



## The Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs

The essence of Steve Jobs, according to Walter Issacson as recapped in Harvard Business Review April 2012, is that his personality was integral to his way of doing business. He acted as if the normal rules didn't apply to him, and the passion, intensity, and extreme emotionalism he brought to everyday life were things he also poured into the products he made. His petulance and impatience were part and parcel of his perfectionism.

*One of the last times I saw him, after I had finished writing most of the book, I asked him again about his tendency to be rough on people. "Look at the results," he replied. "These are all smart people I work with, and any of them could get a top job at another place if they were truly feeling brutalized. But they don't." Then he paused for a few moments and said, almost wistfully, "And we got some amazing things done."*

*Making an enduring company, he said, was both far harder and more important than making a great product. How did he do it? Business schools will be studying that question a century from now. Here are what I consider the keys to his success.*

### Focus

*When Jobs returned to Apple in 1997, it was producing a random array of computers and peripherals, including a dozen different versions of the Macintosh. After a few weeks of product review sessions, he'd finally had enough. "Stop!" he shouted. "This is crazy." He grabbed a Magic Marker, padded in his bare feet to a whiteboard, and drew a two-by-two grid. "Here's what we need," he declared. Atop the two columns, he wrote "Consumer" and "Pro." He labeled the two rows "Desktop" and "Portable." Their job, he told his team members, was to focus on four great products, one for each quadrant. All other products should be canceled. There was a stunned silence. But by getting Apple to focus on making just four computers, he saved the company. "Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do," he told me. "That's true for companies, and it's true for products."*

*After he righted the company, Jobs began taking his "top 100" people on a retreat each year. On the last day, he would stand in front of a whiteboard (he loved whiteboards, because they gave him complete control of a situation and they engendered focus) and ask, "What are the 10 things we should be doing next?" People would fight to get their suggestions on the list. Jobs would write them down—and then cross off the ones he decreed dumb. After much jockeying, the group would*

come up with a list of 10. Then Jobs would slash the bottom seven and announce, “We can only do three.”

Near the end of his life, Jobs was visited at home by Larry Page, who was about to resume control of Google, the company he had cofounded. Even though their companies were feuding, Jobs was willing to give some advice. “The main thing I stressed was focus,” he recalled. Figure out what Google wants to be when it grows up, he told Page. “It’s now all over the map. What are the five products you want to focus on? Get rid of the rest, because they’re dragging you down. They’re turning you into Microsoft. They’re causing you to turn out products that are adequate but not great.” Page followed the advice. In January 2012 he told employees to focus on just a few priorities, such as Android and Google+, and to make them “beautiful,” the way Jobs would have done.

## **Simplify**

Jobs’ Zen like ability to focus was accompanied by the related instinct to simplify things by zeroing in on their essence and eliminating unnecessary components. “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication,” declared Apple’s first marketing brochure. To see what that means, compare any Apple software with, say, Microsoft Word, which keeps getting uglier and more cluttered with non-intuitive navigational ribbons and intrusive features. It is a reminder of the glory of Apple’s quest for simplicity.

During the design of the iPod interface, Jobs tried at every meeting to find ways to cut clutter. He insisted on being able to get to whatever he wanted in three clicks. One navigation screen, for example, asked users whether they wanted to search by song, album, or artist. “Why do we need that screen?” Jobs demanded. The designers realized they didn’t. “There would be times when we’d rack our brains on a user interface problem, and he would go, ‘Did you think of this?’” says Tony Fadell, who led the iPod team. “And then we’d all go, ‘Holy shit.’ He’d redefine the problem or approach, and our little problem would go away.” At one point Jobs made the simplest of all suggestions: Let’s get rid of the on/off button. At first the team members were taken aback, but then they realized the button was unnecessary. The device would gradually power down if it wasn’t being used and would spring to life when reengaged.

In looking for industries or categories ripe for disruption, Jobs always asked who was making products more complicated than they should be. In 2001 portable music players and ways to acquire songs online fit that description, leading to the iPod and the iTunes Store. Mobile phones were next. Jobs would grab a phone at a meeting and rant (correctly) that nobody could possibly figure out how to navigate half the features, including the address book. At the end of his career he was setting his sights on the television industry, which had made it almost impossible for people to click on a simple device to watch what they wanted when they wanted.

