

BLACK BAG



Diary of a Creative Director
An exploration of the road to greatness.



Second City Theatre - April 18th, 2005

HEIDI EHLERS:

Several people have asked why I created *Diary of a Creative Director*. I did it because I'm curious and I have a question and I wanted to see if a theory I had was true.

Let me explain: Over the past 10 years I've interviewed a lot of creative people. Here's a typical conversation that I have with 95% of them: I ask "Why do you want to change jobs?" and the answer is usually "Because it's been two years." I ask "Why do you think you're ready to be an Associate Creative Director?" and they say "Because I've been in the industry for 8 years." I ask "What are you trying to create in your career?" and I usually get a blank stare.

That made me wonder: how do people who have worked to become some of the worlds most awarded, respected, and I might add loved, creative people answer the same questions? How do they think about their career? What would they say? I was dying to know, and I thought you might be, too.

The reason I chose NABS as the charity of choice for this event is obvious. Sometimes we meet people that are inches away from being NABS and still we can't help them. I thought the proceeds from *Diary of Creative Director* would be a way of helping those people anyway.

I'd like to read to you an excerpt from a 25-year journalist/broadcaster who called upon NABS to help him through a four month illness:

"In a philosophical context I view NABS through a special kind of lens. Socrates defined two kinds of love. The first was *agape*: The love we feel for wives, husbands, children, family. And the second was *caritas*: the love we have for our country, society, and those less fortunate. Almost all of us have experienced *agape* at one time or another, but to find *caritas* in an organization is virtually unique. NABS has it in spades and you demonstrate it on a daily basis."

Thank you to everyone in this room for demonstrating *caritas*.

Once again, we have 27 students who have received free tickets as guests of Lee Garfinkel. And we also have two students who are here as guests of the AMA. Welcome.

Our guest this evening is Lee Garfinkel.

Two years ago he accepted the position of Chairman and Chief Creative Officer of DDB New York. Lee started his advertising career at Levine Huntley Schmidt & Beaver where he spent 11 years rising from junior copywriter to Executive Vice President/Executive Creative Director. During that time Lee was chosen for Adweek's East Coast All-Star team as Best TV Writer. Three years later he was chosen by Adweek Winners magazine as their number one US copywriter and number three US Creative Director. After Levine Huntley Schmidt & Beaver, a place Lee has called "Camelot", he was chosen by BBDO's Phil Dusenberry to run the prestigious Pepsi business, during which time he created *Shady Acres* and the original Cindy Crawford spot, which you'll see in a moment.

Next, Lee made his mark on Lowe New York and over the next 8 years increased that office's profile, which led to scads of awards and Lee being named one of the Top 40 Under 40 by New York Business Magazine, induction into the Advertising Hall of Achievement, and a feature in the Wall Street Journal's infamous Creative Leaders series. He was also chosen again for Adweek's All-Star team, but this time as Creative Director for the entire United States.

He then spent 14 months at D'Arcy before the dissolution of that brand gave Lee a chance to consider the top jobs at all the multinational networks. He chose the one that has won more Grand Prix in Cannes than any other agency, the one that over the last 16 years has won more awards in Cannes than any other agency network, and the one that in 2004 was named Network Agency of the Year by the Clio's for the fourth year in a row.

Please join me in showing Lee Garfinkel how much we appreciate him sharing his thoughts and his time for *Diary of a Creative Director*.

HEIDI

Here you are!

LEE GARFINKEL

Here I am!

HEIDI

Lee has put together a reel for us, an anthology of some of the better known campaigns and commercials of his career. You told me when we met in January that your reel had over 200 spots on it. How did you choose the 23 spots you're going to show us first this evening?

LEE

Some I hadn't seen in a while, so I wanted to see them again, and some just kind of illustrate some milestones but I do like to mix it up because I get bored, and also to do a historical from some early Subaru commercials.

[SHOW REEL]

HEIDI

Let's start at the beginning. Advertising is actually your second career. You started as a stand-up comedian. Who was making the rounds with you at the time?

LEE

I think it was the highlight of, I mean it was kind of the high point of comedy was around '75, '76. I went to school with Jerry Seinfeld, and we actually took comedy courses together, and then I went out to LA to try my hand at doing standup, and I was this little nothing guy performing at the Comedy Store, the Improv, but the up and coming comedians that were just starting to make it that nobody had ever heard of yet, were Robin Williams and Michael Keaton and David Letterman and Sandra Bernhard. And it was just like an amazing time to see all these people just before they were about to burst onto the scene.

HEIDI

Do you remember your opening bit?

LEE

I don't remember my opening bit, because I tried different things all the time, 'cause you never, depending on the audience you never knew what was going to work.

HEIDI

Or where it was going to go... Everyone I spoke to about you mentioned your standup comedy background. Do you think it has helped you in your advertising career?

LEE

I think it's helped me because I always thought I was funny, but until you get up in front of strangers that don't know you, that's when you really find out if you're funny or not.

It helped me, I guess in a way, to try to figure out what works best for a wider range of people. And almost just as important was figuring out how to not only write funny things, but say funny things. And I think that kind of helps in presenting to feel comfortable getting up in front of strangers.

HEIDI

What initially attracted you to advertising?

LEE

I grew up in the Bronx and I needed a job. I needed to get out of the Bronx. Do you want me to tell the story about Queen's College?

HEIDI

Sure

LEE

I majored in communications in a city college in New York, and I remember just as we were about to graduate, the TV production professor said “Don’t expect to get a job in this business if you don’t have a connection”. And so I asked “Oh my God what am I going to do?” so I sent out resumes to film companies and TV companies and advertising agencies and I got three responses and one was from an advertising agency.

