

Steve Jobs - What was Special about him?

Most readers will have been aware of Walter Isaacson's, biography *Steve Jobs*, which has been on display in every bookshop that I have gone into in recent times. Steve Jobs has captured the imagination of millions of people around the world as the real driving force behind Apple and its fantastic run of successes: iMac, iPod, iPod Nano, MacBook, iPhone, iPad and the iTunes store. Under his guidance, Apple became the most valuable company in the world based on market capitalisation earlier this year.

The biography focused on Steve Jobs as a whole person, as it should have. However, Isaacson did not draw out in the biography what it was about Steve Jobs that led him to be so successful as a business leader. In *The Australian Financial Review's Review* section on 8 June, Walter Isaacson set out what he thought were the traits in Steve Jobs' character and management style that led to his success. It was a long article and at first I thought I would not bother reading it, but for some reason I started on it and then I could not put it down and have since read it several times. I thought that my readers might appreciate a summary of the key points, because if we ever see his like again we should invest in the company he or she leads. These are what Walter Isaacson drew out as the key attributes of Steve Jobs' management style.

Focus

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple in 1997, it was making a very long list of computers and the gadgets that go with them. He began to review the range and became increasingly agitated. He drew a line down the centre of a whiteboard and labeled the columns *Consumer* and *Professional*. Then he drew another line across the centre of the height of the whiteboard and labelled the two rows *Desktop* and *Portable*. He instructed his team to create four great products, one in each of the quadrants on the whiteboard. The development of all other products was cancelled.

The idea behind what he had done was to decide to simply remove from the agenda everything that should not be done, leaving an intense focus on what remained in the form of four products. This is a key not just for managing a company, but for all of us to manage our own lives, the way Steve Jobs applied it to his entire life. Think: how many things do we do that are done just because they are there? To apply this, make a list of everything you think you **have** to do or would **like** to do if you could. Steve Jobs called for such a list for Apple from his key staff each year. He then crossed out everything he thought was silly and kept at it until everyone was happy with a list of ten things in priority order. Then he unilaterally crossed off the last seven and decreed that only the top three would be worked on.

This is what focus is about: stop wasting time on things that would be nice to do but are not the really important goals. Focus on a very small number of key goals and pursue them to the exclusion of all the things that waste a great amount of time and effort, holding us back from achieving our key goals.

Simplify

A large part of Steve Jobs' approach to product design was to simplify everything about it as far as the user was concerned: No multiple screens with a myriad of options that have to be navigated to get to where the user wants to be. This was a large part of the Apple magic: elegant simplicity for the

user. He was famous for questioning the need for everything at all – even an on/off switch was questioned and found not to be really necessary if the product turned itself off and on as it was closed or opened again. The Jobs' rule was that he should be able to do anything he wanted on a product in no more than three clicks.

Making something superficially simple sounds easy, but what Steve Jobs required was not just a matter of eliminating things and steps in a process. The simplicity that Steve Jobs wanted went intellectually deeper and deeper: To make something in the final product truly simple requires a depth of understanding about every component in the product and in the processes for operating it. The way everything comes together and the interplay between every element must be truly understood and a very deep level. And it was even more than that, every interrelationship in the product and processes had to be truly understood.

To quote from Apple's first brochure: *Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication*. By applying this philosophy to sector after sector in the electronics industry, Apple disrupted each product category. It was never the same again after Apple broke into a product sector. Next time we struggle with a hugely complex manual for operating an electronic gadget we should quietly wish that Steve Jobs was still alive to turn his passion and unique ability for simplifying things, onto that product sector too. Then again, it is an opportunity waiting for someone with his skills to create a new market leading product, so time will tell whether Steve Jobs was truly unique.

Be responsible end-to-end

In an Apple product the simplicity came from a complete integration of hardware, software and peripherals. This integration had to be seamless for the user. Steve Jobs set Apple on a course that was a reflection of his personality, that of an extreme perfectionist. While other major competitors were opening their products up for use in many different manufacturers' products, Steve Jobs saw that as a sure way to mediocrity or worse. It certainly challenged his mantra of simplicity and consistency.

