emotional attachment to CAS (or a desire to invest in people the same way).

With Wall Street's obsession with short-term financial outcomes, the high cost of such a leadership program and today's zeitgeist around work, we may never see another program like CAS again.

It was a personal honor to have been invited to join CAS and then later serve as their APAC HR leader. I wouldn't trade that experience for anything. Even so, I was aware that CAS came with some controversy: Did

it produce one type of leader for too long? Did it take away opportunities from others in the company? Was the finance skillset the wrong one to emphasize in the 21st century? All fair questions.



How many companies have a TV show made after them?

The business world needs long-term investments in people beyond compensation. This investment may look and feel different than the CAS model, but there's a leadership development vacuum today. I wonder which company will step up to fill the void.

In the comment section below, you can find a broader list of CAS grads who became C-suite executives or board members of consequential companies. Please add any names I missed.

#CorporateAuditStaff #GeneralElectric #Leadership #CEO #CFO

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GE's Corporate Audit Staff was truly unbeatable as an early career development experience! Those 3 years are still among the top 1 or 2 experiences of my career! The pace of learning. The impact we made. The exposure to global environments. The intellect, capability, and camaraderie of those around me. It was just incredible as a develo ...more

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Best years of my life, it was definitely hard, and I can tell you very confidently that I don't remember a single FASB at this point, but what I cannot forget are the tons of great people I met and worked with ... The people made the CAS journey memorable and frankly played a big part in my career. ...more

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