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How Would I Have Coached Steve Jobs?

Maybe the first question to be asked is, Would he or Apple have hired me to do so? I doubt it, given Steve's figurehead and celebrity status at the company he founded, and as the standard-bearer for its culture. At some level, executives are just immune from coaching.

But the question is more than a theoretical one for me, since it leads me to review and reconsider the parameters and techniques we use in coaching executives who might be less colorful and high-profile than Mr. Jobs.

There's an old saying that is applied to executive coaching: we should not try to teach a pig to fly: it won't work and it annoys the pig. When it comes to executive coaching, I take exception to this dictum. First of all, because before I came into contact with the Leadership Development Program at the Center for Creative Leadership, I was probably the biggest porker in the barnyard! Years of top-down hierarchy in the U.S. Navy, joined then to the magisterial status I enjoyed in the classroom as an economics professor, had pretty well convinced me that I knew all I needed to know about dealing with people. Of course, I soon discovered that the business world was much more interpersonally complicated than my military and academic experience could handle; and that I was way too one-dimensional in my approach to leadership. I find this is same attitude is pretty typical among executives, where sometimes we think we are smart enough to figure out any problem, particularly in our own area of expertise, and that it's up to us to provide solutions across the board. We seldom access others, we try to answer every question ourselves, and we very infrequently try to promote an environment where others work together to arrive at their own solutions.

But in all reality, I have to say that in my years with TEAM International®, I have seldom met an executive whom I thought was too far gone so as not to benefit from a leadership development program, and some coaching follow-up on skills and behaviors that would rescue him/her from any pigsty they happened to be occupying....So I am pretty confident that development training and coaching really does work and produces positive results for almost anyone who experiences it. Of course, the pig has to want to get his snout out of the ground; but by the second day of a leadership experience we are conducting, our participants, even the most recalcitrant and dirt-grubbing ones, are buying into the process of growth and development of their interpersonal skills.

Back to Steve Jobs: I have for some time been an admirer of Jobs, having seen a number of his recorded presentations over time and being impressed by the candid and thoughtful way he answered customers' questions and complaints. So I quickly went to my local Wal-Mart to buy a copy of his biography by Walter Isaacson. My comments in this paper result from my reading of this bio, rather than any primary source. Since my reflections about coaching are personal in terms of the way I/we have conducted our coaching practice over time, I believe there is no reality lost in the supposed application of our coaching techniques to his person, as presented by his biographer.

Steve had a more difficult early childhood than many of us, having been put up for adoption at an early age and thus “abandoned” by his natural parents. His adoptive parents did a good job with him, on balance, and he later said he never really felt abandoned. However, not knowing who his parents were weighed on him, and he did not deal with this loss positively, leaving behind his own first girl friend with his baby; and so the abandoned continued the cycle of abandonment. Jobs’s business life before Apple was a somewhat random walk through a broad array of relationships as he deepened his interest in electronics and set the stage for the founding of his company with Steve Wozniak, who became Jobs’s primary business relationship. Along with others, Wozniak finally helped focus Jobs on a development path ahead with Apple. Whatever the impact of Jobs’s early personal life, our coaching would not dwell on it, deferring mainly to the here-and-now of his impact on others around him. Understanding a coachee’s past is useful for the coach; but dealing with it in detail is, in our view, more therapy than coaching. So, if I had coached Steve, it would have focused on present and future behaviors and attitudes, not on past exigencies.

Had he accepted my coaching, I would have asked Steve to go through our “assessment–for-development” process. This would have expected him to turn over to his colleagues a couple of 360 instruments that measure his impact on other people. The first is a checklist called the Effective Leadership Indicator that asks respondents to indicate subjectively whether a list of 48 adjectives describes a person, and if so, does the adjective make the person more or less effective. For some of the adjectives – analytical, energetic, independent, resourceful, and self-confident – Jobs would likely have been rated positively. For others – abrasive, critical, demanding, impatient, opinionated, and pressuring – he would have likely scored negatively. Nevertheless, his biographer indicates that had a positive way with many people and could exude considerable interpersonal persuasiveness and charm. Some of this charm became known as Jobs’s “Reality Distortion Field”, his ability to beguile people into accepting his own vision of the world rather than a more objective view of reality. This would haunt Jobs in the course of his development during and after his first turn at Apple, and would figure negatively later in his own acceptance of his bout with cancer.

