

IS3103 Information Systems Leadership and Communication
Mini Case: Steve Jobs (for Lecture 7 Discussion)

Box 4.8 Case Study**An Entrepreneur for the Ages ⁸¹**

Steve Jobs has been called “the greatest business executive of our era, the one most certain to be remembered a century from now.”⁸² Jobs, who led both Apple Computer and Pixar Animation Studios, played a key role in revolutionizing six industries: personal computing, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing, and digital publishing. He also helped create the phone application business. Under his leadership, Pixar became one of the most profitable studios in Hollywood history by producing such films as *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*. Jobs not only cofounded Apple but also returned after a decade to lead the firm’s resurrection. Less than 90 days from insolvency when he returned in 1996, Apple became the most valuable company in the world right before his death in 2011. During his two tenures, the company released a series of highly successful new products including the iMac, iPod, iPhone, iPad, and iCloud.

Biographers frequently use the term “charismatic” when describing Jobs. He earned this label, in part, through his communication style and his ability to read the needs and emotions of other people. Kept lean by a series of strange diets (at one point he ate only raw shredded carrots without dressing), Jobs trained himself to make eye contact for long periods of time without blinking. He could size people up and convince them to support his ideas by speaking to their needs. He would be alternatively charming and abusive, flattering those he liked (or needed something from), and dismissing those he disliked.

Jobs demonstrated the self-confidence, vision, and focus associated with charismatic figures. He considered himself to be special or enlightened, like Einstein, Gandhi, or the gurus he met as a spiritual seeker in India. One sign of his supreme self-confidence was his refusal to do market research. He argued, “A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.”⁸³ Throughout his life his goal was to unite the humanities (liberal arts) with technology, creating products that were simple, beautiful, and functional. Despite his limited technological and engineering skills, Jobs was awarded more than 200 patents, mainly for product design. His focus was legendary. When he returned to Apple after a decade away, he helped save the company by eliminating most of the firm’s products to concentrate on a few. The CEO oversaw nearly every detail of every device Apple produced. He rejected boards and memory chips he considered ugly, even though consumers would never see them. His attention to detail carried over to packaging. The box for the iMac or iPad was often as elegantly designed as the device itself.

Jobs’s charisma was most apparent when introducing new products to gatherings of the Apple faithful, who often acted like members of a religious cult. He would carefully choose the background images and music for his performance at MacWorld. He would then appear on stage in a black turtleneck and jeans to the cheers of the audience. Sometimes speaking for an hour or two without notes, he would carefully build toward the climax of the event. Enthusiastic audience members knew that the moment had arrived to unveil the latest iPod or iPhone when Jobs would say, “And one last thing.” Then he would flawlessly demonstrate the device’s features while extolling its ability to change the lives of consumers.

The Apple CEO had a powerful effect on his employees. For example, those who served on the team that developed the first Mac computer still look back at this experience as one of the high

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points of their lives. Time and time again Jobs was able to convince his followers to achieve much more than they ever could have on their own. Under his direction, engineers met seemingly unachievable deadlines while inventing new technologies.

Jobs exhibited the dark side of charisma as well. His intense focus meant that he divided the world into two categories: great or terrible. Those who worked with him could find themselves on both sides of the divide in one day, being lavished with praise one moment and the subject of an angry rant at another. Employees described the "good Steve" and the "bad Steve." The "good Steve" brought out the best in followers. The "bad Steve" was an abusive bully, yelling at employees and demeaning them in meetings. Apple employees would opt for the stairs rather than ride the elevator with him lest they lose their jobs before the doors opened. Entrepreneur Jobs also clashed with outsiders. He dismissed Bill Gates as "basically unimaginative" and accused him of "shamelessly" stealing the ideas of others.⁸⁴ He told a reporter that he was a "slime bucket who gets most of his facts wrong."⁸⁵

Those around Jobs noted his ability to deny or distort facts, what they called the "reality distortion field," a term adapted from a *Star Trek* episode in which aliens create their own world through the force of mental energy. Jobs didn't believe that the rules applied to him and he was often able to change how followers viewed the world as well. For instance, Apple was able to compete with much larger companies like Xerox and IBM because Jobs was able to convince followers to buy into his vision of the future. Said one employee, "It was a self-fulfilling distortion. You did the impossible, because you didn't realize it was impossible."⁸⁶

Sadly, operating in the reality distortion field may have contributed to the CEO's premature death. Jobs refused to be operated on after he was diagnosed with cancer. He believed that he could cure himself through diet instead. Only later did he relent, which allowed the cancer to spread.