

CASE STUDY

Steve Jobs and authentic leadership

Steve Jobs is one of the iconic business leaders of our time. He has been both praised and vilified for his leadership style. In Apple, he created an amazingly successful company, and at the same time Jobs' life was a series of failures. He dropped out of college. He was removed from the company he founded. His subsequent ventures struggled. Yet Jobs' perseverance in seeking perfection and dedication to doing work that he loved served as his guiding light. Even when being difficult, it was clear to followers what mattered to him. This became part of the ethos and story around Apple. Bill George speaks of leaders who use their stories to convey the difference they want to make 'and inspire others to join with them in pursuing common goals.'⁵⁴ Jobs understood the value of the story and used it to form Apple's company culture and to launch products that changed the face of technology.

Jobs' evolution and learning as a leader eventually brought him full circle. It is difficult to argue with the results he achieved in bringing Apple back from the brink of bankruptcy in the late 1990s. He returned to the organization that he founded, wiser from the lessons of failure that contributed to his earlier departure and kinder, according to those who worked most closely with him.⁵⁵ Drawing on those missteps, which he readily conceded, he began to build Apple into an innovation powerhouse.

Jobs co-founded Apple Computers in his parents' garage in 1976 with limited technology skills and no engineering background but a vision for what personal computing could become. As the company grew, he struggled to implement that vision in a rapidly evolving environment. After bringing in more experienced business leaders, he was sidelined by the board of directors in 1985 and decided to leave the organization. For the next decade, he pursued other opportunities, founding NeXT – a computer and software company – and purchasing a computer animation studio from George Lucas that became the dynamic and wildly successful Pixar Studios. NeXT sold only 50,000 computers and ultimately narrowed its focus to software. Jobs was struggling but happy in his continued pursuit of innovation and excellence.

It seemed that Jobs had moved on in his life, but when Apple purchased NeXT in 1996, he connected once again with the organization he founded. As Apple faced financial and leadership challenges, he was enticed to resume the role of CEO in 1997. From that point on, Jobs built Apple into one of the world's most powerful brands and a highly-valued

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company over the decade that followed. He did this through a clear and intuitive understanding of what was important – to him, to customers, and to the company – and by staying true to principles of simplicity and focus in living out his values around passion, innovation, and perfection. He was consistent in his expectations that his followers demonstrate the same kind of curiosity, dedication, and rabid enthusiasm. Jobs was not afraid of failure in business as long as he learned from mistakes, and he spoke frankly at industry forums about blunders and lessons learned, not just successes. While Jobs cared deeply about the success of the organization, his behavior and communication suggest less concern about accumulating the trappings of wealth for himself than making a difference in the world.

Jobs could be brutal to those whose ideas he viewed as inferior and at the same time, he knew that the secret to differentiation for Apple was to gather ideas from many creative minds to change the world of technology by competing through innovation in design, not merely increased functionality. When he returned to Apple, his vision and direction helped the company reinvent itself and become an incredibly successful brand with revolutions in design and functionality in the personal device space, introducing the iMac, iPod, iPhone, and iPad, among other products.

Jobs continually innovated and was viewed as disruptive in many industries, whether it was finding a way to put one-thousand songs in customers' pockets (the iPod) or creating a platform for external applications developers to produce infinite functionality in a single device (the iPhone). Apple set a new standard for the retail shopping experience when the company began to open Apple stores. Instead of focusing on increased sales volume, associates in Apple stores were responsible for helping customers find solutions.⁵⁶ Jobs addressed Apple's retail strategy in much the same way that he thought about product development. Design was important, innovation was crucial, and the user experience was at the forefront. Steve Jobs continued in his role as Apple CEO until he stepped down in 2011, just before he passed away from cancer at the age of 56.

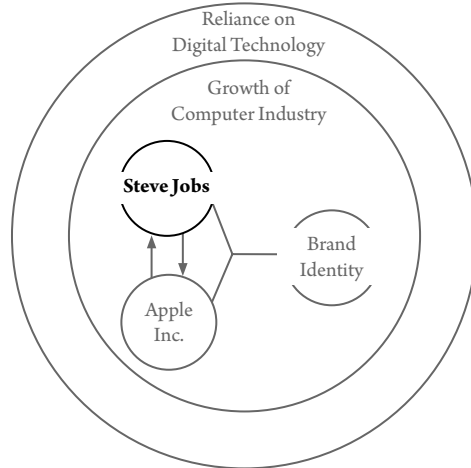
Five component analysis

Examined using the Five Components Model of leadership, a conclusion as to Steve Jobs' authenticity as a leader appears to be highly situational. Regardless of whether or not he was an authentic leader – which we'll take up further in a moment – he had a strong influence on followers, the goals of his organization, the context in which work was performed, and the culture of the company whose success was deeply intertwined with his own. Steve Jobs, the leader, was a presence that overshadowed all else.