And I went on the interview and I brought TV scripts that I had written and songs that I had written and cartoons and funny videos, and this man was very, very nice and he said “Well you seem like a talented guy but this isn’t how you get a job in advertising, you have to put a portfolio together.” and I said “What’s a portfolio?” and he explained what to me what it was and he said “Maybe you want to go back to school for advertising.” I said “No, I can’t go back to school.” So I went to the library and took out advertising books and basically taught myself. I was so desperate to get a job that I did nothing for ten months but work on my portfolio.

HEIDI

In hindsight, which would have been more of a demanding career, advertising or standup comedy?

LEE

I think they’re both incredibly demanding. The difference is, I say to people that when you’re in advertising and you present and the client doesn’t like the work they usually just hate the work, they don’t hate you.

But when you do standup comedy, if you bomb, they hate you.

HEIDI

Neil Drossman, who is one of the industry’s most talented writers, basically told you to start over when he saw your first book. That would discourage most people, yet you went back and worked on your book 14 hours a day for 10 months.

How long did it take you to get your actual first job in advertising?

LEE

Well, it was about ten months, I was very lucky to meet Neil.

As I was teaching myself about advertising, the two most important books were Ogilvy’s book on advertising and Della Femina’s book on advertising. And I called up Della Femina one day and I very naively asked to speak to a Creative Director and they put me through to Neil Drossman and I was really lucky and he was nice enough to see me and he showed me award shows books and he told me what was good and what was bad and then over the next ten months he’d be willing to see my book and tell me what, and eventually he said “If I like it enough I’ll introduce you to some people”. And after ten months he introduced me to these guys at Levine Huntley Schmidt & Beaver which at the time was one of the best creative shops in New York. And I was lucky enough to get a job.

HEIDI

Was that your first job in advertising?

LEE

No, it was really my second job.

HEIDI

Right.

LEE

My first job was, I did get an offer from a company called James Neal Harvey which was a very small agency in New York. But I didn’t know enough about advertising to know who were the good agencies and who were the bad agencies. But I had a sense that James Neal Harvey was bad, but they were going to pay me.

And they were famous for three things: they had the Wella Balsam account, which was Farrah Fawcett, if you remember these horrible ads that they did; an account executive had left DDB with the Volkswagen Bus account and brought it to James Neal Harvey; and James Neal Harvey was actually one man, and he was married to the German secretary that was on Hogan’s Heroes. And he had her picture on his desk and I said “Wow! This is great! One day I can be like this guy.”

HEIDI

And when you went to Levine Huntley, didn't you do some rather shrewd salary negotiations?

LEE

Yes, when I started at James Neal Harvey they paid me \$12,000 a year, I was only there for two months, which to me was incredible because it was more than I was making at Baskin Robbins at the time, after I'd graduated college. And then when this writer, John Russo, from Levine called me up, and I had a sense that Levine was the better agency, John offered me the job and said "We'll pay you \$12,000." I said "Well you know, I've been in advertising for two months now and I'm already making 12, you have to pay me 13." So, I think he laughed, and he called me back and said "Alright, we'll pay you the 13" and I switched jobs.

HEIDI

Did you like advertising right away?

LEE

I wasn't sure if I liked it. I figured that I would get back into comedy writing at some point. And around 1980 or so, I had sent some work to Saturday Night Live and they said they were interested and asked for some more work, some more scripts, and I never did, because I got so wrapped up in advertising and so committed to wanting to be a success in advertising that I never wrote those scripts to follow up on. So I guess now, you know, if I look back, I must have really started to like advertising.

HEIDI

What did you learn how to do on your first job?

LEE

How to write headlines, basically, 'cause I thought I knew how to write headlines when I put my book together. But I used to obsess over every ad, I would write 500 headlines for every ad 'til John Russo who was actually my Creative Director at the time said "You can edit some of these out before you put them on paper".

Which is an interesting thing to learn. As you know, now you say "Well that's not going to be a good headline", but at first I was insecure so I'd write down every line thinking somehow I'd craft it into a good line, and eventually I was able to get it down to around 15 lines for every ad, and down to lines I thought were really the best.

HEIDI

What did you learn about yourself?

LEE

I never really worked that hard in school. I got by somehow but when I got into advertising, it was like all of a sudden I became a workaholic and I realized that I do want to be a success, I do want to get ahead in this business, and I can't believe how hard I'm working and yet I'm not complaining a bit.

HEIDI

What was your first big career goal?

LEE

My first career goal was to prove to people that I deserved to have a job in advertising. Levine, at the time, we'd always do well in the shows, and right off the bat I said I want to be one of those writers that has their fair share of ads in the awards shows.

HEIDI

And how would you rate that goal today, in terms of its magnitude?

LEE

I think I did pretty well early on, and I learned a couple of good lessons, which is you can win awards for pieces, on assignments that you wouldn't normally think that you could win awards on.

I think my first pieces in the One Show were for postcards that a Subaru dealer sent out. My first silver award at the One Show was the senior team that was working on the thirty-second Subaru spots had to cut them down to tens, and they didn't want to do it so they asked me to do it.

So I cut up all their footage and wrote new copy, and nothing ever came out of their campaign, but I won a silver for a ten-second campaign that I made out of their footage. So I tell that story to young people today is that you can win awards for assignments that you think, that's not the sexiest assignments but you can win awards for smaller assignments.

HEIDI

You stayed at Levine Huntley Schmidt Beaver for 11 years - that's at least four jobs in most people's careers. Why did you stay so long?

