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The Real Leadership Lessons¹⁴ of Steve Jobs

Six months after Jobs's death, the author of his best-selling biography identifies the practices that every CEO can try to emulate.
by Walter Isaacson

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Jonathan Rotenberg

THE "NOT-SO-IMPORTANT" LEADERSHIP LESSONS OF STEVE JOBS

The April Harvard Business Review has a major new article by Walter Isaacson called "The Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs." (<http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/about/HBR-Isaacson.pdf>)

Isaacson lays out a thoughtful, well-written answer to a monumental set of question on the minds of many business leaders: Is anything that Steve Jobs did repeatable or transferable to other companies? Or was Steve just an enigmatic, eccentric artist who got lucky (a lot)?

Each of Isaacson's take-aways in this article are reasonable and more true than not. The graphics are cool too; HBR portrays each of Isaacson's take-aways as its own little iPad app.

Unfortunately, Isaacson misses the underlying point of HOW Steve led, how he made decisions, and how he created the products and companies he did. Steve spent his entire life trying to teach a very different approach to business leadership. Most people (including Isaacson) could not listen. They did not know how.

The essence of Steve's approach to leadership are summed up in the two-word tagline with which he relaunched Apple in 1997: THINK DIFFERENT. Isaacson projects a lot of misconceptions onto what Steve meant by "Think Different." Isaacson mistakenly attributes delusional 'magical' thinking, perfectionism, reality distortion, and artistic exuberance to how Steve did what he did.

"Think Different" meant some very specific things to Steve about business leadership. Steve was a deeply dedicated, highly disciplined Buddhist practitioner. He followed an Eastern wisdom tradition that is antithetical to many Western theoretical models about business leadership. Buddhism sees competition, free markets, asset-management theories, and much of what is inculcated at Harvard Business School not as first-principles to reify, but

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as relatively minor, man-made artifacts.

The source of all wisdom in Eastern traditions—and what Steve meant in the words "Think Different"—is MINDFULNESS. Mindfulness means paying attention to your present-moment experience as it is received through your sense gates. Where HBS would have business leaders plaster-over their present-moment experiences with boatloads of frameworks and theories, "Think Different" means: Drop ALL your theories, concepts & preconceived ideas. PAY ATTENTION instead to the raw reality coming in through your five senses and your mind. This is where you will find real insight and wisdom.

In trying to understand how Steve Jobs succeeded as a CEO, Isaacson is like someone who has never played basketball observing what he sees as the elements of Michael Jordan's success. Michael Jordan sweats, makes serious expressions on his face, leans as he passes the basketball, etc. This is an outside observer's view who doesn't see things from Michael Jordan's vantage point.

In fairness to Isaacson, he would probably have had to spend several years investigating his own preconceived ideas before he could listen clearly & receptively to Steve Jobs. Isaacson did a yeoman job on capturing Steve's life story under very stressful, difficult circumstances. Isaacson has given humanity a tremendous gift in all of his good work.

As far as the "Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs," however, I don't think Isaacson is even close. One could test whether or not Isaacson's insights work with an empirical experiment. Take two similar portfolios of ten companies. Ask the senior leadership of the first ten companies to read Isaacson's article and follow its advice carefully. Ask the senior leadership of the second NOT to read Isaacson's article. Wait a year and see: Did Isaacson's article make a difference in the performance and effectiveness of the first group? I don't think it would, but I could be wrong.

I believe the Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs are still to be written. The true leadership lessons of Steve Jobs are the lessons of the first high-profile business leader to build a global company from a deep foundational grounding in BOTH Western Capitalism and in Eastern Wisdom traditions. In other words, Steve Jobs was the first Bodhisattva Warrior in history to become a Fortune 500 CEO.

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 Teresa Moraska, Shannon Starr and 64 others like this.

