



Note:

This column ran under the headline, “Steve Jobs’ poisonous personality was never an asset for Apple.” Yikes. I would never have chosen this title. It makes it seem as if I think Jobs was not an asset for Apple. This would be absurd. The truth is that columnists do not get to write the headlines for their work. Below is the title I submitted.

Steve Jobs and Leadership Theory: Reconciliation Needed?

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When I began reading Walter Isaacson’s hefty biography of Steve Jobs, I wasn’t sure I could get past the first chapter: The late Mr. Jobs comes off as forbidding, to say the least. I wasn’t sure I could read 600 pages about a guy who is repeatedly described by his official biographer as “cruel,” indifferent to his children, and a “control freak.” According to Isaacson, Jobs was a profane man who would publically castigate your ideas one day and claim credit for them the next, and would resort to crying if no other method worked in getting his way.

Jobs was more than just a notoriously difficult person, of course, which is what makes his story fascinating, so I read every word. Many writers covering his death have compared him—as his biographer does—to Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. Isaacson calls him “the greatest business executive of our era.” I come away agreeing.

To me, however, as a leadership educator and coach, Jobs’ business accomplishments sit uncomfortably alongside his methods. I’m left with a vexing question: *If Steve Jobs was a great business leader, how are we to reconcile his exceptionally abrasive personal style and self-centered, even brutal approach with*

the popular formulation of the leader as nurturer of talent and leadership as the act of getting out of the way so others can rise to greatness? Was he not a leader or do I have to revise my definition of leadership?

Karol Wasylyshyn, an exceptionally talented executive coach and poet, helps. She writes about three types of leaders in her new book *Behind the Executive Door* and in a book we created together (her poetry, my illustrations; I'm also an artist) called *Standing On Marbles*. See which of Wasylyshyn's three categories you think Mr. Jobs would best fit in: the emotionally intelligent *Remarkable* leader who brings out the best in others, the *Perilous* leader whose narcissism sometimes gets the best of them and others, or *Toxic* leader whose psychological ills inhibit everyone and everything?

I've ruled out *Remarkable* and *Toxic* right away. Mr. Jobs is venerated for his business accomplishments but emotional intelligence was hardly his strong suit. Apparently he had some insight into people and their motivations, but he mostly used it to cajole, bully, and manipulate, not to develop and support. His arrogance and perfectionism would probably qualify him for membership in Wasylyshyn's *Perilous* category. In *Standing on Marbles*, Wasylyshyn writes, "Perilous leaders are erratic in their ability to tap into positive emotions as a motivational resource." A possibility forms in the mind: Jobs could have been even *more* successful if he could have empowered others more and could have gotten himself out of the way more of the time?

Boil down today's most accepted line about good business leadership and you find a formulation that says good leaders bring out the best in others by doing three things: providing clear vision, defining boundaries and keeping people within them, and by creating an environment that fosters best effort. There is no question that Jobs, a leader whom Isaacson describes repeatedly as a "control freak," provided vision, boundaries, and feedback. But it is as clear that he did not create an environment that most people would feel nurtured by. (Apple does not show up on *Fortune's* 100 "Best Places to Work" list although many of its competitors, including Dell and Microsoft, do.)

What are we to make of all this? My conclusion is that no rewriting of accepted leadership theory is necessary. Job's case is, as the saying goes, the exception that proves the rule: His bullying style was a tolerated idiosyncrasy requiring elaborate work-arounds, not an asset. Jobs surrounded himself with people who were not only what he called "A-players," but also people who—vitality—could tolerate his exceptionally high standards, badgering, and idea stealing. (This did not, apparently, characterize the former head of Apple's Mobile-Me Division—a failure—whom Jobs fired publicly in front of the entire Mobile-Me group.)

Don't be confused by Steve Jobs's repellent style. His biographer wasn't. Near the end of the book, Isaacson writes, "The nasty edge to his personality was not necessary. It hindered him more than it helped him."

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Paragraphs worth reading that did not make the cut:

This description of the leader as an unseen, supportive hand doesn't sit well with everyone, but it's had legions of adherents—including me—for a long, long time. Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, in the 6th century BC, wrote, "A good leader is best when people barely know that he exists. Not so good when people obey and acclaim him. Worse when they despise him."

On a more contemporary note, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, in their 1994 book *Built to Last*, found that leaders of successful companies that endure over time and are industry leaders—Steve Jobs's career-long aspiration for Apple—have leaders that "do not have the personality traits of the archetypal high-profile, charismatic visionary leader." They offer the example of 3M's decidedly non-charismatic leader, William McKnight (no relation) who guided this revered industry titan for 52 years using a leadership style that emphasized personal humility, accepting mistakes, empowering people, and taking small steps, all anathema to Steve Jobs.

Steve Jobs was exceptional—exceptionally inspiring and exceptionally exasperating, even withering. He built, arguably, the most creative company in the world. He was also exceptionally good at selecting talent, i.e., people who are not only world-class at what they do but also have the hide of a rhinoceros. Many, perhaps most people don't fit either description. Unless you're a Steve Jobs, you're going to have to settle for mere mortals talent-wise and people who require a more encouraging hand.