LEE

I loved Levine Huntley because it was all about the work. And year after year they would attract some of the best talent in New York and as I rose up the ranks and became Creative Director I was able to bring in a lot of those people and I loved the people that I had working for me.

A lot of people in retrospect will refer to Levine as being Camelot. They say "Well you must have had great clients" - we had miserable clients. But why we did good work was we would just relax. And it was all about being competitive with ourselves and I felt that there was no reason to leave because I kept getting promoted, and I kept getting more money, and we were doing great work and I loved the people, so it was probably one of the best agencies in the '80s, I think, in New York.

HEIDI

How many years did you work there before you were promoted to EVP and Executive Creative Director?

LEE

I got promoted pretty early, not to Executive Creative Director, but to Associate Creative Director, because John Russo, who had hired me, was the Copy Chief/Creative Director at the time, he left about a year and a half after I got there.

Before they replaced him, in the meantime, I worked with his art director and it took a while to find a replacement so I was working with his art director for a couple of months and eventually they said "Hey, we could pay a Creative Director \$50,000, we could give Lee \$16,000" so they gave me a couple of thousand more than I was making and made me Associate Creative Director.

I got promoted pretty quickly.

HEIDI

Okay, you can't hire a Creative Director now for \$16,000!

What do you think was biggest change in responsibility between being a copy writer and being a Creative Director?

LEE

You know, originally, because I was promoted so early and there were people that were in advertising much longer than I was that all of sudden now were reporting to me, and I said "I don't want to be a pr*ck". So I want these guys to like me because some of them were older than me and were probably more senior than I am, so I'm going to make sure than all of my criticisms is purely about making the work better.

HEIDI

How old were you, when you were promoted?

LEE

I probably started when I was about 23, so about 24 and a half.

HEIDI

Were there any question marks about that promotion that concerned you?

LEE

No, because I really thought I was doing a good job with this art director, who was really my supervisor. And after about four or five months we were just clicking, so it felt very natural to me.

HEIDI

Have you ever in your career asked for a promotion?

LEE

Yes, I've probably, when I was at Levine, because I was younger and they were paying me hardly anything. I'd have to go in and say - I would like a little bit more money, why not give me a different title. There weren't a lot of people back then. We started out with only about 8 or 10 creative people which eventually became about 25 or 30 people toward the end.

But going in and asking for more money I remember doing that more than asking for promotions. In fact, probably when I go in and ask for more money they would say "No, but we'll promote you"!

HEIDI

Hasn't changed.

I asked John Russo, who you've known for 25 years, first as your copy chief at Levine Huntley, now one of your CDs, if you were competitive. He said "He's competitive with himself; that's the push, to get better". Alan Beaver said "I've never thought of Lee as competitive in a negative sense, for a guy that is so driven."

What do you think? Are you competitive and has it served you well?

LEE

I'm definitely competitive with myself. And I think early on we had friendly competition. So if another team did an award-winning ad, it wasn't so much about beating them but you wanted to do it, win an award.

So I've always wanted to top what I've done before. I mean, I'm still writing commercials, and doing ads because that's the thing I haven't done my best ad is yet. So I'm still trying to top it. Even when I look at my reel I'm thinking of things I want to re-edit.

HEIDI

You said "friendly competition". When does friendly competition turn into unfriendly competition? What's the mark?

LEE

Let's see... well, at Levine Huntley it was an open-door policy, where people would go into each other's offices and run ideas by each other, which I encouraged. I would say to people "Before you present to me, present to each other, so by the time you come to me you've had some opinions." And people would come running in and say so-and-so liked this or helped with this and that would be what I call friendly competition.

Eventually when I went to BBDO, people kept their doors closed and nobody shared ideas with anybody, and that would be what I would call less friendly.

HEIDI

What role has the pursuit of money played in your career?

LEE

I've only once considered a job because of the money. It's nice to make money, I've made probably some of the worst decisions financially, but all of my decisions have been "Do I think I can continue to do good work in this place or do I think I can turn the place around?". Because I don't think at the end of the day, unless I was going to make like 200 million dollars, I would be happy doing menial work. But, I always am pretty tough about negotiating money for myself because I feel I work really hard, do great work for clients, and should be rewarded for it.

HEIDI

Do you have a strong gut?

LEE

I do.

I think I have a really strong gut because if I were to create something or if somebody shows something to me, and I get jealous of that then I know it's a great idea. Or if I come up with something and I feel like I'm getting goose bumps about it, I go "That's it!" Unfortunately I don't get that enough. I wish that more teams would come into me and I'd just go "That's it!" It doesn't happen enough.

HEIDI

You said what it feels like when it's right. What does it feel like when it's wrong?

LEE

It feels boring. I say to the people that work for me that my job is great when you come into me with good ideas and I'm entertained, but imagine spending 10 to 12 hours every day looking at mediocre work. It's the worst job, because it's so boring.

HEIDI

What does it feel like, what does your gut feel like, when something's wrong?

LEE

It is boring. It's boring.

HEIDI

What are the three things that stand out for you from your 11 years at Levine Huntley Schmidt & Beaver?

LEE

That friendly competition, incredibly hard work, nobody cared about the hours that they put in. That's what I got used to - working 'til 11 o'clock at night and just pushing and pushing and pushing to top the ideas, and a lot of practical jokes.

HEIDI

Tell us one.

LEE

Well, we used to like to have our Christmas parties in the agency, because you could have a little more fun in the agency, and one year we had this product which was instant garlic in a jar, and for some reason, I don't know why, we decided the night of the Christmas party to pour this garlic down the heating unit of the account executive's office, who was right by the lobby, so as people were coming out of the elevators and coming into the party the smell of garlic just made its way through the agency. So my art director, who did this with me, he left! He thought he was going to be fired for sure.

