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The Dark Side of Steve Jobs

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Steven Jobs is arguably one of the most successful businessmen in modern times. He started Apple and NeXT, took a majority ownership stake in Pixar for \$10M and after ten blockbuster films sold the company to Disney for over \$7B, and around the time of his death Apple had a market cap greater than the gross domestic product of Poland. Apple is one of the world's most recognized brands and the company's products have won numerous awards for their technical capabilities, functionality, ease of use, and aesthetics. Because of these results many view Steve Jobs as the personification of the successful business leader, yet Walter Isaacson's biography paints a picture of a complex and highly flawed individual.

As experts in executive assessment, reading Isaacson's book prompted us to ask three questions about Steven Jobs and current hiring practices. First, would Jobs have been hired to be the CEO of a start up or a Fortune 500 company if he had to go through a formal assessment process? Second, what would an assessment have revealed about Jobs' watch outs or development needs? Third, what can we learn from Steve Jobs and his leadership style? This last question is important, as Job's tremendous success as a businessman has overshadowed some of the critical lessons about leadership.

Steve Jobs and Executive Assessments

Most Fortune 500 companies put external candidates through a formalized assessment process before making hiring decisions. Those looking to fill C-suite positions often go through one to two day assessments that include resume reviews, personality and work values inventories, mental abilities tests, business simulations, and structured interviews with multiple stakeholders. Research shows that companies using a more systematic assessment process make much better hiring decisions than those only using headhunter recommendations and "get to know you" type interviews.

So how would Steve Jobs fair in one of these formal assessments? If it was early in his career and he had shown up barefoot, wearing saffron robes, and in need of a bath then it is highly likely security would have escorted Jobs off the premises before the assessment had even begun. And even after he had cleaned up his personal appearance, Jobs would have never tolerated going through a formal assessment process. His rebelliousness, hostility to authority, and impatience would have caused him to reject the process outright and see the assessors as bozos and the company as *&it. For Pixar and Apple this would have been a multi-billion dollar mistake, but given Jobs psychological makeup and the realities of executive assessment he would have never went through the process.

Leadership Watch Outs

Even though Jobs never went through an executive assessment, it is possible to predict what this process would have revealed by reverse engineering the main behavioral patterns from Isaacson's book. Biographies often provide much more detailed information than that gleaned from an executive assessment, but is it likely that Job's assessment results would have identified his major strengths and liabilities as a leader. On the positive side, Jobs' assessment results would have stated that he was an extremely bright, visionary, passionate, charismatic leader with strong aesthetic and commerce needs, and driven to make an impact.

Jobs' liabilities as a leader would have likely been detected by one of the key components in many executive assessment processes, the Hogan Development Survey (HDS). The HDS provides feedback on 11 dark side personality traits, which are irritating, counterproductive behaviors that interfere with a person's ability to build cohesive, goal-oriented teams or get results through others. These behavioral tendencies are one of the key reasons why people in positions of authority fail, so knowing candidates' dark side traits can help companies make better hiring decisions.

Dark side characteristics are hard to detect when someone is actively engaged in impression management; they are more readily seen in high stress situations or when people are not actively managing the impression they want to leave on others. Jobs didn't care about how others felt about him, so predicting his dark side trait scores is fairly easy. The tables on the next two pages provide detailed trait descriptions, some key behavioral examples from Isaacson's book, and Jobs' predicted score on each trait. The No and Low, Moderate, and High Risk scores indicate the degree to which Jobs exhibited these dark side traits. Most people have one or two dark side traits; people with more dark side traits tend to be more difficult to work for.

As seen in the table, Jobs exhibited Excitable, Reserved, Bold, Mischievous, Colorful Imaginative, and Diligent tendencies and his assessment would have predicted that he would be miserable to work with. Given these liabilities, it is highly unlikely that Jobs would not have been recommended as a CEO for either a start-up or Fortune 500 firm.

Lessons Learned

We believe there are six lessons learned from this exercise:

- 1. Assessments are not a perfect predictor of success.** Steve Jobs probably would not have been recommended to lead Apple, NeXT, or Pixar had he gone through an executive assessment. HR would have recommended someone less capable but with few dark side liabilities, and it would have been a \$600B mistake.
- 2. Talented individual contributor, terrible leader.** Jobs was an amazingly talented but highly flawed individual. A manipulative, excitable liar who was cold, mean, and vindictive, he was not very pleasant to be around. One can only wonder what would have happened to Apple, NeXT, and Pixar if he did not possess these personality flaws.
- 3. If you are going to be a jerk, then you better be good.** Many bad leaders may falsely believe that they too can get away with being a jerk after reading Isaacson's book. These individuals are not remotely as talented as Jobs, so they will be difficult to work with and get nowhere near the same results.
- 4. Did he change, or did people just learn to put up with him?** Although he practiced Zen Buddhism, Jobs seemed to lack self-reflection skills. His capacity to deceive others, distort reality, exhibit emotional outbursts, and inflict cruelty seemed to withstand the test of time. Did he manage to smooth over some of his rough edges when he returned to Apple or did people just suffer from a massive case of learned helplessness?

