

# The Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs

KEY LEARNING SUMMARY

*featuring* **Walter Isaacson**

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# The Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs

Walter Isaacson, Author of *Steve Jobs*; President and CEO, Aspen Institute,  
Adi Ignatius (Moderator), Editor-in-Chief, Harvard Business Review Group

## OVERVIEW

Steve Jobs is one of the most compelling business leaders of our time and it is impossible to replicate his success. Valuable lessons can be learned from how Jobs created products and ran his companies. These lessons can be reapplied by leaders within their own contexts and styles.

Among these lessons: Put great, beautiful products before profits; sit at the intersection of art, technology, and business; focus on both the big picture and the small details; simplify; and bend reality by not accepting the status quo.

## CONTEXT

Walter Isaacson, author of best-selling biography *Steve Jobs*, engaged in a conversation with Adi Ignatius about the upcoming *HBR* cover story, “The Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs,” where Isaacson shares 14 lessons from Jobs that can be applied broadly by business leaders.

## KEY LEARNINGS

**Steve Jobs was far more than an eccentric personality; he was a business genius.**

The biography *Steve Jobs* was a narrative of Jobs’ life. Per Jobs’ request, it was brutally honest, with no whitewashing. It was filled with anecdotes but didn’t contain analysis.

Commentators have tended to focus on Jobs’ strong and at times abrasive personality, but many have failed to recognize Jobs’ greatness as an innovative business leader. Because of this emphasis on Jobs’ personality, Isaacson decided to write a follow-up article focusing on important and broadly applicable leadership lessons from Jobs. He saw *Harvard Business Review* as the ideal forum for sharing these lessons.

Regarding Jobs’ personality (which received minimal focus in the webinar in comparison to the leadership lessons), Isaacson acknowledged that Jobs could be incredibly demanding of those who worked for him. Yet there are many

unpleasant bosses in the world. Jobs was different because he was compelling, charismatic, and inspired people to achieve great things. While Jobs was tough on people, he was fun to work with, interesting, and engendered tremendous loyalty among those who worked for him.

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*“He was tough and pushed people to their limits, but he inspired them.”*

—Walter Isaacson

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**Leadership lessons can be learned from Steve Jobs and applied by each person based on their context and style.**

The leadership lessons extracted from Jobs are not a how-to guide and don’t represent a formula for success. Each context and each leader are different. But, these lessons from Jobs’ life and experience can influence a leader’s thinking.

Tim Cook, the current CEO of Apple, provides an example. Cook has done an outstanding job of learning these important lessons from Jobs (such as the importance of simplicity and of great products), while applying his own personality and leadership style to the unique problems he faces. Jobs didn’t have to deal with issues in China, which Cook does, and Jobs didn’t want Apple to pay a dividend, which Cook has done. Thus, these lessons are informative, but they don’t provide a cookie-cutter approach to leadership and don’t guarantee success. Each leader must make his or her own decisions based on their context and personal style.

**Lesson: Combine the Humanities with the Sciences**

Jobs was a tech geek who loved poetry, art, and music. He believed that beauty mattered. He was a creative humanities kid who was inspired by Picasso, Gandhi, and Dylan. He was also fascinated with technology and science. He saw tremendous value in standing at the intersection of the humanities and the sciences, of art and technology.

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*"He applied art and beauty to technology."*

—Walter Isaacson

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#### **Lesson: Put Products Before Profits.**

Jobs felt strongly that if a company makes beautiful, compelling products, profits will follow. This is contrary to the approach in many companies where the focus is on milking existing products to maximize profits. In doing so, designers and engineers are excluded.

#### **Lesson: Impute**

The word means that everything related to a product affects how people will think about that product. So the colors and packaging of a product affect how people perceive the product. People's initial reaction upon setting foot into an Apple store affects how they feel about the store, the company, and its products.

#### **Lesson: Take Responsibility End to End**

Jobs felt that to deliver a beautiful product it was necessary to tightly control everything about the product. As a result, even with some imperfections, tens of millions of people love Apple products. (Isaacson expressed the hope that there will always be a tension between tightly controlled, beautiful products/systems and more open platforms that provide more choices.)

#### **Lesson: Simplify**

Jobs initially worked at Atari and was struck by the simplicity of the company's products. He constantly pushed to make products even simpler, more intuitive, and easier to use. In designing the iPod, he wanted a user to be able to get to any song in three clicks. He required that the device not have an on or off switch. It needed no manual. The marketing for the iPad touted, "You already know how to use it."

#### **Lesson: Focus**

When Jobs returned to the helm of Apple, the company was making 40 models of computers, which he reduced to four. He forced the company to focus and make a few big bets. At retreats among executives, participants fought to get their ideas on a short list of top priorities. Jobs would then cross

off most of the list and demand that the organization focus on just three or four areas.

His emphasis on focus can also be seen in how he spent his day. He was very strict in filtering out distraction. Each day he would pick four or five things on which to focus, and wouldn't do anything else. He wouldn't respond to emails or calls if they weren't related to what he was focusing on.