HEIDI

You must have had plenty of calls during the time you were at Levine Huntley, to change agencies. Why did you say 'yes' to BBDO.

LEE

I had been at Levine for 11 years, worked on probably every account they'd ever had during that time, and I just felt that there wasn't much else for me to do. The management at the time, I didn't see us winning any new pieces of business that were significant.

And most of the accounts - Subaru was the biggest account but it was still a relatively small account at the time - and I was really starting to wonder could I do what I was doing for Levine on small accounts on a big, high-profile piece of business.

So BBDO asked me to work on Pepsi and I said "Well this is a real challenge. To see if, can I do it. Because now everyone will see if I'm a success or a failure or not." So I decided to take the job and see what happens.

HEIDI

And were you excited right away or did you have questions? Was there some reservations?

LEE

I was definitely nervous about it.

In fact, I loved Levine so much that I gave three months notice. And BBDO was willing to wait three months, too, to their credit.

It was the best three months probably of my career because these guys did going away parties every night for almost three months.

But I was nervous, because I knew Levine, and it was my buddies, and that was probably my biggest concern about leaving was about leaving my buddies behind and I had heard really mixed things about BBDO.

What people don't remember back then, this was 1989, people said to me Levine is a hot, small, good creative agency and BBDO, other than Pepsi and GE really wasn't doing much, and they said why would you want to leave a hot, small creative agency to go work with them, it's considered mostly a big hack advertising agency.

And so I felt like I was taking a gamble.

HEIDI

What questions did you ask during that first interview, to make you feel better about your decision?

LEE

If they would let me do my thing as long as it felt like it was in the realm of what would be acceptable to Pepsi. And I liked Phil Dusenberry and Ted Saan a lot, I thought they were talented, solid people. I think I was 35 at the time and I said I guess I can take a chance, I'm only 35. See what happens.

HEIDI

Phil Dusenberry said "Lee was very good at bringing along other people and gave them the opportunity to do some outstanding work, he didn't make the 'Not-Invented-Here' syndrome mistake. He gave people a chance to shine and spread their wings and do work that was pretty outstanding."

What was the main thing you were hired to do?

LEE

It was to supervise the brand Pepsi business which meant not just working on it myself as a writer but put a team together, which would probably be about ten teams that would work on Pepsi and in the BBDO mentality at the time, too, was, especially when it was Pepsi, to put as many people against it as possible.

And what was satisfying for me is that if I obviously got a couple of spots in the mix but other people that I thought had potential, if I got their spots in the mix as well then that was really rewarding for me.

HEIDI

Did you have a goal for the piece of business; was there something specific you set out to do?

LEE

Year one was not to embarrass myself.

To see if I could something that felt like Pepsi, but different, and in fact the *Shady Acres* spot, which seems kind of tame right now, was such a hard sell because up until then it was really young people drinking Pepsi, You know, Pepsi's hip, Coke isn't. And I said "Can we show old people in drinking Pepsi?" and they said "No you can't do that" and I said "Well we'll make it hip" and believe it or not it was a tough sell and even at their bottlers' convention when they showed the spot; every spot was shown in the 30 and 60 version, but *Shady Acres* was only shown in one version because they were afraid if it bombed they wouldn't have to show it twice.

It actually got a good response.

HEIDI

Did you get everything done that you wanted in the three years you were there?

LEE

I had three good years on Pepsi. I did five or six spots that I thought were really good, but I felt like the place wasn't for me. They had team spirit, they had openness, it just wasn't there at BBDO at the time and you know I said I could stay at BBDO for the rest of my career and work on these big brands. The work was starting to get better at the agency, I could make a lot of money at BBDO, but I just felt it's just not my kind of place. And if I could go to some place and kind of recreate what I had at Levine that would seem more interesting for me.

HEIDI

Why did you choose Lowe?

LEE

Lowe was a difficult choice. Because I first met Frank Lowe, he had a good agency in London and a crappy agency in New York and he said to me “I’d like you to come and turn around the agency in New York” and he said “But Lee, you’ll never go to client meetings, because in London we have account people present the work, not creative people.” And I said “Well then I’m not that interested, because I’ve never seen an account person present better than I can, and I can’t hire creative people and then not let them present so I’m not interested.”

So we shook and that was it, and then about three months later he called me back and said “Okay, I’ll let you present your work” and I gave him all the requests that I had in terms of you know, if you want me to turn the agency around this is what I need and we agreed and everybody said I was crazy for doing it.

HEIDI

Did you have a plan? Did you outline a plan to him?

LEE

The plan was to evaluate the place for the first three months in terms of staff, in terms of clients; to see what I could think I could achieve over the first year or so, and then over time start to staff it with the people.

HEIDI

What was more difficult about the job when you actually got in than you were expecting?

LEE

Most of the clients were terrible and the account people weren’t very good, and nobody cared about the work except for Frank. So at least it was good that the chairman of the company cared about the work.

And Frank wanted to be famous for having a great creative agency and he was going to use me to get it, which was fine. So nobody really stopped me, but I remember meeting some of the clients.

In fact when I first met the Coke and Sprite client I was ready to kill myself ‘cause these guys were so different than the Pepsi client, who was so open to doing great advertising and the Coke clients at the time were so stiff, I said “Oh my God, what did I do?”

HEIDI

What did you do? How did you work with the clients to evolve that relationship and the account group?

LEE

What I learned is you can’t make drastic changes overnight - you have to take the time to win over the clients.