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 **Jonathan Rotenberg** NOTE: Please click CAREFULLY on the blue "See More" to read my posting. Clicking ever-so-slightly to the left opens Walter Isaacson's article... and you'll miss my thought-provoking, Dharmic analysis! 😊
March 20, 2012 at 3:18pm · [Like](#) · [👍 2](#)

 **David Needle** hey great stuff Jonathan. This is the best analysis I've seen of why the "Steve Jobs way" isn't easily (if at all) transferable. I like the Michael Jordan comparison -- along the same lines, if business neophytes tried to learn from watching Steve Jobs they might conclude that yelling at people was the key to success. A lot of folks have tried that without much luck.
March 20, 2012 at 5:31pm · [Unlike](#) · [👍 2](#)

 **Paul Kowal** Where does "lying about how much the two of you got paid by Atari so that when you split what you got paid with your partner 50-50, you ended up keeping 75% fit in? I have always believed that where your values end up when you turn age 12 stays with you the rest of your life. Perhaps Eastern wisdom was so transformative that it truly converted SJ into a mensch. But I suspect not.
March 21, 2012 at 2:46pm · [Like](#) · [👍 2](#)

 **Jonathan Rotenberg** Paul – I don't know very much about the few months when Steve & Woz worked together at Atari in 1974. I do know that they both played a lot of pranks on each other. If Steve did stiff Woz out of \$300 (as you suggest), I think Woz might have gotten over it when he got over \$200 million from Apple. You can ask Woz yourself; he is a Facebook friend. It sounds to me like if Mother Teresa had an unpaid parking ticket or a moment of poor judgment when she was 19, she too would surely have been deleted from the Kowal Book of Menschdom.
March 21, 2012 at 4:06pm via mobile · [Like](#) · [👍 1](#)

 **Jonathan Rotenberg** Hey, Steve Wozniak! Can you comment on the Atari episode that Paul Kowal asks about? Was it a prank or was Steve J. being a total jerk?
March 21, 2012 at 8:39pm · [Like](#)

 **Woz** Truth is Steve told me the payment was \$700 and he wrote a check to me for \$350. 12 years later I learned (and confirmed with the top Atari people who paid him) that it was thousands. I would not have cared but the lack of truth to a friend was there. It's one thing out of hundreds in our

friend was there. It's one thing out of hundreds in our relationship and I would have done it for free and have no regrets about the money.

March 22, 2012 at 1:20am · [Unlike](#) · [👍 81](#)



Rich Schlegel Great thread guys 😊

March 22, 2012 at 1:23am · [Like](#) · [👍 1](#)



Jon Cordeiro I had heard the story about Steve telling a lie that the pay was only \$700. Hearing it actually confirmed by Steve Wozniak himself is very cool though.

March 22, 2012 at 1:26am · [Like](#) · [👍 5](#)



Robert Dale Smith Passion for ones work far supersedes any cash value paid for that work.

March 22, 2012 at 1:29am · [Like](#)



Julien Dufrenne Steve W, have you to follow this guide to become the "new" CEO of Apple ? ^^

March 22, 2012 at 1:31am · [Like](#)



Stephen Gibson Williams It hard to think that Steve Jobs is the first successful Buddhist in business. That is where your premiss brakes down. Like so many you read to much into eastern religions.

March 22, 2012 at 1:33am · [Like](#) · [👍 1](#)



John Eichinger Jonathan . . . thanks for the insightful and very thought-provoking analysis. Well said!

March 22, 2012 at 1:45am · [Like](#)



Chase Jay Mr. Wozniak, I understand that friends can go through many trials and still end up friends. I'm assuming you don't have hard feelings on events that happened many years ago. How was your relationship with Steve J towards the end, if there was one?

March 22, 2012 at 1:57am · [Like](#) · [👍 1](#)



Paul Kowal Jonathan – Don't worry, Mother Teresa is safe in my Book of Menschdom. (As are you!) My point is not the \$300, or, as it turns out, "thousands", and whether the \$200 million years later made up for it. That's a very HBS way of thinking (even if Woz has no regrets about the money today), and I thought you had risen above that. I just wonder if the incident was only "a moment of poor judgment" as you characterize it, or an early window into one of the more unfortunate values SJ had developed in his youth, which can be delicately referred to as a "lack of truth" or less delicately as "lying with impunity", to a close friend, no less. It's not going to turn Steve Jobs into a villain by itself. But he needs to have more than a few Mother Teresa moments later in life to balance the scales and enter the Kowal Book. Hell, I'm not even sure *I'm* going to make it into my Book yet. Stay tuned.