## **Take Responsibility End to End**

*Jobs and Apple took end-to-end responsibility for the user experience—something too few companies do. From the performance of the ARM microprocessor in the iPhone to the act of buying that phone in an Apple Store, every aspect of the customer experience was tightly linked together.*

*Part of Jobs' compulsion to take responsibility for what he called "the whole widget" stemmed from his personality, which was very controlling. But it was also driven by his passion for perfection and making elegant products. He got hives, or worse, when contemplating the use of great Apple software on another company's uninspired hardware, and he was equally allergic to the thought that unapproved apps or content might pollute the perfection of an Apple device. It was an approach that did not always maximize short-term profits, but in a world filled with junky devices, inscrutable error messages, and annoying interfaces, it led to astonishing products marked by delightful user experiences. Being in the Apple ecosystem could be as sublime as walking in one of the Zen gardens of Kyoto that Jobs loved, and neither experience was created by worshipping at the altar of openness or by letting a thousand flowers bloom. Sometimes it's nice to be in the hands of a control freak.*

## **When Behind, Leapfrog**

*The mark of an innovative company is not only that it comes up with new ideas first. It also knows how to leapfrog when it finds itself behind. That happened when Jobs built the original iMac. He focused on making it useful for managing a user's photos and videos, but it was left behind when dealing with music. People with PCs were downloading and swapping music and then ripping and burning their own CDs. The iMac's slot drive couldn't burn CDs. "I felt like a dope," he said. "I thought we had missed it."*

*After the iPod became a huge success, Jobs spent little time relishing it. Instead he began to worry about what might endanger it. One possibility was that mobile phone makers would start adding music players to their handsets. So he cannibalized iPod sales by creating the iPhone. "If we don't cannibalize ourselves, someone else will," he said.*

## **Put Products Before Profits**

*John Sculley, who ran Apple from 1983 to 1993, was a marketing and sales executive from Pepsi. He focused more on profit maximization than on product design after Jobs left, and Apple gradually declined. "I have my own theory about why decline happens at companies," Jobs told me: They make some great products, but then the sales and marketing people take over the*

*company, because they are the ones who can juice up profits. “When the sales guys run the company, the product guys don’t matter so much, and a lot of them just turn off. It happened at Apple when Sculley came in, which was my fault, and it happened when Ballmer took over at Microsoft.”*

*When Jobs returned, he shifted Apple’s focus back to making innovative products: the sprightly iMac, the PowerBook, and then the iPod, the iPhone, and the iPad. As he explained, “My passion has been to build an enduring company where people were motivated to make great products. Everything else was secondary. Sure, it was great to make a profit, because that was what allowed you to make great products. But the products, not the profits, were the motivation. Sculley flipped these priorities to where the goal was to make money. It’s a subtle difference, but it ends up meaning everything—the people you hire, who gets promoted, what you discuss in meetings.”*

### **Don’t Be a Slave To Focus Groups**

*When Jobs took his original Macintosh team on its first retreat, one member asked whether they should do some market research to see what customers wanted. “No,” Jobs replied, “because customers don’t know what they want until we’ve shown them.” He invoked Henry Ford’s line “If I’d asked customers what they wanted, they would have told me, ‘A faster horse!’”*

*Caring deeply about what customers want is much different from continually asking them what they want; it requires intuition and instinct about desires that have not yet formed. “Our task is to read things that are not yet on the page,” Jobs explained. “Intuition is a very powerful thing—more powerful than intellect, in my opinion.”*

*Sometimes that meant that Jobs used a one-person focus group: himself. He made products that he and his friends wanted. For example, there were many portable music players around in 2000, but Jobs felt they were all lame, and as a music fanatic he wanted a simple device that would allow him to carry a thousand songs in his pocket. “We made the iPod for ourselves,” he said, “and when you’re doing something for yourself, or your best friend or family, you’re not going to cheese out.”*

### **Bend Reality**

*Because Jobs felt that life’s ordinary rules didn’t apply to him, he could inspire his team to change the course of computer history with a small fraction of the resources that Xerox or IBM had. “It was a self-fulfilling distortion,” recalls Debi Coleman, a member of the original Mac team who won an award one year for being the employee who best stood up to Jobs. “You did the impossible because you didn’t realize it was impossible.”*