Authenticity touches each of the five components. In Jobs' case, whether or not he was viewed as an authentic leader appears to depend on the situation. As already noted, introspection is required of authentic leaders to understand themselves. Interactions between leaders and followers impact their relationships. The authentic leader

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Figure 12.3 The Five Components of Leadership Model applied to the Steve Jobs case study



exercises influence on goals, the environment, and the overall organizational culture. Ultimately, the authentic leader is accountable for the kind of culture under his direction. Let's examine Jobs a bit deeper in light of authentic leadership and the Five Components Model.

Steve Jobs has been called 'authentic' because of his willingness to call things as he saw them, but is that really what authentic leadership is all about? Though certainly leader-centric, the authentic leadership model also reflects leadership characteristics that recognize the interactive nature of the leader within the organizational culture as he relates with followers. Clarity of purpose and sufficient self-awareness to transparently work with and enable others to reach great heights reflect the leader's authenticity. Authentic leaders continually seek to do 'what's right for their constituency,'⁵⁷ developing relationships that encourage others to be similarly ethically congruent, transparent, and balanced in decision-making and interactions.

Steve Jobs was known for being curious, passionate, impatient, dedicated, spiteful, and persistent. He was said to be rough, rude, and often abusive, but possessed the ability to inspire. He was profoundly private and kept his personal life out of the spotlight as much as possible, though he lived a very public life in other ways. Family was a high priority for Jobs, and that meant his wife and children but also his Apple 'family.' Though Jobs had not embraced the responsibilities of fatherhood when he was younger, he came to be a devoted husband and father as he grew and evolved as a person and a leader. By accepting his failures, both personal and professional, and learning from them, Steve Jobs applied the same focus and pursuit of excellence to his own life that he had to his many corporate ventures. In this way, he was authentic as a leader.

In his 2005 Commencement address at Stanford University,⁵⁸ Steve Jobs reflected on the things that mattered to him personally. Authentic leaders typically seek to understand their

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motivations to reduce unpredictable behavior and appropriately share this self-knowledge with their followers. Knowing themselves and their inspiration allows these leaders to be more 'real' with followers. Before the graduation speech, Jobs was articulate about the things that mattered to him professionally: innovating to solve customer problems, deliver beautifully designed products, and conceive solutions before customers knew they needed them. However, his public persona up to that point in his career did not suggest that he was particularly introspective.

Jobs spoke to the audience at Stanford University about the importance of loving the work you do, focusing on the things that matter, and trusting in something that guides your life.⁵⁹ He observed that often the design of one's life only becomes apparent over time and looking back with the accumulated wisdom of years. His speech was reflective and transparent in expressing his firmly held belief that one should not settle. Though more open than his public persona had been to that point, the speech reflected values that Jobs had held dear for some time.

While Jobs' early years as a founder and leader may not have involved much introspection, by the time he returned to the helm at Apple in the late 1990s, Jobs knew himself and was clear to the point of being relentless about his values. He actively demonstrated his passion and dedication to innovation through his work. Jobs' adherence to the practice of Zen Buddhism might have suggested a kinder, calmer countenance, and in this manner, Jobs reflects the fallibility of humankind. He sought to do what he loved and be more accepting of the results, yet he continually struggled to accept the failings of himself and others. Jobs trusted his intuition and was committed to excellence. He expected no less of himself than he did of others, but his typical reaction to ideas or people who frustrated him suggests that he wrestled with being authentically aligned to his moral core.

As Apple's leader, Steve Jobs was viewed by some as inspiring and others as demeaning. He had a passion for distilling products to their simplest essence, almost a purity of design and thinking, and could excite followers about the possibilities of their work with his vision. He acknowledged that he could be both demanding and selfish and yet many of those who worked most closely with Jobs tended to revere him for his leadership. Others have described him as a manipulative bully who ruled through fear. Perhaps he was aware of this reputation and felt it served his purpose to achieve results. Perhaps he had good intentions but was unaware of how his behavior affected followers. Walter Isaacson – whose biography of Jobs is often quoted as providing support that Job was a jerk – is quick to defend the CEO's reputation, suggesting that 'genius worship' has led to multiple interpretations of an incredibly complex individual.⁶⁰

Because, or perhaps in spite, of Jobs' visionary abilities, it could be difficult for him to pursue an unbiased interest in others' ideas and opinions before making decisions; however, he was always looking for new ideas and ways to improve products. Jobs' form of empathy was about intuition, not intellect, and while he could be a formidable sparring partner, he respected those who were willing to push back when they had a better solution and could make a case for their ideas.