#### **Lesson: Engage Face-to-Face**

Jobs loved face-to-face meetings. Apple had a senior team meeting each Monday and a marketing meeting each Wednesday with no agenda and no presentations. Ideas were presented and the group hashed out what it wanted to do. He also loved face-to-face meetings in the design studio to see first-hand the products being developed.

#### **Lesson: Bend Reality**

Throughout Jobs' life, he believed that certain things were possible, even when others said, "It can't be done." He imagined it and then pushed and inspired people to rise to the challenge and create a new reality. This doesn't always work, but for Jobs it worked frequently.

Examples included pushing Steve Wozniak to create software within four days that he thought was impossible, getting engineers within Apple to decrease the Mac's time to boot up from 70 seconds to 42, and convincing the CEO of Corning to produce a new type of glass for the iPhone. In each instance, an unblinking Jobs looked these individuals in the eye and said, "Don't be afraid; you can do it."

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*"Don't be afraid. You can do it."*

—Steve Jobs, in a common refrain to inspire people to do what they thought wasn't possible

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#### **Lesson: Know Both the Big Picture and the Details**

Few people can deal with both big-picture strategy and minute details—but Jobs could. He engaged in strategies about new platforms, new classes of devices, the cloud, and how the tablet would change publishing (as a strategist). At the same time, he dealt with the screws used in the iPhone, the colors used, and how the box would open (as an artist).

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*"This might be the most important item on the list. It explains why people don't just use his products but why they love them."*

—Adi Ignatius

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**Lesson: Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish**

Jobs was a bit of a rebel and a misfit who went from complete poverty to immense wealth in a very short period. Once this occurred, Jobs realized life was about the journey; not about making money. This realization gave Jobs the courage to take big risks without having fear of failure.

(Other lessons in the HBR article which were not discussed in the webinar include: when behind, leapfrog; don't be a slave to focus groups; tolerate only "A" players; and push for perfection.)

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## Other Important Points

- **Jobs and Gates.** Jobs and Gates had a rivalry and a strong respect for the other. Gates began by creating software for Apple and then created Windows, which crushed Apple's operating system. Yet when Jobs
- **Relationship with money.** Jobs had a complex relationship with money. He said "It's not about the money," took a salary of \$1, and believed that money is not a motivator. Yet he re-priced stock options for other executives, which was investigated by the SEC, and was not extremely philanthropic.
- **Lessons from Ben Franklin.** Ben Franklin, whose biography Mr. Isaacson also authored, offered 12 life lessons. Among these were diligence, honesty, frugality, and humility (which Franklin said he faked well).

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## BIOGRAPHIES

### **Walter Isaacson**

*President and CEO, Aspen Institute*

Walter Isaacson is the president and CEO of the Aspen Institute. He is a graduate of Harvard College and of Pembroke College of Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He began his career at *The Sunday Times of London* and then the *New Orleans Times-Picayune/States-Item*. He joined TIME in 1978 and served as a political correspondent, national editor, and editor of new media before becoming the magazine's 14<sup>th</sup> editor in 1996. He became chairman and CEO of CNN in 2001, and then president and CEO of the Aspen Institute in 2003.

Isaacson is also the chairman of the board of Teach for America, which recruits recent college graduates to teach in underserved communities. He was appointed by President Barack Obama and confirmed by the Senate to serve as the chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and other international broadcasts of the United States, a position he held until 2012. He is vice-chair of Partners for a New Beginning, a public-private group tasked with forging ties between the United States and the Muslim world. He is on the board of United Airlines, Tulane University, and the Overseers of Harvard University. From 2005-2007, after Hurricane Katrina, he was the vice-chair of the Louisiana Recovery Authority.

### **Adi Ignatius**

*Editor-in-Chief, Harvard Business Review Group*

Adi Ignatius joined Harvard Business Review as editor-in-chief in January 2009. Previously, he was deputy managing editor for TIME, where he helped oversee the week-to-week editing of the magazine and was also responsible for many of TIME's special editions, including the Person of the Year and TIME 100 franchises. He was the editor of two books: *President Obama: The Path to the White House* and *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang*. Both made the *New York Times* Bestseller List. Prior to his 2007 appointment as deputy managing editor, Ignatius served as executive editor of TIME starting in 2002, and from 2004 to 2007, he also held the additional title of editor of TIME Canada. Ignatius joined TIME as deputy editor of TIME Asia in 1996, based in Hong Kong, and was named editor of that edition in 2000. He also wrote frequently for TIME, including most recently, cover stories on Google Inc., and the 2007 Person of the Year profile of Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

Prior to joining TIME, Ignatius worked for many years at the *Wall Street Journal*, where his work was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and later as managing editor of the *Central European Economic Review* and business editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, publications owned by Dow Jones, Inc.

Ignatius was awarded a Zuckerman Fellowship at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs in 1990. He received his BA in History in 1981 from Haverford College in Pennsylvania. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Asia Society.

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