Critical Questions in Leadership Analysis

By
Thomas A. Lifvendahl, Ed.D.
November 22, 2011

Introduction

I have been intrigued for a long period by trying to understand the relationships between culture, context, cognition, and effectiveness. Great leaders tend to be widely recognized as being able to bridge these intersections as such. Indeed, one of the key aspects of being allowed to lead is the ability of that potential leader to be recognized by those holding power for the value of his/her work. In essence, recognition validates effort. However, for the sake of this essay that is only a portion of what I am writing.

In reading the recent biography of Steve Jobs by Walter Isaacson I was more struck by the unique factors that provided a platform for Jobs' unique genius at generating technological innovation then the man's life (or death). These factors include but are not limited to:

1. The recognition of talent by others sufficient for those others to "bend the rules" to allow Jobs to flourish.

2. The position of power that allowed Jobs to give full vent to his idiosyncrasies without full regard to the consequences of his actions.

3. The creation of an organizational environment that nurtured those idiosyncrasies.

4. The organizational environment used by Jobs to control others.

5. The indulgence of organizational players to tolerate or acquiesce to Jobs odd behaviors (unblinking stare, intimidating language, incessant crying, etc.) became accepted actions within his span of organizational control. Outside of Apple, many people considered those behaviors strange.

Indeed, for the purpose of this essay, I consider Jobs a "savant". I expand on the dictionary definition of savant as *a person possessing a hypersensitive sense (in this case design) who was given the freedom by others to actualize his "vision"*. The power that energized this vision was personal "charisma"…his unique personal characteristics that allowed him to control the processes of production and the individuals he chose to actualize his vision.

From what I know about Jobs, having never met the man, he considered himself a member of the "creative" class, an individual consciously situated at the "nexus" between science and art, who believed he understood customer needs better than the customers could ever fully understand themselves. He believed he had an innate ability to strip away the clutter of life in an evolving world of chaotic technology. He could then focus with a Zen like simplicity on the essence of use a given piece of technology represented.

A firm believer of Bauhaus sensibilities ("less is more"), he designed not by drawing imaginings himself but by getting others to create iterations of a verbalized mind doppelgänger to which Jobs sought to give birth. Design was form…seeking perfection, perfection *as an end in itself*. Jobs argued that he did what he did because that was who he was; unique, unbendable, and correct! Apple became, over time, the fully enclosed world he needed to support an unfettered imagination and the devotees of Apple lapped up the resulting products.

Nevertheless, I need to remind the reader that this paper is only partially about Jobs. Although his history drives portions of this analysis, the essay seeks to understand the environment and conditions that would let Jobs (or Rockefeller, Edison, Ford, etc.) be himself. What follows are a set of questions that we can use to investigate in a systematic way conditions that lead to individual leaders' creative success. I am not going to answer them fully but I pose them primarily as rhetorical references to aid your thought processes.

Questions

For the sake of discussion, I want to address the following questions. They are:

1. To what extent does the background and upbringing of any individual mold that person into what they are…the level of social support (nurture) of any individual vs. genetic inheritance (nature) they possess at birth?

2. To what extent does the individual require a <u>sense of control</u> over themselves and their destiny?

3. To what extent does the individual leader require a <u>cohesive philosophy</u> to indulge their creative behaviors?

4. To what extent does a broader <u>society recognize</u> one's creativity sufficient to be deemed successful?

5. What is the <u>cultural context</u> of the supportive organization?

6. To what extent does the individual leaders "<u>style of leadership</u>" match the organization she/he created?

7. Is that organization controlling the individual creative or is the creative controlling the organization?

Who controls whom and for what reasons are what I am attempting to address. I hope that we will have an interesting journey in finding out the level of my success.

Background and Upbringing

All of us are the product of an accumulation of experiences starting in childhood and ending in death. Steve Jobs was no different. The key to understanding Jobs though is in examining how he leveraged his background into a constructed persona that supported his work. A middle class family in California adopted him. That location in what was to become Silicon Valley was fortuitous.

His biographer believed that his adoptive parents deeply loved him. Jobs also exhibited little interest in his biological mother and less with father. He was interested in his siblings. Nevertheless, his adoption /rejection experience manifested itself in a need to be in control over his life from an early age. His adoptive father, Paul Jobs, was a car rebuilder/used car dealer whom Jobs held in high esteem. Significantly, he was also a creative mechanic with an astute concern for quality, detail, and design.

