

# The *How a new generation of engineers, designers, and managers saved Chrysler* Critical Path



Inventing an Automobile and  
Reinventing a Corporation

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# Introduction

Please, in the words of the late Richard Nixon, let me make one thing perfectly clear: This book was written *about* Chrysler Corporation, not *for* Chrysler Corporation. I was given the unique privilege of entering their heretofore private precincts to trace the creation of a new vehicle with no constraints whatsoever. No caveats, no prior agreements, no strictures, no demands for copy approval. In fact, the entire project was completed without any discussion of how I would write this book, other than my general verbal description to president Bob Lutz in late 1991. From the moment he agreed to the notion of my documenting the design, manufacture, and sale of his corporation's single greatest automotive project, not a word was ever uttered by anyone within the Chrysler Corporation about how I might treat the subject.

When I proposed the idea of documenting the creation of an automobile to Lutz, I had no idea which car might be on the drawing boards. Coincidentally, Chrysler's new minivan program had just begun to form up and it was obvious to Lutz and myself that this was a prime choice. After all, it was the cornerstone of the Chrysler business. It involved the greatest single gamble, \$2.1 billion (later increased to \$2.6 billion), in the history of the corporation. At the time Lutz approved the idea, there was no assurance of success, not only for the new vehicle, but for the company itself. Chrysler was in a state of chaos. Its longtime leader and standard-bearer, Lee Iacocca, was ending his reign under intense internal pressure, while a new and unknown entity, CEO Robert Eaton, was preparing to assume control. The new minivan had to work. A failure would sim-

ply doom the company, a fact that exerted enormous pressure on the small team that had been assembled to create it.

Like any journalist embarking into uncertain territory, I had no idea where the trail would lead me. I expected hostility and suspicion. I was prepared to be excluded from much of the process and to be escorted constantly by a public relations staffer who would monitor carefully controlled peeks inside the operation. This did not happen. While I never enjoyed total freedom to roam the factories and design spaces, I was given complete access to all meetings, large or small, that involved the minivan project at the design level. Surely there were senior sessions dealing with long-term strategies and proprietary information about corporate finance to which I was not invited, but there was no exclusion from any sessions, day-to-day, relating to the actual making of the vehicle.

If Chrysler had chosen to exclude me from the key elements of the process, the result would have been a faintly blurred and incomplete sketch of the real thing. Thankfully, this did not happen. While the book deals with a number of potential disasters, the overall conclusion — that crossfunctional teams work in modern industry — is clear.

The attitude of openness that greeted me fits a company with confidence in itself. From its leaders, the Bobs Eaton and Lutz, to its senior managers like Tom Gale and Francois Castaing (who play a significant role in the story) to the key minivan team members — Chris Theodore, Tom Edson, Dick Winter, Sham Rushwin and scores of others — the level of cooperation I received was nothing short of amazing. That I was able to operate inside the workings of the minivan platform team on a daily basis can only be confirmed by reading the following, but I truly believe the experience is unique in the annals of journalism.

I wish the idea for this book had risen full blown from my imagination without the input of others. That is hardly the case. Long-time friend and publishing executive Roger Straus III originally suggested such a book nearly a decade ago. Much has changed since then, and a series of circumstances prevented Roger and me from completing the project together. But credit for the idea is exclusively his. To my wife, Pamela, goes thanks for reviving the

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project following its hiatus after Roger had dropped out of the picture. It was she, following completion of my biography of car-maker Enzo Ferrari, while I was puzzling over another book project, who suggested the call to Bob Lutz which triggered this book. To those two, I owe much in the way of gratitude.

So too for Chris Theodore and Tom Edson, two key members of the minivan platform team, who spent endless hours in my company, patiently explaining the insanely complex details encompassing the creation of a contemporary automobile. They treated me without fail with courtesy and candor, even in situations that implied serious problems within their system. While they remained loyal to the company and to their mission, their honesty in evaluating situations that were less than seamlessly defined corporate policy was invaluable in the creation of this book. I remain supremely grateful for their help.

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