So if I went in to, you know, a client meeting and presented something outrageous, and if I didn’t have any credibility and these guys didn’t know me, I would fail.

So I figured this is going to take time to win them over, show them that I’m a sensible guy, and offering smart solutions, and it was really patience. I think patience was probably the main thing. And patience with account people also, kind of training them in what good advertising was, taking the time to teach them, and see who I really could start to train.

HEIDI

How did you train them?

LEE

How to train account people... well, sometimes I was tough on them. I remember one account guy, to whom I said “How do you go home at night and tell your family what you do every day when you’re responsible for some of the most mediocre advertising on television? What do you do when commercials show up on TV?” That guy eventually quit.

There were other people who really, I said “You work so hard, none of us get paid enough that it’s worth it, the least we should get some enjoyment out of what we do every day” and some of the account people really came around.

HEIDI

What was easier about the job then you were expecting?

LEE

I would say probably I kept 40% of the creative department, who weren't really known for any famous advertising at the time, but I said there seems like some really good raw talent here that hasn't gotten proper creative direction. And that's taking a chance 'cause I'm a really big believer that your first or second job can really make who you are.

You can be really imaginative but if you get bad Creative Directors at the beginning of your career they can point you in the wrong direction and make you do hack work and you may never get it back.

And I was able to see in some of these people that I could take their raw talent and get them to forget some of the stuff that they were doing and turn them around.

And that was, it was really rewarding.

HEIDI

You spent eight years at Lowe during which time you significantly raised the creative bar on the work you did for Heineken, Diet Coke, and Sprite.

We've covered this, but I think it's important to read this quote.

It's your quote: "You can blame stuff on the clients, but it's not always the clients' fault. You know, you start to meet the clients and you find out that they're much more willing than you think to get good work out, but they can only work on what the agency offers them."

Talk to us about your philosophy of client as partner.

LEE

I don't like ramming work down a client's throat.

If I can get them to feel that they're a partner in the creation of the advertising, it's a much easier way to sell. It's a much easier way to build trust in the long run. And I've used that since then to sell work to clients that you would think it would never work.

Most of the clients either came to Lowe or were at Lowe never did great work and just like slowly trying to build up that teamwork with them really helped me to sell work.

HEIDI

Why don't more creative people have relationships with their clients?

LEE

Sometimes it's painful. It does take a lot of patience. But I found, it can be, it takes a lot of time. I mean, I already work at least 10 to 12 hours a day so to add client meetings and the phone calls, I mean it takes up a lot of time, but I honestly say I probably couldn't have sold 50% of the work if I hadn't established relationships with my clients.

And I know that, even at Lowe when I got there, that creative people would say "They won't buy good work - we've presented good work to them." and I'd say "Well show me all the good work that you've created that they didn't buy."

And for the most part, it wasn't very good. And I said "We have to make the work better because this is probably why we've lost their trust over the years. "

HEIDI

Your presentation style was described by John Russo as "a dialogue, not a presentation. Lee's strength is to come across as a blue-collar, hard-working guy that's out for your best interest. It's like he's inviting somebody to his house."

How important have your presentation skills been to your success?

LEE

I think it's really important to sell work that the client doesn't necessarily want to buy, by convincing them that you're in this with them. That you're not just being a crazy creative but that you've really thought out the assignment and the strategy, and that you're there in the trenches with them. You can't underestimate it.

With Heineken, we spent so much time together to have the client buy into the strategy that by the time the client finally bought into the strategy I was halfway there with some creative.

HEIDI

Can you tell us about your initial conversations with Heineken when you were pitching the business?

LEE

The Heineken client is a great guy.

When we pitched the business, he said "I don't want to see any creative work. I want to visit three or four agencies that we're talking to, for about three months. I want to get to know everybody; I want to know who people are, I want to see if I feel comfortable with them. And then at the end of that I'd like to see some strategic planning."

And that's basically how we pitched the business was going out to drinks, have Heinekens with the guy, meet him at a bar and talk about advertising and talk about his business. Come off like a regular guy, have him feel comfortable and help him take the brand where he thinks it's going.

HEIDI

Alan Beaver, who was one of the partners at Levine Huntley, said "People generate leadership in different ways; Lee is not a big talker, he's big doer".

Are you comfortable with leadership, and where you always?

LEE

I think I've been comfortable with leading because I like to be in control of the situation. A lot of people said... why... it's different times in my career...like when I was at Lowe I was chairman and chief executive officer and chief creative officer, and people said "Why do you want those roles?" and I said "You have to be in control of your destiny". You can't just be the, you know, for me, the creative guy and hope that the rest of the agency is going to follow along. The whole agency has to be there, committed to the goal, and I said, whether it was at Lowe, especially at Lowe, I said "I need to be in control of what happens at this agency to make me fulfill my goals" and I just did it. I've always felt comfortable with it.

Maybe it has something to do with growing up in the Bronx.

HEIDI

How was your influence felt outside of the creative department, when you were reshaping the agency?

LEE

Well I will tell you when I came to DDB I said, "I have a lot of work here to turn the New York office around." I said "I'm going to need to interview every creative person at any level, but I'm also going need to interview every planner, mid-level and up, and every account executive mid-level and up, to get a sense of who's coming into the agency because I want to make sure they understand the vision before they come into the agency."

HEIDI

And what were you looking for in those interviews?

LEE

People who were smart; people you wanted to be around.

I think at DDB I said "It takes 3 things to succeed: One is you have to be talented; Two is you have to work hard; and Three is you have to be a nice person. And if you're not nice I'll talk to you about your attitude, but life is too short to be around people that are creeps. If you don't work hard, I work hard, so I expect the same. And if you're not delivering the kind of work I expect I'll try my best to get the work better, but even if you're my friend, I mean, at the end of day I'm going to judge you on your work. But I will work with you to try to get you better."