Therefore, Steve Jobs took Apple down a totally different path. Everything about his products was locked down so that the simplicity was not broken. Moreover, he was able to make Apple products work every time for the user, without any complex steps or rules to learn.

Part of this approach may seem to readers like arrogance, something that Steve Jobs was often accused of by almost everyone except the ones who really counted: his staff and his loyal army of users. In the Steve Jobs universe, total control of the product design, its operation and its links to other products was deliberate and sensationally successful. Nothing is a free; there is always a cost for ease of use and simplicity. Apple paid this price and has become the largest company in the world, at least up to the passing of Steve Jobs. Time will tell whether his team can keep doing it without him.

When behind, leapfrog; then cannibalise

From time to time along the way, Steve Jobs found that Apple products were not making the grade. Users wanted to do something the Apple product could not do. Most managers instinctively think of adding something to bring their product up to the competitors. Not Steve Jobs; he set out to jump over the competition completely, with new concepts and products that disrupted the industry and created market leaders.

Most manufacturers would rest there. They had created a market leader. Not Steve Jobs, he instructed his team to create new products that would cannibalise the Apple products before his competitors could even match his first jump. This was the game: disrupt your own product segment while competitors were still scurrying to catch up with Apple's first disrupting product. I think we could truly say that for Steve Jobs, there was no status quo – he was constantly on the move and looking for new product sectors to disrupt – including the ones where Apple was already the leader.

Products before profits

This heading might also read: *Don't compromise*. Steve Jobs believed, and acted upon, the idea that Apple should make the best possible products for their purpose. If he got the product design correct, the profits would follow.

He was particularly disparaging of marketing people who wanted to design the products to maximize profits rather than focusing on what the user would want. This he saw as the exact opposite of his vision which was a company dedicated and motivated to create superb products.

After Steve Jobs first left Apple, his successor swung to the conventional methods and the company almost perished. What will happen now that he is dead and cannot return to save Apple a second time? Has he been able to embed his values?

Don't be a focus-group slave

Steve Jobs held one abiding core belief: that his customers did not really know what they wanted until he showed them what was possible. This was the overwhelming opposite of the way politicians and corporate marketing people base their decisions on what their "customers" say they want in market research. So Steve Jobs did not waste time on asking his potential users, because they could not tell him about a revolutionary new product until they had seen and used it.

However, do not mistake this for unthinking arrogance, of which some critics have accused Steve Jobs. No, it was about having a deep and instinctive empathy for his potential users and what they would find to be both useful and valuable. So, he personally filled the role of the focus groups his competitors used to guide them. His intuition was honed from deep and broad insight into what he thought his customers would want once they were shown it.

Bend reality

Steve Jobs' managerial behaviour was described by those who worked with, or for him, as distorting reality. He asked employees and suppliers to do things that they had told him were impossible. By sheer effort of will he was able to change their reality and they did amazing things – things they had previously "known" were impossible, yet in the end they did them.

This sounds to me as though Steve Jobs was in this respect at least, truly unique. The big question is can Apple find another Steve Jobs? Possibly not.

Impute

Steve Jobs totally absorbed and practised three principles set out for him by his early mentor Mike Makkula: Empathy, focus and impute. The first two we have already dealt with. Impute is a difficult idea to grasp intuitively. It amounted to Steve Jobs' belief that customers did judge a product's value by the way it was presented. He spent a great deal of time on the exterior design of the product and especially its packaging. He even patented his ideas for the packaging of the iPod and iPhone. Thus,

everything about the product was there to impute the value of the product to the buyer. Sometimes, his employees did not realise why he wanted something in the presentation of the product, so he just instructed them to do it without any explanation. It does seem that the market has proven him right most of the time.