A second inventory, called Leaderview 360, is more about on-the-job competencies, such as Problem Solving, Planning, Controlling, Managing Self, Managing Relationships, Leading, and Communicating. Likely Jobs would have scored highly on Problem Solving and Communicating, particularly later on in his career at Apple. Managing Self, Managing Relationships, and Leading might not have looked so positive, particularly as Apple began to grow exponentially and Jobs was forced out of the company he had co-founded.

One can make projections of Jobs’s styles and preferences, but it would appear likely that one profile marking the way would be a high preference on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator for Extraversion, Intuition, Thinking, and Perceiving. ENTPs are known for their quick and ingenious resourcefulness, changeability across interests, and strategic generation of possibilities. In the old, non-politically-correct Myers-Briggs jargon, they were called “Space Cadets”; and Jobs’s early customs of going barefoot to meetings and tripping on acid, among other eccentricities, would likely bestow upon him this classification. On another inventory we use around interpersonal preferences, FIRO-B, Jobs’s clearest preference would certainly have been for expressing control over others, a behavior which followed him throughout his career.

Apple went public in late 1980, and Steve became a rich man overnight. This was also long before coaching became an everyday pursuit for consultants. So it would not have been probable that I or anyone else would have been invited in as a coach. It would not have been until 1985 when the relationship with John Sculley, who Jobs himself had championed as CEO of Apple, came apart, that Steve seriously needed coaching. In truth, what happened to Jobs at that point can be categorized into a syndrome studied for many years by the Center for Creative Leadership, *derailment*, a process whereby an executive loses authority, distinction, and dignity after too long a dependence on strengths, and ignorance of faults. Typically this revolves around a history of poor interpersonal behaviors, and in Jobs's case, this history was exacerbated by a sudden failure in operational results, also a hallmark of derailment.

However, the struggle for control of Apple between Sculley and Jobs became so bitter and adversarial, that Steve was driven out rather quickly. At this point, coaching might best have served for Jobs's outplacement. But characteristically, he soon found a new interest and outlet for his brilliance and independence, and NeXT computers became his new venture. This venture was wrapped around Steve's concept of a powerful and expensive computer designed principally for academic research, but with the elegance of design that was Jobs's hallmark at Apple. Notwithstanding this brilliance, the NeXT project was ultimately an expensive fizzle as a hardware product. In the meantime, Steve had turned his interest to animated movie-making with Disney in a digital project that combined computer wizardry and the artistry of color images, Pixar. But this technology was still on the software, not hardware side.

At this point in his career, I believe that coaching would no longer have been a viable prospect for Jobs, in the last couple of decades of his career and life. Three events conspired to make this so: first, Jobs finally found the love of his life, married, and began a family. Second, he was invited to return to Apple, first as an "advisor", and later as "interim" CEO, and finally vested with the full title and power. Third, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. If he needed a coach at all, it might have been a health and wellness specialist, since Jobs ignored his medical condition in another of his famous "radical distortion fields", while the cancer metastasized into his liver.

However, had I coached Jobs, I would have focused on his behaviors rather than any particular element of style. Here are some of the behaviors that caused him difficulty during his entire executive life:

- Jobs was irascible and even insulting with colleagues and subordinates. His favorite expression was that their idea, their product, or their design "...sucked". The meaning of that expression, as applied by Jobs, is not found in the standard English dictionary, but we all know that it means something north of terrible and lousy and highly displeasing. His second favorite expression was that someone's idea, product, or design, was "shit". (Look that up in your Funk and Wagnalls – this word's not there, either, but we recognize what it means as a statement of opprobrium.)
- Jobs was a tremendous micro-manager. This may have had a positive outcome, as when he was very particular about product design. But even when he was very ill with his liver transplant, Steve tried to control details as the design of his breathing mask, insisting that that his medical team bring him 5 different options so that he could pick the design he liked!
- Jobs's relationships were frayed throughout his life. Even with his faithful and supportive wife Laurene, he came and went with his focus on her, proposing marriage and then not speaking of it for months. Even after he proposed again

and she became pregnant, he toyed with the idea of going back to a previous girl friend. Steve's relationship with the daughter he had abandoned waxed and waned, as he alternately connected with her and then lost touch.