Jobs adoptive parents saw in him a child worthy of indulgence. Jobs, from an early age, exhibited the traits of an <u>autodidactic</u> learner. If Jobs was a child today, he probably would have been home schooled.

His brief education at Reeds College fully actualized his earlier autodidactic style of learning. In essence, if the subject at hand was of interest Jobs absorbed like a sponge (i.e. calligraphy). If

it was not interesting, he rejected the need to invest himself in learning. Over time, he constructed idiosyncratic learning styles gleaned from a wide assortment of acquaintances and teachers that would be useful in forming an organization. These styles also set boundaries of interpersonal actions sufficient to control those wishing to work with him. His famous "reality altering force field" (Isaacson, 2011) and unblinking stare were really a set of studied constructed behaviors used by him to get others to do what he wanted them to do. A self-taught management technique!

The effect of this process coupled with his indulgence in alternative life styles, odd diets, journeying to India in order to be enlightened by gurus, and a resulting amalgam of mind-altering, drug induced experiences created a unique blend of personal traits that would have a difficult time blending into any mainstream corporate environment. Steve Jobs was a product of the 60's counterculture, a bright individual who coped with his world by choosing personal pathways that fostered a cocooned environment designed to support his personality traits while limiting the impact of his well-documented social inadequacies. These facts reinforce my previously stated impression that he was a "savant" (a person with a highly developed knowledge of a specialized field of learning….design/aesthetics) bent on creating an environment uniquely suited to supporting his savantism.

In summary, the circumstances of Jobs prospering the way he did required a unique blend of place, time, and emerging economic conditions conducive to a personality like his. Human success is based on the same concurrence of divergent circumstances. Jobs, I contend, represents a highly successful version of this phenomena!

Sense of Control

Every person I know wants at least two things, a sense of control over their environment and a belief in their own self-worth. This includes me. Some go further than the norm and seek obsessive control. I believe that Steve Jobs is an example of an obsessive controller.

The theme he used to support his need to control was design. Couched in the mannerisms of an "artiste" Jobs gathered to him employees and allies who would commit to his need to fashion perfection in product form and integrated usage. This is the core concept required for understanding the formation of Apple.

Conversely, this tendency to control also fostered in Jobs and thus in Apple a reactive

environment wherein diminished control was equated with shoddiness and commercial prostitution. Apple and Jobs represented a "Guardian" against crass Commercialism. Art perfection over pragmatic capitalism? No, right vs. wrong…light vs. darkness…a dichotomy excluding compromise. Bauhaus vs. outhouse with Jobs standing at the gate holding the barbarians back with finely tuned hardware and software weapons of power.

In conclusion, this overdeveloped sense of "rightness" fueled the growth of Apple and the tendency of its customers to see their collective selves as privy to a worldview of technology elevated in aesthetic form and meaning. What then are the Guardian values that drive this phenomenon?

Cohesive Philosophy

For a number of years I have applied a mental filter to try to decipher the different organization behaviors I see in contemporary business. In 1992, the author Jane Jacobs illustrated in her book *Systems of Survival* two overarching moral syndromes that she contended infuse our society: the "Commercial syndrome, which arose from trading cultures; and the governing, or Guardian, syndrome, which arose from territorial cultures" (Jacobs, 1992).

In reiteration, her interpretation defines the *Guardian* as "conservative and hierarchical, adheres to tradition, values loyalty, and shuns trading and innovation". Conversely, the *Commercial* "system is based on trading and can function well only when it is open, trusting of outsiders, innovative, positive, and forward thinking" (Jacobs, 1992).

Jacobs's hypothesized that society must separate those two functions as completely as possible. "Trouble ensues when the two systems become confused about their roles and each takes on the functions of the other, for its then that the positive attributes of one system become the vices of the other" (Jacobs, 1992). In a classic interpretation of Jacobs philosophy Guardians are bureaucrats who impose their methodologies into the realm of commerce in restrictive ways. In my current interpretation, For the purpose of this essay, Guardians are re-interpreted as representing *Preservationists* seeking to insure the sanctity of design in a world of Commercial perfidy.