This empathy for the customer and his instinctive understanding of the subliminal messages from the presentation and packaging of the product are rare skills and we must wonder whether those left behind in Apple can hold that level of the impute principle.

Push for perfection

In this respect Steve Jobs had a very unusual and high hit-rate in sensing what perfect products were. Through his career he repeatedly stopped development of products in order to go back to the drawing board. This was not just in product development, but also packaging and presentation, as we have seen. It was also applied to the design of the Apple stores and the way the parts inside the device were laid out. It has to look beautiful, even if users would never see what was inside the sealed casing.

Tolerate only "A" players

Perfectionists like Steve Jobs tend to be rather hard on people working with and for them. He consciously tried to avoid allowing the development of a workplace culture where mediocrity was tolerated by an atmosphere of politeness and blunting of criticism of poor decisions and judgements.

In most people this would be unacceptable, except that Steve Jobs married it with an ability to inspire people to achieve things that they initially did not believe could be done. This engendered a fierce loyalty to him that saw great people stay with Apple much longer than at other companies. So, in the end all agree that it was well worth the pain of conceiving and birthing a series of truly revolutionary product ideas.

Engage face-to-face

Our world is increasingly one where people communicate with each other using email, SMS, Facebook, Twitter and so on. Most people present ideas formally using PowerPoint, which is how they present ideas without thinking or challenge. Steve Jobs abhorred this lack of real contact between people. He saw it as being directly counter to the way creativity and collaboration can develop ideas. He created an atmosphere that saw ideas being developed between people in informal, wide-ranging face-to-face discussions without a fixed agenda. Problems were tackled in open discussion where every idea could be challenged and new approaches hatched and grown by a group of open-minded people.

Know both the big and small pictures

Some people are what are called *big-picture* thinkers. Others are those who think the devil is the detail. Both are valuable and are needed in a team to solve problems in a creative way. Steve Jobs was both these types. He could envisage giant steps to revolutionary new concepts, while at the same time focusing of the smallest detail necessary to achieve the vision consistent with the overall idea.

Humanities with sciences

Steve Jobs began his life with a love for the humanities, even though he was working in electronics. Then one day he was inspired by Edwin Land to stand at the point where humanities and science either collide or grow co-operatively. This made his mix of the two disciplines rather unusual and not what you might expect in someone who was developing electronic gadgets. It meant that there were scientists who did greater work, and liberal arts designers who were far more talented. However, Steve Jobs' unique mix of both meant that the products his team developed changed the industries in which they came with disruptive concepts of a better way to do things and the products that made implementation of the new ideas possible.

Stay hungry, stay foolish

Steve Jobs grew up in a countercultural era that was also grappling with a revolution in electronics. He was a blend of both in his business and personal life. Apple was a combination of business and engineering, but it could not be great without his anti-authoritarian streak that led him to envisage and create products that had science working to realise the new ways of doing things.

No, that is not right. Apple was working at a deeper level. Take the typical devices turned out by most electronics companies. They try to do everything for all people. This means that the instruction book is huge and complex. The product does many things, but none of them easily and intuitively. Steve Jobs asked himself why it had to be that way. He envisaged products that did just one thing, but did it in a truly excellent way with the minimal need for any instructions. Then Apple produced a string of these products, each one of which cut through the competition like a chain saw. Each of these products has changed the world in some way. That he had properly understood what the user would want, and set about manufacturing it, was Steve Jobs' genius.

The big question is whether it is possible that he has been able to leave this unique genius behind in the culture of the Apple organisation?

I hope that readers have enjoyed my summary of the Walter Isaacson article. It arose out of his biography of Steve Jobs. His other biographies of Henry Kissinger, Benjamin Franklin and Albert Einstein are also highly regarded.

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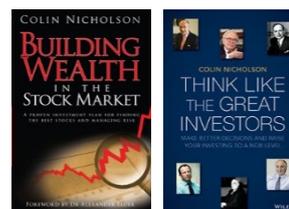
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