HEIDI

What was the first example of leadership in your life?

LEE

That's an interesting question.

HEIDI

Bossing your sister around?

LEE

No, I think in the seventh grade a teacher falsely accused one of these other students of doing something and I stood up and defended him as if I was a lawyer and the teacher hated me for the rest of the year.

But I didn't mind, because I felt like I had done the right thing.

HEIDI

Do you think we're born with leadership abilities or can we learn it?

LEE

Probably both.

I have no idea if I was born with it. I think I got my style from watching James Cagney movies. I don't know if you know this movie, *Angels With Dirty Faces*. If you don't know it you should rent it - it just came out on DVD.

James Cagney, in this movie, would not snitch or tell on the bad guys, he would only do what he thought was right and when I saw that movie I thought, somehow that influenced me, and I knew that I was going to sort of be, that kind of person when I got into business.

HEIDI

What is the essence of leadership for you?

LEE

Lead by example.

I would never ask anybody to do something that I wouldn't do myself. So, I worked the hours - unfortunately I was usually the last person to leave too often.

I will work on any assignment. You know, I just worked on a website, I wrote the website, the other ads, I work on strategies, I'll do everything I expect other people to do.

HEIDI

What's been the most difficult leadership moment of your career?

LEE

That would probably be when I was at Lowe, and my partner, Marvin Sloves, he was forced to retire. And when he was forced to retire he said "I'm going to make Lowe lose the Mercedes account". Which he did.

So after we were fired by Mercedes, I had to stand up in front of about 350 people and tell them that the agency was going to go on in spite of this. And that was really a tough moment. I probably spoke for about 45 minutes from the heart to all these employees.

All I remember is the beginning of my speech was "I'm from the Bronx, I've been knocked around, and I know how to come back and we're going to come back". I don't remember anything I said after that, and then at the end there was applause. It was probably the toughest moment of my career.

HEIDI

What's been the most inspiring and heartwarming?

LEE

Probably winning the Subaru business, at DDB.

HEIDI

We're going to get into that later. Which have you had more of? More tough or more inspiring or heartwarming?

LEE

Being probably a pessimist and a cynic, I'd say I probably had more negative experiences. Which would all be funny in retrospect, and they made for great building of character.

But I guess while the good moments may have been less they must have been rewarding enough to keep me going in this business. I'm still as excited about the business as I was when I started.

HEIDI

You were just getting started at D'Arcy as President and Chief Creative Officer of the worldwide network, yet in fourteen months you revamped Cadillac and Crest and won Heineken and Cadbury for the network.

Do you think you would still be there if Publicis hadn't dissolved the brand?

LEE

You know, I have no idea.

When I started at D'Arcy I was shocked, because I couldn't believe how bad it was. I knew it was bad, I just didn't realize how bad it was. I knew the creative was bad, but part of the reason I took the job was there was nowhere to go but up, and after Lowe if I could turn D'Arcy around that would be a miracle.

My shock was how bad the account side of the business was, and how badly it was managed. In spite of that we were able to win the Cadbury account and Heineken followed me from Lowe, which I had nothing to do with - they came over on their own.

I didn't solicit the business. And we were able to do two of the better Heineken spots when I was at D'Arcy, the Jennifer Aniston spot and the holiday party spot were both done at D'Arcy, so I was able to get good work out of the creative department I found at D'Arcy.

But I remember I judged at Cannes, I guess around 2001 or 2002, I forget the years, Alison Fahey, the editor of Adweek, came up to me and said "You don't believe in D'Arcy, you aren't going to stay at D'Arcy" and this stayed in the back of my mind then two months later Maurice Levy said I'm buying D'Arcy and going to merge it into Publicis and of course Maurice wanted me to be the Worldwide Creative Director for Publicis and I just was thinking "Do I really want to be in this place, do I want to commit to this for the long term?"

And I met Ken Kaess at DDB and people had always said to me in my career that "One day you should be at DDB, you just seem like a DDB kind of guy". So I figured, I don't know how many more times I'm going to change jobs, because I like to stay in a place, so I said instead of going to Publicis I'm going to take DDB and see if I can finish my career there.

HEIDI

How important is culture?

LEE

The culture and the work are the two most important things.

HEIDI

What are three things you can do to create it?

LEE

Again, lead by example. Two is: get rid of people who bring down the culture. And what I said to people is, whether it was at Levine or Lowe, when things are going well, we could bring in foosball machines and pool tables and ping pong tables, but that isn't going to make the place more fun. What's going to make the place more fun is creating great ideas.

I remember some interesting foosball games, but what I remember even more people running down the hallways with scripts yelling "Look at this idea! Look this idea! This is great!" That's what builds the culture. And so once you start creating better ideas and selling these ideas, then everybody starts having a lot more fun, because you're proud of what you do every day.

HEIDI

What is the measure? How do you know when you've got culture? How do you know when you're there? What are the signposts?

LEE

People working late and they don't complain. There is something that I feel in the hallways. I feel better about doing practical jokes, because I don't want to do practical jokes when I meet people I don't like. So I'll do more practical jokes -

HEIDI

Okay, so if the office smells like garlic, we know you're on your way.

LEE

Or phony phone calls, that sort of stuff. It's always interesting when the chairman is the one doing phony phone calls. But once the works starts getting better and you start to see a lot of, you know, people laughing in the hallways, you know you're on the road to something.