Jacob's primary admonition is in essence a warning. When each system of collective values acts within its own sphere all seems well. When values mix, one unleashes conflict over whose goals and values win out. Her term for an immoral organization is that it represents a "monstrous

hybrid" (think the odd mix that represents values utilized by the Mafia...trade with anyone for illegal items, wreak vengeance on your enemies for trying to take over territory). Conversely, when values mix in beneficial ways society prospers (think research hospital guarding patient care while cutting deals with drug companies over useful experimental drugs). In essence, all organizations exhibit mixed values. The usefulness of Jacob's concepts is to help filter through the masked behaviors of organizational leaders as they seek to direct group behavior.

What does all this have to do with Apple? The classic conflict in the computer technology industry has been the opposing approaches manifested by Apple and Microsoft as they each seek to meet customer needs. To me Microsoft represents the classic <u>Commercial</u> mindset. Those values are:

> "Shun force. Come to voluntary agreements. Be honest. Collaborate easily with strangers and aliens. Compete. Respect contracts. Use initiative and enterprise. Be open to inventiveness and novelty. Be efficient. Promote comfort and convenience. Dissent for the sake of the task. Invest for productive purposes. Be thrifty. Be optimistic" (Jacobs, 1992).

Microsoft built its company around unleashing operating software to the widest audience possible and collaborating with manufacturers in order to load its products on as many machines as conceivable. Compete, trade and invent with everyone to facilitate cornering the marketplace without much regard for the hardware configurations that supported it drove Microsoft's strategic plan.

Conversely, Apple constructed a closed, totally designed system integrating software and hardware development that reflected clearly the <u>Guardian</u> values of "strict discipline" throughout all processes used to deliver a designed user experience. For the sake of discussion, classic Guardian values are:

> "Shun trading. Exert prowess. Be obedient and disciplined. Adhere to tradition. Respect hierarchy. Be loyal. Take vengeance. Deceive for the sake of the task. Make rich use of leisure. Be ostentatious. Dispense largesse. Be exclusive. Show fortitude. Be fatalistic. Treasure honor" (Jacobs, 1992).

Apple is a Guardian organization to me because Jobs saw himself as a Guardian. Jobs behaviors towards his employees and competitors were consistently Guardian like. He was deceitful when needed, vengeful to employees he saw as "turncoats" and loyal to those who sided with him.

Microsoft is Commercial because Bill Gates is Commercial. Gates has been more flexible in interacting with his suppliers and customers in ways that Jobs innately could not. Significantly, both wanted to trade but each did trading in their own unique ways. Of greater significance are the mirror images each organization presents of its founder's values!

Societal Recognition

One can create the most wonderful organization in the world but if no one acknowledges its "wonderfulness" it does not exist. Steve Jobs believed that his aesthetic sensitivities transcended common views of technological potential.

He believed, to the depth of his soul, that by making his ideas manifest that he could change the world. He did. However, the key to understanding this is to acknowledge his elevated sensitivity to customer needs. To the public, Jobs seemed to divine customer needs before customers were aware that those needs even existed.

I reduce that message to the following points:

1. <u>Focus</u> on "crafting" your products so that the rigor of design quality and production is represented throughout. In essence, design the *box* of an iPhone with the same attention to detail that the integrated circuit within the phone represents.

2. <u>Empathize</u> with your customers so well that you know better than they do what they want.

3. Constantly seek <u>simplicity</u>…eliminate "unimportant opportunities" (Isaacson, 2011).

4. Design friendly products that <u>intuitively</u> allow even a "three year old child from the third world" (Isaacson, 2011) who had never seen a computer use it fully.

The interesting thing about Apple is that this aesthetic is reasserting itself as the company repositions after its founder's death. Jobs corporate cocoon is morphing. The question is absent Jobs, what form will its new emergent properties take?

Cultural Context

Culture consists of the stories, values, history, and behaviors exhibited by an organization. The collective culture of Apple supported the vision of Steve Jobs. One must than question the ability of the organization to continue the founder's vision. The key problem is the extent to which Guardian founders need organizational support. I contend that Guardians need more

support because their tendency to be inflexible about altering core values requires more energy to sustain the organizational mission than the Commercial mindset where compromise is more readily accepted.