*One day Jobs marched into the cubicle of Larry Kenyon, the engineer who was working on the Macintosh operating system, and complained that it was taking too long to boot up. Kenyon started to explain why reducing the boot-up time wasn't possible, but Jobs cut him off. "If it would save a person's life, could you find a way to shave 10 seconds off the boot time?" he asked. Kenyon allowed that he probably could. Jobs went to a whiteboard and showed that if 10 million people were using the Mac and it took 10 seconds extra to turn it on every day, that added up to 300 million or so hours a year—the equivalent of at least 100 lifetimes a year. After a few weeks Kenyon had the machine booting up 28 seconds faster.*

## **Impute**

*Jobs' early mentor Mike Markkula wrote him a memo in 1979 that urged three principles. The first two were "empathy" and "focus." The third was an awkward word, "impute," but it became one of Jobs' key doctrines. He knew that people form an opinion about a product or a company on the basis of how it is presented and packaged. "Mike taught me that people do judge a book by its cover," he told me.*

*When he was getting ready to ship the Macintosh in 1984, he obsessed over the colors and design of the box. Similarly, he personally spent time designing and redesigning the jewellike boxes that cradle the iPod and the iPhone and listed himself on the patents for them. He and I've believed that unpacking was a ritual, like theater and heralded the glory of the product. "When you open the box of an iPhone or iPad, we want that tactile experience to set the tone for how you perceive the product," Jobs said.*

*Sometimes Jobs used the design of a machine to "impute" a signal rather than to be merely functional. For example, when he was creating the new and playful iMac, after his return to Apple, he was shown a design by I've that had a little recessed handle nestled in the top. It was more semiotic than useful. This was a desktop computer. Not many people were really going to carry it around. But Jobs and I've realized that a lot of people were still intimidated by computers. If it had a handle, the new machine would seem friendly, deferential, and at one's service. The handle signaled permission to touch the iMac. The manufacturing team was opposed to the extra cost, but Jobs simply announced, "No, we're doing this." He didn't even try to explain.*

## **Push for Perfection**

*During the development of almost every product he ever created, Jobs at a certain point "hit the pause button" and went back to the drawing board because he felt it wasn't perfect. When he was about to launch Apple Stores, he and his store guru, Ron Johnson, suddenly decided to delay everything a few months so that the stores' layouts could be reorganized around activities and not just product categories.*

*The same was true for the iPhone. The initial design had the glass screen set into an aluminum case. One Monday morning Jobs went over to see I've. "I didn't sleep last night," he said, "because I realized that I just don't love it." "Guys, you've killed yourselves over this design for the last nine months, but we're going to change it," Jobs told his team. "We're all going to have to work nights and weekends, and if you want, we can hand out some guns so you can kill us now." Instead of balking, the team agreed. "It was one of my proudest moments at Apple," Jobs recalled.*

*A similar thing happened as Jobs and I've were finishing the iPad. At one point Jobs looked at the model and felt slightly dissatisfied. It didn't seem casual and friendly enough to scoop up and whisk away. They needed to signal that you could grab it with one hand, on impulse. They decided that the bottom edge should be slightly rounded, so that a user would feel comfortable just snatching it up rather than lifting it carefully. Jobs delayed the product until the change could be made.*

### **Tolerate Only "A" Players**

*People who try to emulate his roughness without understanding his ability to generate loyalty make a dangerous mistake. Jobs was famously impatient, petulant, and tough with the people around him. But his treatment of people, though not laudable, emanated from his passion for perfection and his desire to work with only the best. It was his way of preventing what he called "the bozo explosion," in which managers are so polite that mediocre people feel comfortable sticking around. "I don't think I run roughshod over people," he said, "but if something sucks, I tell people to their face. It's my job to be honest." When I pressed him on whether he could have gotten the same results while being nicer, he said perhaps so. "But it's not who I am," he said. "Maybe there's a better way—a gentlemen's club where we all wear ties and speak in this Brahmin language and velvet code words—but I don't know that way, because I am middle-class from California."*