March 22, 2012 at 2:28am · [Like](#)



Damien Lavizzo I never met Steve, but I've known people like him. They're generally the people that have other, less successful people nitpicking over their flaws, while the people that actually know them have nothing but great things to say about them. In the immortal words of Ice T – "Haters gon' hate, players gon' play."

March 22, 2012 at 3:08am · [Unlike](#) · [👍 2](#)



Jonathan Rotenberg Stephen G. – I love your question! Do you know of any othe successful Buddhists in business? I'm fascinated to learn more about them. I go to a lot of meditation centers and Buddhist retreats, and (in my experience) <5% of the people I get to meet have any experience in the business world. The values of big business and the Dharma are almost 100% antithetical to each other. The only person I've met so far (other than Steve Jobs) is Phillip Moffett, the former editor of Esquire magazine and now chairman of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin, CA. Ironically, the closest I've ever seen to a Buddhist CEO (again, other than Steve Jobs) is Bill Marriott, CEO of Marriott International. Bill is a devout Mormon. Unlike certain Mormon politicians who shall remain nameless, Bill is a deeply devout, highly spiritual, authentic follower of spiritual wisdom.

March 22, 2012 at 7:16am · [Like](#)



Jonathan Rotenberg Paul – I think the ultimate Book of Menschdom is going to open with "Dedicated to the mensches of mensches, Paul Kowal"! :-). I don't disagree with you that Steve could say things that were dishonest and SOUNDED narcissistic or self-serving. I once had a wonderful business

school professor, Jim Cash, who told me once: "There are two kinds of people in the world: People who see the world as being there to serve them. And people who see their purpose as serving the world.". I have worked with more than one, super-self-centered CEO who typified the first group. Although many people perceived Steve Jobs to be an egomaniac, he was not. He

was never driven by his ego or selfishness. He was never interested in making money and spent virtually no money on himself; he lived an almost Monastic life. Steve felt that he had a responsibility to help push the human race forward, by seeing clearly all the gifts we have been given and squander. Steve was—in every possible sense—following a higher calling, listening to his higher angels. What most people fail to understand is that he was in the loneliest possible place that any human being could be. He was always at least 15–20 years ahead of EVERYONE (including me). At some point, I think all of us has an experience where we are seeing the big picture of something, we're trying to explain, but everyone else is so far behind and can't seem to catch up. This was the fundamental source of Steve's frustration and short-temperedness. If you can see & understand Steve with true compassion and empathy, you will start to see everything he said and did in an entirely different way.

March 22, 2012 at 7:32am · [Like](#)



Jonathan Rotenberg Dear Friends, A minor miracle of social networking just occurred to me... Following up on industry legend [Steve Wozniak](#) and his revelation that Atari paid Steve Jobs thousands of dollars while Steve told Woz he only got paid \$700... how about we ask another INDUSTRY LEGEND, Atari founder & CEO, [Nolan Bushnell](#), what HE thinks? (Nolan is a Facebook friend and fellow Los Angelino. Howdy Nolan!! Good on ya mate! :->) Nolan – Can you speak to Steve Wozniak's comment? Can you share with our readers how much Atari paid Steve Jobs? And do you think Steve Jobs was a pathological liar or do you have a different explanation?

March 22, 2012 at 12:54pm · [Like](#)



Nigel Searle I did not know Steve Jobs, but I have known a number of highly successful people and they all had one thing in common: they were passionate, obsessed, ruthless and paranoid in pursuit of their goals, to the point where they would justify almost any behavior to themselves when others stood in the way of – or merely failed to support – achieving those goals. It's not that they were amoral, but their drive and ambition informed their personal code of ethics. In their private lives, some were among the kindest people I have known.