Therefore, what is Apples Mission statement? The web generated the following:

> Tim Cook made a statement during Steve Jobs' leave of absence that is probably as close to Apple's mission statement as it gets. The context makes perfect sense, as Cook was explaining to investors what Apple stands for, with or without Steve Jobs:
>
> We believe that we're on the face of the earth to make great products and that's not changing. We're constantly focusing on innovating. We believe in the simple, not the complex.
>
> We believe we need to own and control the primary technologies behind the products that we make and participate only in markets where we can make a significant contribution.
>
> We believe in saying no to thousands of projects so that we can focus on the few that are meaningful to us. We believe in deep collaboration and cross pollination in order to innovate in a way others cannot.
>
> We don't settle for anything other than excellence in any group in the company, and we have the self-honesty to admit when we're wrong and the courage to change.
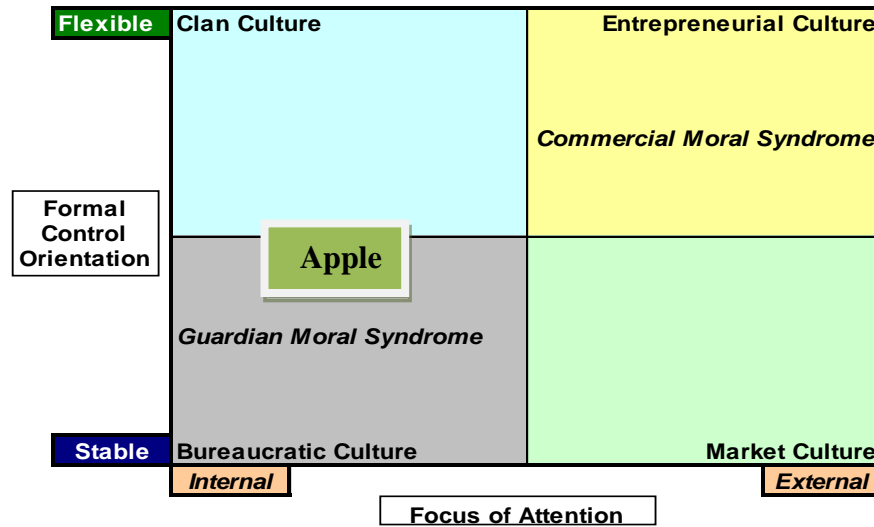> http://www.macobserver.com/tmo/article/

Now, let us see if we can translate this hodge-podge into an applicable Mission Statement.

Meaningful Technological Contributions Driven by
Magical Simplicity

The art of a Zen Master made manifest in a technology company. What kind of cultural attributes assure achievement of this goal?

The grid highlighted on the next page reflects a normalized view of cultures. Apple, if considered a normal company should fall in the upper right quadrant; an entrepreneurial culture in the Commercial moral syndrome. However, I believe it is not. I believe that it behaved as a clan culture using formal, albeit idiosyncratic control under Jobs. Significantly, it is Guardian like in its need for design control throughout all production and distribution processes. Apple

exhibits a high need for internal control but is highly sensitive to market needs. The key to understanding Apple therefore is working to define the nature of its "hybridization".

	Clan Culture	Entrepreneurial Culture
Flexible		
		Commercial Moral Syndrome
Formal Control Orientation	**Apple**	
	Guardian Moral Syndrome	
Stable	Bureaucratic Culture	Market Culture
	Internal	*External*

Focus of Attention

   The second graphic depicted below represents the change environment that Apple still seeks to dominate. Jobs believed that his "vision" and internal compass foresaw what his customers needed. Therefore, he anticipated radical change before it occurred in the market. Thus, Apple requires placement in the blue, bottom left quadrant.