HEIDI

When you took the job at DDB in New York you were also offered the position of worldwide Creative Director at Publicis. How do you approach making a decision when those are the two options on the table?

LEE

It came down to a lot things.

From an ego point of view, Worldwide Creative Director sounds better.

But I don't like traveling - I'd rather create. I spend most of my time in the office, either writing or supervising or going to client meetings. And I said it really doesn't, you know, I could travel the world, which is, I think Worldwide Creative Director is a great job. And if you want to, like, see the world; it's a great way to see the world.

But you know, too many people would say what Worldwide Creative Director is you go to the office, people show you their reels, they nod, they 'yes' you, then you leave and they don't care what you said anymore.

I still wanted to have my hands involved in the work so I said even though this one in New York seems like a smaller job I'll have my hands in the work, there's a lot of work to try to bring DDB New York back, and I really like the culture and the people at DDB a lot better than the people I'd been talking to at Publicis and at D'Arcy at the time.

HEIDI

It's also about knowing yourself, knowing what you love and what you love to do.

LEE

And I took a salary cut to go to DDB.

HEIDI

A thousand dollars?

LEE

No, it was more than a thousand dollars!

HEIDI

Which did you think was the bigger challenge of the two jobs?

LEE

You know both, both were tough challenges.

To make, you know, a network, a worldwide network become a super-creative network is hard. You've got to get at least 15 offices working. And to even just turn around an office, one office is hard.

Because I walked into DDB New York, and let's say there were 15 major clients who were fairly happy with the work that they were doing. I come in and I think this work could be a h*lluva lot better.

How do you convince clients that think the work they're doing is pretty good that's it's not that good? And it was going to be sort of Lowe all over again, of spending the time with these clients to convince them that the work could be a lot better and a lot smarter and it's going to have an impact on their business.

HEIDI

Do you remember your first address to the creative department upon joining DDB New York?

LEE

Yes.

I showed my reel, talked about my philosophy, and I wanted people to feel proud about coming to DDB New York. DDB New York in the '60s was probably the best agency going. In the '80s there were probably about 700 people working at DDB New York. When I started there it was about 200 people.

So that tells you how far the office had gone down. What I wanted to do was, what I said to people, which is sort of our mantra in New York at the moment, is if Bill Bernbach created a revolution in advertising in New York in the '60s, we need to continue that revolution.

Which means we can't keep doing business as usual - we need to shake things up and sort of recreate ourselves for the future. I just said we need to be the best office in New York and we're not going to get there if we continue down the road that we've been on, so we can change things.

Which scares people.

HEIDI

I heard you gave some sort of an ultimatum. A 90 day review by choice. You can do this, this, this. Do you recall that?

LEE

Yeah, I think DDB New York had been through probably about 13 presidents over 15 years. So when somebody new comes in, they think "Well, you're just the next guy". They don't really have to listen to you.

HEIDI

Are you decisive?

LEE

Most of the time.

Occasionally there are times when I'm not sure. Especially when I go by my gut, when it's really good, I know it. When it's really bad, I know it. When it's somewhere in the middle, I'll say to a team "Let me sleep on it, you guys sleep on it, let's revisit it tomorrow, I don't know if I'll change my mind, but let's see." The next day I'll usually say "I haven't changed my mind, I don't like it." It's that borderline stuff that I'm indecisive about.

HEIDI

Picasso said, "Art is 90% perspiration, 10% inspiration." You've said you're not smarter than anyone else, you just work harder than everyone else.

What's a typical week for you?

LEE

I would say Monday through Friday, 9 or 9:30 I get in and work until around 9 o'clock at night, it is non-stop, I've said this for years now. I grew up in New York, I live outside of New York, but working in the city, they have some of the best restaurants in the world, I've gotta get out and have some good meals every once in a while. I almost always have lunch at my desk, and I've been doing this for years.

I remember I met this guy at Lowe, who I had interviewed at Levine and he said, "You look exactly the same way as you did 10 years ago. You have a tuna fish sandwich in your hand and you're eating at your desk." I eat in the office, I probably see creative about 80% of the time, and the other 20% is with clients and other business - that's my style.

HEIDI

You've been at DDB two years last month, are you on track?

LEE

I would say that right now we're on track.

About six months ago I wasn't quite sure where we were going to be. About three months after I started at DDB, Adweek and Adage had called me and said, "All right, you've been there three months, where is all the great advertising?" And I said, "You don't understand what it takes to succeed in this business, you can't turn an agency around in three months."

When I was at Lowe it took a year before I had one commercial I was proud of. And then year two we had about five commercials, and then after that it just kicked in, we had a whole new reel, we had almost every client on the reel within three.

At DDB, the first year is kind of hit and miss. I knew we could do better work with our existing clients, but we were going to have to pitch like crazy. But I couldn't pitch until I started to feel more secure that I had a team in place.

About six months ago we were pitching Lipton Iced Tea, Subaru and Pepsi, and I thought if we can win one of those, that'll jump start the agency. Next thing I knew, we won Lipton, we won Subaru, we won Pepsi - we won all three. And I thought, "Okay now we've got a base, now we can get on track and stabilize all these pieces of business, keep our current clients happy, and in about another month or so start pitching anew."

HEIDI

And you've mostly chosen the team that you in place now?

LEE

Yes, it's a combination of existing DDB and new people that came in. It's really starting to come together.

HEIDI

You've always had major pieces of business follow you, we've talked about this: Subaru, Diet Pepsi, Lipton.

What role should a Creative Director play in winning new business?

LEE

I can't imagine winning a piece of new business without strong creative representation. In my role as Chairman and Chief Creative Officer, I'm out there leading the new business pitch. I think establishing those relationships with clients is so important.