A long time colleague at Apple, whom Jobs described as his "spiritual partner" was Jonathan "Jony" Ive. Ive is quoted by Isaacson as follows:

"I once asked him why he [Jobs] gets so mad about stuff. He said, 'But I don't stay mad.' He has this very childish ability to get really worked up about something, and it doesn't stay with him at all. But there are other times, I think honestly, when he's very frustrated, and his way to achieve catharsis is to hurt somebody. And I think he feels he has a liberty and a license to do that. The normal rules of social engagement, he feels, don't apply to him...he knows exactly how to efficiently and effectively hurt someone. And he does do that."

Along the way of his relationships, Jobs had a long-term attachment with Tina Redse, the previous girl friend mentioned in the above paragraph. Tina was from the same physical template as Laurene, but shared the troubled family background that Jobs inherited. Jobs met her at his time of difficulty with John Sculley and while he was being eased out at Apple, and the relationship lurched along for 5 years. After they broke up, Redse worked in the mental health field and decided that Jobs met the criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NSD). I quote from the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), a widely used manual for diagnosing mental disorders, for a listing of the symptoms of NSD:

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by *five (or more)* of the following (*my emphasis*):

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
3. Believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
4. Requires excessive admiration
5. Has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
6. Is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
8. Is often envious of others or believes others are envious of him or her
9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

Of course, this is armchair psychology, but it is tempting to agree with Redse's "diagnosis", and nearly all of the DSM criteria appear in some degree in Jobs' s behavioral profile throughout the Isaacson book (especially #3,4,5,6,7, and 9). Redse focused on the criteria of "lacks empathy", and that is also the substance of Ive's comments above.

In any case, this article has been more about a fantasy of coaching Steve Jobs than about any reality. I have short-term coached a couple of participants in our programs who presented some subset of the DSM criteria above. In one case, I was totally oblivious to the symptoms mentioned, and I made the mistake of telling her the truth

about what I saw in her 360o feedback, that she was a candidate for derailment. A few hours after the feedback session, she caved in and couldn't immediately complete the program, the brittle side of narcissism.

Bottom line, I return to my earlier paragraph about the possibility of impacting positively an executive in our leadership development programs. If Jobs had accepted to attend, and I now doubt that he would have had occasion to, I have to say that he would likely not have had a successful experience. Nor would any amount of coaching probably made much of a dent in his behavior patterns, as rooted in his styles as they were. In my coaching practice, I have made it mandatory that the executive want to be coached; and we establish that in the first session, along with an agreement to participate in the assessment process. If not, I have to demur on the assignment.

I should mention that, in addition to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and FIRO-B interpersonal preferences mentioned above, we also use another assessment tool which has proven highly successful and would have been useful to apply to Steve's assessment process. The California Psychological Inventory (now in its new CPI-260 format) is an ingenious inventory of character profiles that statistically match up to the way a participant answers the seemingly cryptic questions. The most revealing set of profiles are included in the some of the scales such as "empathy", "self-control", "good impression", "tolerance", "sensitivity", and "amicability". If I detect any complexity in the assessment package, I immediately go to the CPI and examine this array of scores. Almost inevitably I find something there which helps the coachee understand and begin to deal with behaviors that might lead to derailment, both at work and maybe even at home. In Jobs's case, I would expect that in several of these profiles he would have scored on the very low side.

Steve Jobs was an icon of our age, a genius who along with others who shared his passion for change, an innovator who was able to remake the world of cyberscience. He was also a great salesman and marketer, able to detect what his customers wanted, even before they knew they wanted it. He's been compared to Thomas Edison and Henry Ford as a premier pioneer entrepreneur. Although he was successful in leading Apple to the top of American companies, my verdict after reading the Isaacson biography is that Jobs was not a great leader of people, connecting with them on their terms and motivating them to accomplish what they wanted to do. Here are a few passages from the Isaacson book as evidence of that disconnect:

"It was as if Jobs' brain circuits were missing a device that would modulate the extreme spikes of impulsive opinions that popped into his mind. So in dealing with him, the Mac team adopted an audio concept called a "low pass filter". In processing his input, they learned to reduce the amplitude of his high-frequency signals. That served to smooth out the data set and provide a less jittery moving average of his evolving attitudes...."