Types of Organizational Change (Drivers)

Small Adjustment	Incremental Anticipatory Change	Incremental Reactive Change
Degree of Change	**Apple**	
Major Transformation	Radical Anticipatory Change	Radical Reactive Change

Timing of Change

Before Major Shifts in the Enviornment	*After Major Shifts in the Enviornment*
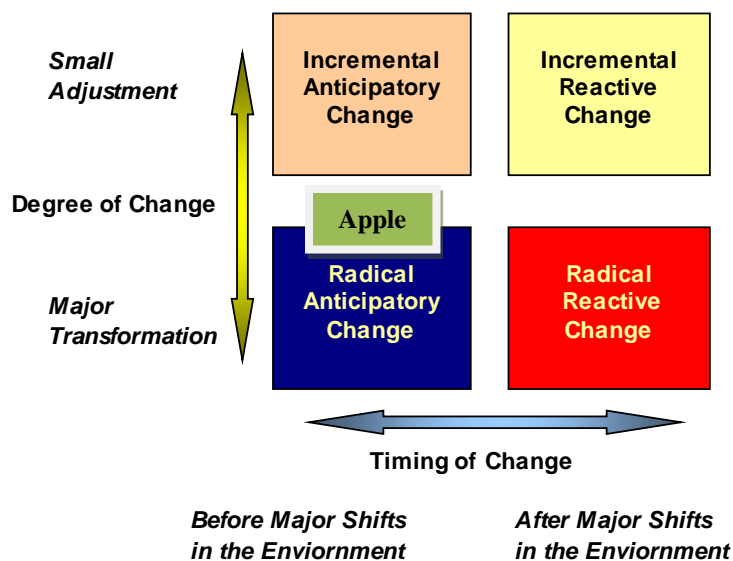
I believe that Steve Jobs consciously "designed"…and the word <u>designed</u> is critical to understanding Apple as a company…a hybrid, quasi Guardian culture; clannish in nature and internally protected from interference from the outside world. In a way, I hope I am stating to the reader an obvious point. Jobs and Apple are interchangeable.

In conclusion, countless books on leadership point out that critical to understanding organizations founded by unique individuals requires an analyst to compare both entities, the company's characteristics with the founder. Apple and Jobs are, as mentioned earlier doppelgängers, mirror images of each other.

Style of Leadership

Classic managers demonstrate a set of key competencies. They include but are not limited to: the ability to be fully self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses; demonstrate flexibility and adaptability in a wide range of circumstances; curiosity to the unusual; patience in face of difficulty; high tolerance to ambiguity; mindfulness of their impact on others; and imagination in problem solving.

Steve Jobs was a leader. He bent people to his will and forced change. However, he was by many criteria a bad manager. Impatient, dismissive of mediocrity (in his eyes), inflexible in almost economically suicidal ways (think NEXT) Steve Jobs becomes the classic bad manager!

In time failure forced Jobs to mature by overcoming his limitations. Failure is a wonderful teacher. It helped Jobs confirm that one of his significant strengths was in problem solving. Repeatedly he cut to the chase of a problem by looking for the simplest solution to an issue. Too many products, reduce them down to four areas of market need (like any good consultant he liked using quadrants).

A critical question about leadership that is greater than my ability to answer in this essay; does the leader need to fit himself/herself into any problem-solving situation (situational leadership) or does the organization morph into a reflection of the owner/leader? I would argue that mutual behavior development takes place over time and because of complex, systemic circumstances. The analyst needs to understand the interplay of both.

Who Controls Whom

My purpose in writing this essay was to help the reader think about organizational change as a dialogue between conflicting cultural and normative behaviors. A dominant theme of leadership literature tends to focus the reader on the individual woman or man apart from the organization she or he leads.

I believe that we are better served if we first focus on the cultural context of the organization through understanding its values. Guardian or Commercial, each set of values determines key aspects of organizational effectiveness. Leaders/owners adopt Guardian or Commercial values in conscious or unconscious ways. Discerning both the value sets adopted and the history of change development apart from the leader allows the analyst to isolate the leader/organizational interplay that over time determines organizational success.

A Tool to Help You

The following graphic presents two sets of values that I critiqued against syndrome values. One is from a book by Jason Jennings titled *Less is more: How great companies use productivity*. The other graphic is directly from Steve Jobs words about Apple values as represented in the Isaacson book. Both express the author/ leader's values as rendered by each in their representative books. I ask you to compare each to the other. Ask yourself why, in this comparison, core values seem to emerge as Guardian more frequently than Commercial? I believe it is because certain Guardian values are seen as contributing to enhancing societal needs more frequently than crass Commercialism. This is especially true if you trying to build a long lasting organization.

Each X in a box represents a subjective choice that weighs personal interpretation against Guardian/Commercial Syndromes. The process of choice is very dependent on your judgment of what each means.