March 22, 2012 at 1:16pm · [Like](#)



Jonathan Rotenberg Nigel – I agree that Steve was passionate & driven. I don't agree with ruthless or paranoid. The key distinction to me is whether someone is driven by their ego (aka, self-aggrandizement) or a calling to serve humanity (aka the heart). Clearly, many people drift from one to the other or live in a hybrid. But I never saw a single selfish or self-aggrandizing bone in Steve's body. I think he was extremely focused and clear about why he was alive. I have met many egotistical, ruthless CEOs and Steve was not one of them. The only other Fortune 500 CEO I've met who reminds me of Steve is Bill Marriott, CEO of Marriott International.

March 22, 2012 at 1:24pm via mobile · [Like](#)



Nigel Searle Again, I did not know Steve, so my comments don't/can't apply to him. But some of the people I have known appear to have unquestioningly equated their ambitions with serving humanity, when most objective observers would not see the equivalence. So, they do not think for one moment that their behavior is selfish; and, indeed, from their perspective, it is not.

March 22, 2012 at 1:37pm · [Like](#)



Jonathan Rotenberg I totally agree, Nigel. We just need to be careful about stereotyping. I could say that many of the British men I've met were arrogant & snobby, but you haven't a fiber of arrogance or snobbishness in you. :->

March 22, 2012 at 1:48pm via mobile · [Like](#)



Nigel Searle I have observed some common traits among all the super successful people I have known, but there aren't enough of them to constitute a scientific sample. I am also perfectly prepared to believe that Steve would not have fit that profile; that he was an exception among the exceptional. And it's possible that he was different in some significant ways in his 40s and 50s than in his 20s and 30s. I think that is probably the public perception.

I know that I am not always the same person. Some days, I'm snobby in the morning and arrogant in the afternoon. Other days, I'm arrogant in the morning and snobby in the afternoon. But always both in the evening 😊

March 22, 2012 at 2:07pm · [Like](#)



Jonathan Rotenberg There's another important dimension of leadership. It's not just the leader; it's also the leader's environment. The environment of big business is a bit like professional hockey; is a rough, violent, contact sport. It's very rare for a sensitive, perceptive artist-type person to be allowed into senior management of a large company, let alone survive there. There have been a few very successful, sensitive, aware

CEOs of large organizations; these include [Tim Gill](#) of Quark, Dan Bricklin of Software Arts, and Mike Markkula of Apple. In the computer industry today, most sensitive leaders of the past 20 years are roadkill today. Steve Jobs was the most sensitive, perceptive executive I have ever known in my life. To his credit, Steve found a way to survive as an artist without sacrificing any of his integrity or artistic vision. For his 57th Birthday, I dedicated the Don McLean song "Vincent" to Steve. Although the song is about Vincent Van Gogh, its words & spirit apply perfectly to Steve. The chorus explains why I am writing a book about Steve: "Now I think I know what you tried to say to me. And how you suffered for your sanity. And how you tried to set them free. They would not listen, they did not know how. Perhaps they'll listen now."

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Timeline Photos

HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR STEVE

Tomorrow, February 24, is Steve Jobs' 57th birthday. ...

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Tim Gill I'm sensitive and aware? And here I thought most of the time I was clueless. 😊

March 22, 2012 at 3:41pm · Like



Tim Gill Or at least shooting in the dark.

March 22, 2012 at 3:42pm · Like



Jonathan Rotenberg Note to readers: Truly great leaders shine brilliantly in their humility and sense of service to others. They don't try to draw attention to themselves because their focus is on cultivating the greatness in people around them. Here we have [Tim Gill](#), one of the most successful & effective software entrepreneurs, philanthropists & political strategists of modern times. Yet, contrary to Nigel's stereotype, you won't see a shred of ruthlessness, paranoia or unkindness when you are in Tim's presence. Steve Jobs was the same; a master of understatement and self-deprecation. Like how Steve got U.S. laws changed to get computers into public schools, as a result of sitting next to U.S. Rep. Pete Stark on a plane. Rep. Stark came away with the impression that Steve was a geeky, entry-level engineer at Apple, when he was actually its CEO, personally worth > \$200M.