5. People almost always act out of their own self-interest. Why would anyone work for the likes of Steve Jobs? He was a first class jerk, yet he cultivated a cult-like following. Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Kim Jong Il, and Saddam Hussein were also terribly flawed people who had large, loyal followings. Robert Hogan maintains that self-interest may be the best explanation for this phenomenon. These followers may have seen more opportunity for gaining power and wealth by demonstrating loyalty to these flawed leaders than working for someone else.

6. You need a sheriff to manage highly talented jerks. How does someone leverage the strengths but minimize the collateral damage of a Steven Jobs? Perhaps the only way to do this is for someone to play the sheriff, and this person must be in a position of real authority. Sheriffs have got to give talented jerks room to perform but be willing to call them on the carpet when they act out. If they do not, then the jerk's problem will soon be seen as the boss' problem. Unfortunately, far too many bosses wring their hands and dither about a jerk's behavior rather than address the problem head on. Or they outsource the sheriff role to HR or external coaches--people with little real authority.

The Eleven Dark Side Traits of the HDS

Dark Side Trait	Description	Score	Behavioral Examples
Excitable	Are unhappy, easily annoyed by others, suffer from wild mood swings, prone to emotional outbursts, and wax and wane on projects and people	High Risk	Jobs had a mercurial personality and would change moods in minutes; he cried over getting badge #2 while at Apple, when Scully relieved him, and finding a CD slot in the iMac; he saw staff as gods or shitheads and it was only a matter of time before one fell off the pedestal.
Skeptical	Constantly question the motives of others, falsely believe staff members are after their jobs, and hold grudges for long periods of time.	Moderate Risk	Jobs was very insightful about others and seemed to know everyone's psychological strengths and weaknesses. He never forgave his biological parents, would hold grudges for a long time, but did not seem to be paranoid about others replacing him.
Cautious	Suffer from analysis paralysis by slowing down the decision-making process. Afraid of getting accused of making "dumb" mistakes	No to Low Risk	Steve Jobs never suffered from analysis paralysis.
Reserved	Are mean, grumpy, and use silence as a way of intimidating others. They want to be left alone and often disappear during crises.	High Risk	Jobs' perfected the art of silence and staring without blinking in order to intimidate others. His tyrannical interpersonal style caused him to be banished to the night shift at Atari, he abandoned almost everyone who was loyal to him, was incredibly mean and demeaning, and seemed to take pleasure in punishing others.
Leisurely	Get irritated when others ask them to do things and show their displeasure with substandard or untimely performance.	No to Low Risk	If Jobs was asked to do something he didn't like he would tell it to the person directly rather than behave in a passive-aggressive manner.
Bold	Come across as unusually self-confident, entitled, feel they have special talents, take on projects others would never undertake, and are unwilling to accept blame for failure.	High Risk	Jobs grew up as the "Lord of the High Chair" and felt special and entitled at an early age. He was supremely self-confident, comfortable taking big risks, thought he had a unique set of talents, and seriously considered Gandhi, Picasso, and Einstein as peers.

The Eleven Dark Side Traits of the HDS (continued)

Dark Side Trait	Description	Score	Behavioral Examples
Mischievous	Come across as charming and witty, but enjoy lying, stealing, pushing limits, and seeing whether they can break rules and not get caught.	High Risk	Jobs was a consummate con man that could convince anyone of anything. He took to heart the Picasso quote, “Good artists borrow, great artists steal” and shamelessly stole ideas from XEROX, his direct reports, and others. He blatantly lied to Wozniak about a bonus from Atari, about poaching key staff when he left Apple and selling his stock when he rejoined. He loved speeding, driving without license plates, and parking in handicapped spots (i.e., Park Different)
Colorful	Flit from one issue to the next, manage by crisis, think they are “hot”, have a constant need to be the center of attention, and hog all the credit.	High Risk	Constantly claimed others’ ideas as his own, devastated when not chosen as <i>Time’s</i> Man on the Year in 1982, had a fit when somebody took over the white board at NeXT, Apple’s product launches became epochal events that were all about Steve.
Imaginative	Enjoy thinking and acting in unconventional or eccentric ways, constantly shift between ideas, and think only their ideas are important.	High Risk	Jobs’ weird diets, Bauhaus aesthetic, and “reality distortion field” are legendary. His view of the facts was usually quite different from every else and he was absolutely convinced that he was right.
Diligent	Are nit-picky perfectionists who obsess over meaningless details, and have difficulty setting priorities or delegating work to others.	High Risk	Jobs’ obsessed over many fairly meaningless details in the development, manufacturing, and marketing of Apple products. He wasted millions of dollars over details that had no bearing on customer satisfaction or product sales.
Dutiful	Are suck-ups who do whatever they can to please their bosses and are reluctant to “rock the boat.”	No to Low Risk	Jobs did not exhibit this trait, as he was openly hostile to authority and often disloyal to bosses.