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When followers did not understand his vision or were less confident that they could meet what they saw as unrealistic and unrealizable goals in a short period of time, he could be unrelenting in his abuse. He could be unyielding as he pushed for better, smarter, more creative technology. At the same time, his drive to challenge Apple employees to be the best they could be inspired many to accomplish what they initially thought was impossible. In spite of clear deficits as a leader, those who knew him best and worked most closely with him were long-term, loyal followers.⁶¹

Many of Jobs' followers speak of his consistent commitment to shared values and vision to accomplish great things together.⁶² This seems inconsistent with stories of poor behavior. Did he lack self-insight or was he purposefully a jerk? Did he suffer from a major character flaw or was he clueless as to how he impacted others? In a 2011 *Forbes* article titled 'Steve Jobs was a jerk, you shouldn't be,'⁶³ David Coursey suggests that Jobs was just being himself and that a lack of empathy was at the core of his poor behavior. If true, Jobs would not be considered an authentic leader. Yet the comments of those closest to him suggest that public perceptions of the 'known' Steve Jobs is perhaps more a creation of collective conscience and the myth of greatness than an accurate reflection of who he really was. Though Jobs combined his abuse with the ability to deliver on an incredible imagination, one might wonder if he could have accomplished the things that he did without being able to connect to the talented people who would help him achieve these feats of innovation. Either way, from the perspective of the authentic leader, *how* one leads is as important as *what* one accomplishes.

But can you be an authentic leader without consideration for the means in which a goal is achieved? Authentic leadership as a model emphasizes an ethical posture and moral approach to leadership. Yet ethically, Jobs seemed to straddle a vast chasm. In addition to Jobs' behavior toward followers, he led an organization that faced issues with its overseas suppliers because of unsafe, sweatshop-like working conditions.⁶⁴ In many of these instances, workers were treated poorly, and some even died. (Apple's poor manufacturing environment is detailed in the case study presented in Chapter 2.) At no point did Jobs appear to express concern about the manufacturing situation overseas or seem willing to provide leadership in applying Apple's standards for worker welfare to the employees in those factories. Although, after repeated reports of unsafe working conditions, Apple did later respond to this situation. Still, an unwillingness to address issues around the poor working conditions at Apple's overseas manufacturing sites would not have been considered 'authentic leadership' by anyone paying attention. Was this failure of leadership an oversight, misplaced trust in those who were responsible for that aspect of the business, or a disregard for persons with less power, status, and influence? This seeming disregard for the workers' lives he impacted through his corporate and personal success raises questions about whether or not Steve Jobs could be considered an authentic leader.

When Jobs came back to Apple in 1997, the company was in poor financial shape and working on a wide array of products – what Jobs described to a MacWorld audience as not the 'right' products. Instead of being afraid of further failure associated with Apple, Steve

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Jobs brought determination and enthusiasm for the company's potential to his position as leader. This helped him focus his followers on the need to develop products that would change the world and to continue to do so in an exceptional way. He was unrelenting in his approach and authentic in his desire to achieve positive outcomes. Followers who worked most closely with him in his 'second act' at Apple understood that, even when he behaved badly, it came from a place of caring and wanting to make a difference through innovation. In turn, these followers said they gave their best to Apple with extraordinary results.⁶⁵

Jobs' decisions were consistent with his values, and he was accountable for his actions, readily admitting failure and pushing others to do more than they thought they were capable of because he believed in their potential. As he stated upon his return to Apple in 1997, 'I have the scars to show for my mistakes.'⁶⁶ He then went on to praise the employees working on highly challenging issues and changes that were necessary to save the company. Jobs acknowledged that mistakes would be made along the way, and promised 'when we find the mistakes, we'll fix them.' This mindset did not pretend to have the 'right' answers but instead to continue to pursue the answers that would have the most positive long-term result for the company, adjusting and learning along the way. This is, indeed, in keeping with the balanced processing and relational transparency that are hallmarks of authentic leadership.

In many respects, it appears that Jobs' ability to inspire and engage as an authentic leader was inconsistent. At his worst, he inspired some to lead in an abusive way and manipulated others to achieve success. At his best, he demonstrated the importance of growing and evolving as a leader to achieve greater authenticity in interactions with followers. Leaders may declare themselves authentic, but it is the experience of those working with them that ultimately determines how they are viewed. The business results that Steve Jobs achieved as a leader are indisputable; whether he did so as an authentic leader is subject to debate.

Consider the full scope of Jobs' career and how he grew in his authenticity as he came to terms with his personal challenges and story. His continual evolution as a leader speaks to his willingness to apply the same rigor and expectations to himself that he did to his companies, their products, and the people who made them. Jobs recognized his failings, including the very public humiliation of being removed from the company he created. He learned from his mistakes and came back to demonstrate the value of those lessons.

Some have observed⁶⁷ that to emulate Jobs' 'jerk-like' behaviors in hopes of achieving similar results is to miss the essence that led to his brilliance as a leader. Jobs was not simply critical of others; he was self-critical and always seeking to improve the customer experience. His ability to generate loyalty was key to his success. Though stories of Jobs' bullying and abusive behavior are legendary, those who worked most closely with him praised him for his leadership. Said one, 'I consider myself the absolute luckiest person in the world to have worked with him.'⁶⁸ They saw that his actions were congruent with his values and recognized the genius and caring for his passion. Jobs' closest followers came to trust him implicitly, knowing he had the customers' and company's best interests at heart when he drove relentlessly for perfection.