"Was Jobs's unfiltered behavior caused by a lack of emotional sensitivity? No, almost the opposite. He was very emotionally attuned, able to read people and know their psychological strengths and vulnerabilities. He could stun and unsuspecting victim with an emotional towel-snap, perfectly aimed...."

"Joanna Hoffman [an original Mac team member] said: 'It's a common trait in people who are charismatic and know how to manipulate people. Knowing that he can crush you makes you feel weakened and eager for his approval, so then he can elevate you and put you on a pedestal and own you.'"

“Ann Bowers [human resources at Apple]: ‘He had these huge expectations, and if people didn’t deliver, he couldn’t stand it. He couldn’t control himself. I could understand why Steve would get upset, and he was usually right, but it had a hurtful effect. It created a fear factor. He was self-aware, but that didn’t always modify his behavior.’”

“[John] Sculley began to believe that Jobs’s mercurial personality and erratic treatment of people were rooted deep in his psychological makeup, perhaps the reflection of a mild bipolarity. There were big mood swings; sometimes he would be ecstatic, at other times he was depressed. At times he would launch into brutal tirades without warning, and Sculley would have to calm him down. ‘Twenty minutes later, I would get another call and be told to come over because Steve is losing it again,’ [Sculley] said.”

“Every now and then a wise colleague would pull Jobs aside and try to get him to settle down. Lee Clow [advertising wizard who worked with Jobs for 3 decades] was a master. ‘Steve, can I talk to you’, he would quietly say when Jobs had belittled someone publicly. He would go into Jobs’s office and explain how hard everyone was working. ‘When you humiliate them, it’s more debilitating than stimulating,’ he said in one such session. Jobs would apologize and say he understood. But then he would lapse again. ‘It’s simply who I am,’ he would say.”

Isaacson ends his biography with a recounting of products that over 3 decades transformed whole industries: from the Apple II, the first personal computer that was not just for hobbyists; through the iPod, which changed the way we consume music; to the iPhone which turned mobile phones into web devices; and the iPad, which launched tablet computing and offered a platform for digital newspapers, magazines, books, and web browsing .

Apart from products, Jobs contributed Apple (Computer Co.) itself, a place where imagination was nurtured, applied, and executed in ways so creative that Apple became the company with the highest market value on the planet.

In this same ending chapter, entitled “Legacy”, Isaacson allows Jobs to speak for himself:

“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....

“Some people say, ‘Give the customers what they want.’ But that’s not my approach. Our job is to figure out what they’re going to want before they do. I think Henry Ford once said, ‘If I’d asked customers what they wanted, they would have told me, A faster horse!’ People don’t know what they want until you show it to them. That’s why I never rely on market research. Our task is to read things that are not yet on the page....

“I don’t think I run roughshod over people, but if something sucks, I tell people to their face. It’s my job to be honest. I know what I’m talking about, and I usually turn out to be right. That’s the culture I tried to create. We are brutally honest with each other, and anyone can tell me they think I am full of shit and I can tell them the same....

“I was hard on people sometimes, probably harder than I needed to be. I remember the time when Reed [Jobs’ eldest son] was six years old, coming home, and I had just fired somebody that day, and I imagined what it was like for that person to tell his family and his young son that he had lost his job. It was hard. But somebody’s got to do it. I figured that it was always my job to make sure that the team was excellent, and if I didn’t do it, nobody was going to do it.”

Steven Paul Jobs died on October 5, 2011, in the company of his family, at the age of 56, after a long bout with pancreatic and liver cancer. He was mourned around the world as a great innovator and a brilliant and inspiring business entrepreneur. In the outpouring of grief that followed, many mentioned their admiration of Jobs, and their respect and devotion. Very few mentioned the positive feelings he generated in their presence...

In my view, the latter are the primary hallmarks and legacies of truly great leaders... and ultimately what the people whom they influenced will carry around with them. As the poet Maya Angelou has written:

"I've learned that people will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did,
but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Rest in peace, Steve. You will be remembered!

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