March 22, 2012 at 4:07pm · Like



Saravanan Natrayan Jonathan: Any insight into why Steve was not all that much into charity? It would seem, for an individual who leads a Buddhist monkish life, it would make sense to help those in dire need with his wealth.

March 23, 2012 at 9:32am · Like



Shannon Starr Perhaps his giving was something between him and the universe?

March 26, 2012 at 10:30pm · Like



Jonathan Rotenberg Saravanan, That's a great question. I know Steve did help quietly a number of people in dire need. I don't know how many. There some history to Steve and formal philanthropy. Steve had a philosophy that he applied broadly to all parts of his life, including charity. He chose to focus on doing a few things extremely well rather than attempting to do a mediocre job on a lot a stuff. Using technology to improve education and educational opportunity for children was always important to Steve. During his original tenure at Apple, he started a foundation to help provide computers and funding to worthwhile efforts in education. After leaving Apple in 1985, he hired the head of the Apple Foundation, [Mark Vermilion](#), to help him create a new foundation focused on nutrition and vegetarian eating. Mark and Steve worked on this for a while, but both couldn't figure out how to make it work, and ultimately decided to abandon it. Steve was somewhat active as a citizen in helping political candidates. There are public records that he gave \$210,000 to political campaigns. (That broke down, btw, as follows: \$209K to Democratic candidates, \$1K to Republicans!) Many people expected that Steve would start a foundation in his lifetime to support major humanitarian needs, like the Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Carnegie Foundation etc. If Steve were not as deeply of a humanitarian being as he was—and if he cared only buying a reputation—he could have easily given \$1B to a heart-string-tugging cause while he was alive. But what is helpful to understand about Steve is that he always had a deep sense that his time on Earth would

end prematurely. He did not think he would live to see his 30s. This deep intuition gave Steve an extraordinary sense of urgency and focus about his life. He would constantly challenge himself: "There are 1000 things I could do right now, but I have time for only 1. Which shall I choose?" Given his limited time with us, Steve focused on the places where he felt he could be of greatest service to humanity. Steve's focus—as a he put it—was to "put a ding in the universe," to "help push the human race forward." One of the reasons I'm writing a new book about Steve is to delve more deeply into what Steve meant when he said "push the human race forward" and what he was up to bend technology. As

wonderful as Bill & Melinda Gates are—and as extraordinary is work they do through the Gates Foundation—I believe Steve had his sights on far bigger ways to lift humanity and alleviate human suffering. More to come...

March 27, 2012 at 7:19pm · [Like](#) ·  1



Shannon Starr I am finding this eerie. I have no particular passion/interest in Jobs however yesterday I friended Jonathan because of a comment that he like of mine on FB for an event we both attended. Today I started a book on my MP3 that I've had for a week when I was driving into town. Came home and saw this. The Book, Isaacson's bio on Jobs and I'm right at the section you folks are talking about. So now I wonder why the universe wants me to know Jonathan.

March 27, 2012 at 7:43pm · [Like](#)



Jonathan Rotenberg Shannon – That's super-cool that you're paying attention and noticing these coincidences! Steve Jobs would be proud of you. :-> Inexplicable coincidences are the Universe's humorous guidance system. It's a good sign that you're doing the right things if you see more & more inexplicable coincidences showing up in your present-moment experience. Just keep paying attention to everything in the present moment (songs you hear, images, animals, words, children, smells, textures, whatever comes through your senses) while making sure to let go of all judgments and stories you may be telling yourself. Keep an open heart and a clear mind. If you keep paying attention and noticing what you are curious about, the universe will provide the answers you are seeking.... very softly & quietly.

March 27, 2012 at 10:20pm · [Like](#)



Shannon Starr They are happening at such a rate it is breath taking. I also have a feeling that something amazing is about to happen. (Hoping it's going to be a really cool job.)

March 27, 2012 at 10:44pm · [Like](#)



Robert Brako · Friends with Jennifer Hadley
Great

April 1, 2012 at 2:16pm · [Like](#)



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