They want to feel that they've got a trusted Creative Director in the agency that they can count on, not just to come up with great ideas but that cares about their business. All those clients, not all of them followed me, but some of them followed me, and the new ones say "We're going to count on you to help us with our business" and you feel that pressure because you don't only want to come up with commercials that win awards, you want commercials that are going to impact their business.

HEIDI

Ken Kaess, worldwide CEO of DDB, said the biggest seminal event, and one of the more emotional moments, was when you told the New York office they'd won Subaru. He said, "He told a funny story in that self-deprecating way about how the client called him on the weekend. There were people crying, there were people cheering. It was everything about Lee coming together in one moment - all the trust. It was moving beyond words."

Can you tell us what you told the agency? How did you let them know they'd won the business?

LEE

People had asked me prior to the win “How would you feel if you won, or if you lose it?” and I didn’t want to think about it. Having worked on it for 11 years, if we won it, it would look like a shoo-in. If we lost, it would look like a major defeat. I didn’t like to think about it either way.

When I got the call from the client, I don’t usually get choked up, but all the client said to me on the phone was “Lee, welcome back to Subaru” and I got choked up. All I said was “Thank you so much! Thank you so much! Thank you so much!” I called Peter Hempel, who was my managing director, and asked him to call a meeting.

When I got in front of everybody it took me a while to get the words out because I was still choked up from it. I just said what the client said. I just spoke to the Subaru client and he said “Lee, welcome back to Subaru.” The whole agency burst into applause. It helped jumpstart the agency, to let everybody know that everything we’d been working hard to achieve was starting to come together. And also, since having lost the Volkswagen account in the 90s, to be back in the car business? I was so thrilled.

HEIDI

What do you think has been the single greatest contributor to your success?

LEE

Hard work. Compassion for people that work for me. Just being relentless. I remember some key moments in my career, when everybody left the agency and it was dark, that campaign with Noriega and those guys? I was working with Sal Vito, who was my art director at the time. Sal is probably the only guy I know who is just as relentless as I am: the idea’s not good enough! Just keep working and working and working until we stumbled on an idea. I remember those nights when we put in those hours, and then finally, pow! Look at this!

HEIDI

Are you pleased with what you’ve accomplished so far?

LEE

Yeah, but not pleased enough that I don’t want to keep going because I still want to top what I’ve already done.

I don’t know if it’s being Jewish or being from the Bronx, but I’m never satisfied, I always feel like I can do better. And nobody ever pushed me - I’ve always just pushed myself. If you have a conversation with my mother, she thinks I’m great - she never pushed me to do anything, so, even my mother will say “Why do you work so hard?” It’s something; I don’t know what it is.

HEIDI

How far into the future can you see yourself?

LEE

I would see doing this about another ten years or so. As long as I don’t stop creating! I never want to be a creative director that purely sits in the office and supervises.

I believe 100% in “always keep working” because I do think people get stale, lose it. I’ve seen some great creative directors who left the business for a year or two come back and they just don’t have it any more.

Just staying on top of it I think is so important, and letting the rest of the agency know that “I can still do it” because I’ve seen other creative directors, too, where people say “Well what does he know? He hasn’t created an ad in years!” and I never want to be in that position.

HEIDI

What are you going to be doing *after* ten years from now?

LEE

I’m not sure - maybe I’ll go a little longer!

But I do want to write a book about my adventures in advertising. Which I’ve started, and every time I think it’s done, I’ve got enough, I’ll meet some other crazy character that’ll become a new chapter. After I think I can’t see any more absurd stuff happen, something more absurd happens. So I just keep adding to my stories and maybe I’ll put together this little book of all the craziest people I’ve met in advertising.

HEIDI

How many chapters do you have now?

LEE

I've got about 100 pages now, which is only about a tenth. You just name a name and I'll tell what a crazy person this famous advertising person is. You wouldn't believe the stories. You *would* believe the stories!

HEIDI

Do you think you've made a lot of sacrifices?

LEE

Absolutely.

I'm hardly ever home, which I do regret, but I don't know how else I could have done it. I've said to some people "If you're a genius and you've come up with good ideas, go home to your family." But for me, I've got to keep working, figuring it out, so I don't know how to do it.

You definitely give up your family life, and I know a lot of people that have done it and a lot of people that don't want to do it and they take cushy jobs at agencies that don't require a lot from you. I wouldn't be satisfied. I've said to people "You know, our jobs would be so much easier if we didn't care about what we do every day."

I go to client meetings and they don't necessarily *want* the best stuff - I have to *push* the best stuff on them. I could have sold them mediocre work and I could have written this stuff in an hour, but I wouldn't be happy if I did that.

HEIDI

Can you show us the DDB work that you're most excited about?

LEE

Well, I don't get excited about maintenance, but I think this is some of the better work that we've done over the last six to ten months. It's just the first step. When I first got to DDB there really weren't any commercials on the reel that, the New York reel, that I would show at a business meeting.

I would show my own reel. This is really work that was started in the last six to ten months and I say to everybody it's good enough to put up in the lobby and not be embarrassed.

But it's just a first step, because with some of these clients it was convincing clients who hadn't done good work to do better work, and with some others, some opportunities around new clients, like Budweiser, to just start to do important work.

You'll see in some of these commercials, some of the clients like slapstick, when people get hit in the head. I'll show them a commercial I think is smart and it'll go right over them. If I show them a commercial with somebody getting hit in the head, they'll go "Bang! Sold!" So we've got few spots with people getting hit in the head, but hopefully as we go on we won't have to do as many.

[PLAY REEL]