





# W. James McNerney Jr.

MBA 1975

Retired Chairman  
The Boeing Company

At 66, Jim McNerney still plays ice hockey. One of his Frozen Assets teammates, who met him on the ice some 50 years ago, says McNerney remains the player who makes other people better. He sets them up for a shot and passes the puck at the right moment—sacrificing his own goal to help others make theirs.



*From top:*

McNerney addresses HBS students on campus; Boeing's commercial airplanes at the company's corporate offices in Chicago; visiting with his brother Pete.



## TIMELINE

- 1949 Born, Providence, Rhode Island
- 1971 Earns BA, American Studies, Yale University
- 1975 Earns MBA
- 1975 Joins Procter & Gamble, Brand Manager
- 1978 Joins McKinsey & Company, Consultant
- 1982 Begins 19-year tenure at General Electric
- 1997 Named President and CEO, GE Aircraft Engines
- 2000 Named Chairman and CEO, 3M
- 2005 Named Chairman, President, and CEO, Boeing
- 2015 Named CEO of the Year  
by *Chief Executive* magazine
- 2016 Retires from Boeing

Whether McNerney first learned how to be a team player on the ice or off of it is hard to say, but it is a winning formula that has led to exemplary leadership in three Fortune 100 companies.

At the helm of Boeing for the last decade before stepping down recently, McNerney succeeded in helping the roughly 160,000-employee firm find its way forward after a series of mergers and acquisitions, high-profile ethical missteps, and some tough business challenges. His job was to build on strengths, connecting what was good with what could be better. “Boeing had struggled to stitch together four companies and cultures,” says McNerney. “The trick was to create a stronger fifth culture that retained some of the original essence of each.” During his tenure, Boeing recaptured the top position in the global aerospace industry as well as in commercial airplanes. It also maintained its historic leadership in human spaceflight while consistently producing strong financial results.

One of McNerney’s first orders of business when he arrived at Boeing was to repair relationships with the company’s largest customer, the federal government, which were damaged by malfeasance that had occurred prior to his arrival. He believed a company-wide commitment to ethical behavior was the only way to right the ship. “You have to tackle problems head on and fix them,” says McNerney, who tested his crisis management chops again when confronting delays, cost overruns, and reliability problems with the highly anticipated 787 Dreamliner, which today is an industry leader in sales and fuel efficiency.

Jim McNerney grew up outside of Chicago. His father taught economics and his mother raised McNerney and his four younger siblings. An American studies major at Yale, he came to HBS for business training that would help him hone his natural leadership abilities. “I liked the compete-and-cooperate culture at HBS,” says the social chair of Section B. “You help each other and you want to be the best.”

McNerney furthered his education through positions at the gold standards in marketing and consulting: Procter &

Gamble and McKinsey. He then began a 19-year career at General Electric, rising to run several divisions, including GE Aircraft Engines. He was one of three leaders groomed to take the helm, but he didn’t get the job. Someone who learns from setbacks, McNerney spent the next five years leading 3M, known for its industrial, technology, and consumer products, including Scotch tapes and Post-it notes.

While at Boeing, McNerney defined, built, and nurtured a culture that emphasizes both individual accountability for getting one’s job done and a shared responsibility for the company’s overall success. He significantly heightened focus on leadership development, including crafting his own succession plan to ensure a seamless transition in the company’s 100th year. After hand-picking Dennis Muilenburg as his replacement, the two worked side-by-side for 18 months before Muilenburg assumed the CEO role. “He’s made me a better leader,” says Muilenburg. “The fact that he took time to invest in me and that he has a passion for mentoring has been fantastic.”

Newly retired, McNerney admits one of his biggest joys in life for 40 years—on par with his 30-year marriage and his five kids—has been work. Although he’s passed the baton at Boeing, he will keep mentoring future generations, including at HBS, and he’s excited to have more time to apply his leadership skills to his community as a board member and through volunteer activities. McNerney will also, no doubt, continue to exercise them on the ice.

“I believe you have to approach things positively. It’s all about the attitude you bring. If you obsess on obstacles, you’ll find obstacles.”