

The 1 Crucial Trait Steve Jobs Taught Apple CEO Tim Cook

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Steve Jobs taught Tim Cook that transformative leaders don't follow the status quo.

Speaking to more than 5,500 graduates at the 2018 Duke University commencement on Sunday, Apple CEO Tim Cook reminded them that, despite the problems facing society, "this is the best time in history to alive."

The data backs up Cook's observation. Today's university graduates are starting their careers at a time when progress is dramatically accelerating across every measure of human wellbeing. According to Cook, that progress gives everyone--entrepreneurs, especially--"the tools, potential, and reach to a make a better world."

Cook recalled his friend and mentor, Steve Jobs, as the person who taught him to be fearless--a trait anyone hoping to challenge the status quo should share. By working side by side with Jobs beginning in 1998, Cook learned that transformative leaders have "a restless refusal" to accept things as they are.

"No big challenge has ever been solved and no lasting improvement has ever been achieved unless people dare to try something different," Cook told the crowd.

Cook believes that anyone who hopes to change the world must find their fearlessness. He gave the audience three ways to do just that:

1. TAKE THE FIRST STEP, EVEN IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE IT WILL TAKE YOU.

One of Cook's favorite lessons is Steve Jobs's admonition to have the courage to follow your heart wherever it may lead. Often, that means having the courage to break from conventional wisdom.

"I've learned that the greatest challenge of life is knowing when to break with conventional wisdom," Cook said. "Don't just accept the world you inherit today. Don't just accept the status quo. No big challenge has ever been solved, and no lasting improvement has ever been achieved, unless people dare to try something different. Dare to think different."

It reminds me of a quote from Cook's commencement speech at MIT last year: "Measure your impact on humanity not in likes but in the lives you touch, not in popularity but the people you serve. I found my life got bigger when I stopped caring about what people thought of me."

Entrepreneurship, by definition, means going against conventional wisdom. You'll always find more naysayers than supporters, more critics than those who celebrate your original ideas. Taking the first step to challenge the status quo is scary--and it's the habit that drives great leaders.

2. BE DRIVEN BY A HIGHER PURPOSE RATHER THAN APPLAUSE.

At Apple, Cook says, they don't ask, "What can we do?" Instead they ask, "What should we do?"

"We reject the notion that global warming is inevitable--that's why we run Apple on 100 percent renewable energy," Cook told the Duke graduates. "We reject the excuse that getting the most out of technology means trading away your right to privacy. We choose a different path. Collecting as little as your data as possible and being thoughtful and respectful when it's in our care."

Apple, of course, isn't perfect. For example, in 2012, the *New York Times* questioned the labor conditions at overseas factories building Apple products. But Cook responded quickly and forcefully, reminding employees and customers that Apple is guided by its values. If there were problems, he said, they would be "attacked aggressively."

Steve Jobs was known for the phrase "enriching lives," and to this day, I still hear Apple executives--including Tim Cook--use the phrase.

Being guided by a set of higher values and purpose will help you respond more quickly to crises. It'll keep you focused on a North Star when your peers or competitors are shifting strategy based on short-term trends.

3. REVEAL YOUR CHARACTER.

Cook says fearlessness inspires us because it reveals character--people who aren't afraid to stand up and speak out when something needs to change. "Fearless like the students of Parkland, Florida, who refused to be silent about the epidemic of gun violence," Cook proclaimed. "Fearless like the women who cast light into dark places and move us into a more just and equal future. Fearless, like those who fight for the rights of immigrants."

He reminded graduates that they aren't powerless in the face of problems--no previous generation has had more power to change things faster. That reminder applies to students, graduates and entrepreneurs alike.

Entrepreneurship requires fearlessness. At a time of nearly full employment, it takes courage to take the path less traveled by your peers. It takes courage to make gigantic improvements instead of incremental ones. It takes courage to build a business when you don't know where your next paycheck will be coming from.

Above all, says Cook, it takes courage to be the first person to stand up and change things when the majority of people are content to accept things as they are.

Cook ended his Duke commencement speech: "Duke graduates, be fearless." It's a good motto for all entrepreneurs to live by--be fearless.

Fearless is inspiring.

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