

Bully or Inspirational Leader?

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If you have not read the book [Steve Jobs](#) by Walter Isaacson, you should. It offers a fascinating look into the life and times of a complex individual - a once in a generation visionary. As you read the book, you should ask yourself three questions:

1. Is this what it takes to be a successful leader?
2. Does the Steve Jobs style fit you?
3. What can you learn from Steve Jobs?

One of many interesting words used by colleagues to describe Steve Jobs is “maniacal.” It is a word that ranges in meaning from lunacy to uncontrolled enthusiasm or zealotry. It is what Peter Drucker often referred to as a “mono-maniac with a mission” – an individual with a singular focus on achieving an objective. For Jobs, that focus was on what he termed the “intersection of technology and the humanities.” Using one of his favorite words, he was “insanely” successful at finding and driving through that intersection.

Is that what it takes to be a successful leader?

The answer is “yes” - at least in part. Successful leaders have a clear and deep understanding of what they expect (not want) to accomplish. They are unapologetic. They know what success looks like and they expect (not hope) others to join them in their quest to achieve it. They live it. They breathe it. And, most importantly they communicate it.

While the book is about Steve Jobs, it is not really about an individual. It is about a team of capable people who were developed, nurtured, and refined by their individual leader to focus, collaborate, and achieve great results. To be sure, the team changed as people came and went, and products and concepts evolved, but being surrounded by an effective team that understood his vision was a constant in the success of Steve Jobs.

In [Great People Decisions](#), Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, suggests that successful workplace leaders develop a cadre of people who want to help them reach their goal. In fact, he recommends that you ask candidates to list the people they want and need to have on their team. “A” players, he argues, have a list.

Steve Jobs only wanted to work with “A” players. He had little tolerance for “B” players and zero for “C” players. The definition of an “A” player is elusive. If you are senior executive like Steve Jobs, you know an “A” player when you see one. If you do not see it in

the make-up of an individual, they do not work for you for very long.

If you are a front-line workplace leader, you must build, develop, and grow your team around “A” player characteristics. But, it starts with you, not with them. It starts with your vision of how your department fits into the strategic mission of your organization. It starts with you developing a laser focus on what each member of your team must contribute to the success of the corporate mission.

You must hire the right people for the right jobs. You must create an environment that invites open debate focused on business success and unfettered commitment to collaboration. Most importantly, you must provide frequent, honest feedback on performance.

Does the Steve Jobs style fit you?

In two words: Probably not. Steve Jobs was a unique individual. He lived his life through a series of special events and circumstances. The book in many ways personifies him as the poster child for workplace anti-bullying laws. The conundrum is that his schoolyard bully traits are also given credit for driving people to ever higher heights of creativity, innovation, and excellence.

An important lesson lies between the lines. Over and over again, examples emerge of Jobs facilitating frequent two-way communication on key projects – not just with one or two people but with an array of people who needed to be involved. Likewise, an unwavering focus on “getting it right” emerges from often embarrassing, sometimes demeaning, and too frequently, personal interchanges.

Clearly a demanding, unwavering style made Steve Jobs who and what he was. The question becomes: Does it take profanity or personal attacks to get people to “get it right?” The answer is not as simple as it may seem. In the heat of battle over an intense negotiating point, it may lead to a key breakthrough; in every day interactions over on-going business issues, most likely not. There is a difference between being clear and firm and destroying everything in your path. There is a difference between driving people to be successful and driving them to hide behind file cabinets. Your style must work for your team.

Google undertook an effort to describe a successful manager in their culture (New York Times:

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Google's Quest to Build a Better Boss – March 12, 2011). Their list includes characteristics like clear vision, results-orientation, availability, and concern for the individual. The theme is consistent:

- Know what you expect,
- Explain it clearly,
- Involve the team,
- Admit, fix, and learn from mistakes, and,
- Hold everyone on your team, including yourself, accountable.

You are not Steve Jobs, Jack Welch, or some other famous CEO. You are down in the trenches working to translate ideas into action through the support, involvement, and commitment of a good, honest, hard-working team that looks to you for guidance, growth, opportunity, and success.

What can you learn from Steve Jobs?

In two simple words: A lot.

First and foremost, you cannot be someone you are not. The Steve Jobs that Walter Isaacson describes was true to himself. He did not try to be somebody that he was not. It worked for him at Apple and Pixar. It is not clear that it worked as well at NeXT. As a leader, you must recognize when you fit into an organization and when you do not.

Second, you need others to be successful. Steve Jobs was brilliant at figuring out what would work and how it would work. He was an adept negotiator. But he did none of it by himself. He needed a team around him. He needed others to feed him ideas, respond to his concepts, and implement his decisions. As a leader, you must select, develop, and value your team.

Third, your strength is often your weakness. If being maniacal was a strength for Steve Jobs, it was also a weakness. It led to some great decisions and, as he admitted, some poor ones. As a leader, you must recognize when your way is not the right way. You have to perfect the art of deferring to others in a select few situations where your strong side is vulnerable.

Fourth, success comes from a balance of knowledge. Steve Jobs did not finish college. He studied and sought unique experiences his entire life. From traveling to India and the rest of the world, to learning and valuing art, architecture, and engineering, to mastering Eastern philosophies, he brought a wide spectrum of knowledge to the table. He pulled from a vast array of experiences to do what he did best. As a leader, you must recognize that it is not enough to be

an expert in your core field of engineering, accounting, or sales. You must draw from a reservoir of knowledge and experiences. You must find ways to fill that reservoir from streams outside of your comfort zone. It may mean reading a book on a topic you know little about. It might mean volunteering in the community to help people do things that are important to them. It may be a lot of things, but it is about expanding your perspective in a way that gives you the ability to see things in more than one way.

Fifth, there is more to life than work. The Steve Jobs story is a poignant reminder that for too many leaders, work is more important than family. Our rush, rush world does not make it easy, but success as a leader should not come at the expense of a rewarding personal life. Sometimes, the iMac, the iPad, the iPod, and especially the iPhone have a place that is not at the end of your fingertips. Sometimes, a walk on the beach with a loved one, pushing the swing at a local park, or a family dinner where the family actually interacts, is far more important than any business challenge. As a leader, you must recognize that unless and until your house is in order, your team is missing part of who you are and what they can be with your support.

Conclusion

From time to time, you have an opportunity to glimpse into the chemistry of a unique workplace leader. The challenge is to figure out how to use what you learn from the insights you gain. You cannot be Steve Jobs or Bill Gates. You can learn from afar from their unique experiences. You can use what you learn to find opportunities to refine your leadership style. You can experiment with new habits and processes that keep you fresh and effective.

You can draw your own conclusions about Steve Jobs as a leader. Rest assured, however, of one thing. Your team does not need a book to draw conclusions about you. They do it every day, all day long.

Mike Deblieux, SPHR-CA, guides Workplace Leaders and HR Professionals. He presents in-house programs on leadership, writing performance reviews, documenting discipline, selecting the right people, preventing sexual harassment, first discussions, and other topics. He offers one-on-one coaching for front-line leaders and completes special studies and assignments for clients. Contact Mike at 714.929.1070 or mike@deblieux.com. Visit www.deblieux.com.