*Was all his stormy and abusive behavior necessary? Probably not. There were other ways he could have motivated his team. "Steve's contributions could have been made without so many stories about him terrorizing folks," Apple's cofounder, Wozniak, said. "I like being more patient and not having so many conflicts. I think a company can be a good family." But then he added something that is undeniably true: "If the Macintosh project had been run my way, things probably would have been a mess."*

*It's important to appreciate that Jobs' rudeness and roughness were accompanied by an ability to be inspirational. He infused Apple employees with an abiding passion to create groundbreaking products and a belief that they could accomplish what seemed impossible. And we have to judge him by the outcome. Jobs had a close-knit family, and so it was at Apple: His top players tended*

*to stick around longer and be more loyal than those at other companies, including ones led by bosses who were kinder and gentler. CEOs who study Jobs and decide to mistake.*

*“I’ve learned over the years that when you have really good people, you don’t have to baby them,” Jobs told me. “By expecting them to do great things, you can get them to do great things. Ask any member of that Mac team. They will tell you it was worth the pain.” Most of them do. “He would shout at a meeting, ‘You asshole, you never do anything right,’” Debi Coleman recalls. “Yet I consider myself the absolute luckiest person in the world to have worked with him.”*

### **Engage Face-to-Face**

*Despite being a denizen of the digital world, or maybe because he knew all too well its potential to be isolating, Jobs was a strong believer in face-to-face meetings. “There’s a temptation in our networked age to think that ideas can be developed by e-mail and iChat,” he told me. “That’s crazy. Creativity comes from spontaneous meetings, from random discussions. You run into someone, you ask what they’re doing, you say ‘Wow,’ and soon you’re cooking up all sorts of ideas.”*

*Jobs hated formal presentations, but he loved freewheeling face-to-face meetings. He gathered his executive team every week to kick around ideas without a formal agenda, and he spent every Wednesday afternoon doing the same with his marketing and advertising team. Slide shows were banned. “I hate the way people use slide presentations instead of thinking,” Jobs recalled. “People would confront a problem by creating a presentation. I wanted them to engage, to hash things out at the table, rather than show a bunch of slides. People who know what they’re talking about don’t need PowerPoint.”*

### **Know Both the Big Picture and the Details**

*Jobs’ passion was applied to issues both large and minuscule. Some CEOs are great at vision; others are managers who know that God is in the details. Jobs was both. Time Warner CEO Jeff Bewkes says that one of Jobs’ salient traits was his ability and desire to envision overarching strategy while also focusing on the tiniest aspects of design. For example, in 2000 he came up with the grand vision that the personal computer should become a “digital hub” for managing all of a user’s music, videos, photos, and content, and thus got Apple into the personal-device business with the iPod and then the iPad. In 2010 he came up with the successor strategy—the “hub” would move to the cloud—and Apple began building a huge server farm so that all a user’s content could be uploaded and then seamlessly synced to other personal devices. But even as he was laying out these grand visions, he was fretting over the shape and color of the screws inside the iMac.*

## Combine the Humanities with the Sciences

*He connected the humanities to the sciences, creativity to technology, arts to engineering. There were greater technologists (Wozniak, Gates), and certainly better designers and artists. But no one else in our era could better firewire together poetry and processors in a way that jolted innovation. And he did it with an intuitive feel for business strategy. At almost every product launch over the past decade, Jobs ended with a slide that showed a sign at the intersection of Liberal Arts and Technology Streets.*

*The creativity that can occur when a feel for both the humanities and the sciences exists in one strong personality was what most interested me in my biographies of Franklin and Einstein, and I believe that it will be a key to building innovative economies in the 21st century. It is the essence of applied imagination, and it's why both the humanities and the sciences are critical for any society that is to have a creative edge in the future.*

## Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish

*Even as Apple became corporate, Jobs asserted his rebel and counterculture streak in its ads, as if to proclaim that he was still a hacker and a hippie at heart. The famous "1984" ad showed a renegade woman outrunning the thought police to sling a sledgehammer at the screen of an Orwellian Big Brother. And when he returned to Apple, Jobs helped write the text for the "Think Different" ads: "Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes..." If there was any doubt that, consciously or not, he was describing himself, he dispelled it with the last lines: "While some see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do."*