Case study: Steve Jobs as a transformational leader

Steve Jobs is an example of a leader who is often associated with transformational leadership, in particular when it comes to his charismatic and inspirational qualities (e.g. Bryant, 2003; Bass and Riggio, 2005). A simple internet search on his name heralds a raft of articles describing him as 'iconic', 'visionary', 'genius', 'brilliant', 'mythic', 'magical', 'charismatic', or 'authentic'. The *New York Times* argued that he 'led a cultural transformation in the way music, movies and mobile communications were experienced in the digital age' (Madoff, 2011). Or as another newspaper says, 'our lives are different and much more interesting with this man leading us to the land of what's next' ('A design, a dream', 2010). Jobs himself was driven to transform the world, as captured in this mantra: 'I want to put a ding in the universe' (Isaacson, 2011). Academics also attributed transformational powers to Jobs. Victor Vroom, a prominent professor at the Yale School of Management, said in 2010 that '[Jobs] is the supreme example of the transformational leader who stands for higher order values … he has caused people to do things they might never have done before' ('A design, a dream', 2010). Religious language is often used when describing Jobs, some calling him a 'saviour' (Mishkin, 2009), or as one writer says, 'Jobs himself has been labeled a saint, a sinner, and now a saint again' ('A design, a dream', 2010).

After Jobs's death in 2011, the Board of Directors of Apple issued a statement saying that 'The world is immeasurably better because of Steve', which may indeed be seen as 'leadership beyond expectations' (Bass, 1985). This was echoed in the media and the numerous blog posts that eulogised Steve's impact. US President Barack Obama said, 'Steve was among the greatest of American innovators – brave enough to think differently, bold enough to believe he could change the world, and talented enough to do it'. He goes on, 'Steve was fond of saying that he lived every day like it was his last. Because he did, he transformed our lives, redefined entire industries, and achieved one of the rarest feats in human history: he changed the way each of us sees the world' (Gardner and Thornhill, 2011).

Let's start with some of the language used in these quotes. The use of religious metaphors (the saviour, sinner, saint) illustrates our previous discussion about the strong religious dimension of transformational leadership

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that is rarely admitted by the scholars who research this concept. Yet Jobs is a perfect example of a corporate leader who was inspired by and fascinated with the charisma of cult leaders and spiritual gurus (he was a devoted follower of Zen Buddhism) and 'borrowed' charismatic traits from these leaders (Isaacson, 2011, p. 38).

We notice the totalizing nature of the language and sentiments – Steve single-handedly changed not only several industries, but the universe (a bit like God?) and every person in it. Whilst we could debate the likelihood of whether 'every person' has been changed by Jobs's hand, nevertheless the hyperbolic nature of this writing ('entire', 'greatest', 'immeasurably') conveys how journalists, politicians, CEOs, writers and the general public construct him as a 'Great Man', a supreme leader 'leading us to the land of what's next'.

This highly romanticized image of Jobs (which perhaps says more about the needs, desires and anxieties of those constructing this image than Jobs himself) has recently been called into question. While some may celebrate Jobs's ability to make people 'do things they might never have done before', this cannot solely be read in a positive light. Jobs was known for his 'reality distortion field' or, in other words, he had a tendency to wilfully deny reality, to completely ignore certain truths or facts. He then used this to 'con people into believing his vision' as one colleague says (Isaacson, 2011, p. 118). He 'hypnotized' people to do 'the impossible because you didn't realise it was impossible' (p. 119). He transformed 'reality' and 'truth' to get people to perform beyond their expectations.

Jobs's case therefore also links to our previous discussion about the dysfunctional or destructive side of charismatic leadership. Workers describe how they worked beyond their expectations out of fear. Jobs was known to have moments where he was aggressive and belittling in his treatment of peers, superiors and subordinates (Isaacson, 2011). As a senior colleague says, 'He had the uncanny capacity to . . . make you feel small . . . it's a common trait in people who are charismatic and know how to manipulate people. Knowing that he can crush you makes you feel weakened and eager for his approval, so then he can elevate you and put you on a pedestal and own you' (Isaacson, 2011, p. 120). One colleague describes Jobs's leadership as 'management by character assassination' (p. 196). Another senior colleague at one point said, 'we should expose him for the fraud that he is so that people here stop regarding him as a messiah' (p. 214). Such stories therefore pointedly question the problematic assumption in transformational leadership literature that the transformational leader is inherently benign and good. And yet many of those who felt the wrath of Jobs's aggression and bullying also counted themselves 'the absolute luckiest person in the world to have worked with him' (p. 124). This hardly sounds like the individualized consideration or stimulation that the transformational leadership literature prizes, so is the MLQ really a 'relevant' or 'accurate' measure of the complex reality of how transformational leaders indeed get people to work harder?

But it's easy to place far too much emphasis on Jobs's personality and influence. Indeed, there is a lot more going on in a complex, high-tech, entrepreneurial and competitive company like Apple that contributes to the workers' and organization's performance and productivity than just one man. For example, the team who created the first Macintosh computer seemed highly dedicated not only to each other, but also to the product and the competition between the Macintosh product/team and the Apple II product/group. However, these powerful 'transformational' influences invariably become ignored in a contemporary society that worships the idea of a heroic 'saviour' leader.

Finally, the transformational leadership literature rarely (if ever) considers in a broader sense whether the outcomes of this 'transformation' are as beneficial as assumed. In other words, is the new world that Jobs apparently created really as good as it's assumed to be? Has his inventions led to a higher quality of

life like many claim? One could argue that the lives of the Foxconn factory workers who produce thousands of Apple products a day in alienating conditions for very low pay have been transformed, but not for the better (see any of David Barboza's investigative journalism pieces published in the *New York Times* for accounts of the working conditions). One could also question the extreme working conditions of Apple's senior executives, engineers, technicians and others many of whom who work long hours in stressful and competitive conditions – is performing 'beyond expectations' (like Bass celebrates) a sustainable, meaningful way of living 'the good life'? We don't doubt that Apple products have benefited certain groups – this chapter has been written on our MacBooks – but what we are concerned with is the imbalanced nature of discussions about Apple and Jobs that tend to over-celebrate the positive way these products have changed our lives. So, what are some of the harmful consequences of the infusion of technology in our lives, created by products like the iPhone? At a macro level, we may ask how technology is being used by governments (or their intelligence agencies) to facilitate more invasive means of monitoring citizens – and how technology companies are co-operating with these ethically questionable initiatives. At a micro level, we may ask how technological devices (like the iPhone and iPad, and their raft of 'apps') are having negative impacts on our identities, relationships, and communities.

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1. Why do you think so much attention has been placed on Steve Jobs as an individual over Apple as a collective? Do you agree/disagree with these attributions of single-handedly 'saving' Apple, or personally 'dinging' the universe? Why?
2. What did Steve Jobs transform? How was it transformed?
3. How and why did people think Steve Jobs was charismatic?
4. What parallels can you see in this case study between Steve Jobs and a religious leader? What do you make of those? How might this be helpful? How might it be harmful?
5. Where can you see redemption in this case study?