More Is Less - Jennings	G	C
Attention to Detail		X
High Moral Fiber		X
Embracing Simplicity	X	
Competitive Attitude		X
Long-term Focus	X	
Disdain For Waste		X
Coach Leadership	X	
Humility	X	
Reject Bureaucracy		X
Belief In Others	X	
Trust	X	

Apple - Jobs (P. 570)	G	C
Build Enduring Company	X	
Products Before Profits	X	
Figure Out Need Before Customer		X
Magic Intersection - Man & Tech	X	
Not An Entrepreneur	X	
I Am Right!	X	
Innovate - Keep Moving		X
Add to the Flow - Contribute	X	

Finally, I am including a check off chart for your own research. Look at the values of the company you want to evaluate. Do the best you can to subjectively measure organizational values against Jacobs Moral Syndrome Values. I tend to think you will find that long lasting, socially contributive values are an interesting hybridized mix of both Guardian and Commercial Syndrome Values.

Moral Syndromes Values Template

Guardian Moral Value	G
Shun Trading	
Exert Prowess	
Be Obedient and Disciplined	
Adhere to Tradition	
Respect Hierarchy	
Be Loyal	
Take Vengeance	
Deceive for the Sake of the Task	
Make Rich Use of Leisure	
Be Ostentatious	
Dispense Largesse	
Be Exclusive	
Show Fortitude	
Be Fatalistic	
Treasure Honor	

Commercial Moral Value	C
Shun Force	
Come to Voluntary Agreements	
Be Honest	
Collaborate Easily with Strangers and Aliens	
Compete	
Respect Contracts	
Use Initiative and Enterprise	
Be Open to Inventiveness and Novelty	
Be Efficient	
Promote Comfort and Convenience	
Dissent for the Sake of the Task	
Invest for Productive Purposes	
Be Industrious	
Be Thrifty	
Be Optimistic	

Stages of Analysis

1. <u>Define</u> Organizational Values
2. <u>Compare</u> Values to Guardian/Commercial Values
3. <u>Check Off</u> Appropriate Boxes
4. <u>Score</u> – More of One Over the Other
5. <u>Decide</u> Dominant Moral Values
6. *<u>Decide</u> the Level of Hybridization – More Mixed = More Dysfunction*

Summary

I hope the reader has found aspects of this essay informative and useful. I believe that the more we divorce ourselves from the erroneous belief that leaders, <u>by themselves</u>…as *heroic* figures, know best; the better off we are. Further, consider that workers are frequently <u>not lost</u> for direction when far-seeing leaders die (think Corporals successfully leading platoons when the leadership is killed). Interestingly, <u>followership</u> is as important as leadership (the subject of another essay).

In conclusion, I suggest that we all think more deeply about the best attributes of a leader as she/he lead. At the heart of any leader's success is the creative worker/employee. Woman or man, each individual employee has the duty to contribute to organizational effectiveness by challenging leadership to think beyond the leaders own needs and more fully on meeting customer/societal needs. Modern business, indeed global business functions successfully in a complex world only if we effectively harness all aspects of society: leaders, and followers.

Jobs represented both the best and the worst of us. So does, through him, his company, Apple and to some degree ourselves.

Definitions

Autodidact
A self-taught person

Charisma
1: A personal magic of leadership arousing special popular loyalty or enthusiasm for a

public figure (as a political leader)

2: a special magnetic charm or appeal <the charisma of a popular actor>

Nexus
1: connection, link; [see] also: a causal link

2: a connected group or series

Savant
A person of learning; especially: one with detailed knowledge in some specialized field (as of

science or literature).

Syndrome
1: a group of signs and symptoms that occur together and characterize a particular

abnormality or condition

2: a set of concurrent things (as emotions or actions) that usually form and identifiable

pattern

References

Isaacson, W. (October 24, 2011). *Steve Jobs*. New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster. ISBN-10 1451648537

Jacobs, J. (1994). *Systems of survival: A dialogue on the moral foundations of commerce and politics.* Vintage. ISBN-10 0679748164

Jennings, J. (November, 2002). *Less is more: How great companies use productivity*. New York, NY: Penguin. ASIN: B00030KONK

Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary [electronic version].