Steve Jobs' Immortal Quest and the Heroic Persona

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October 2011 was a month of historic milestones for Apple. At the end of the prior month, on Tuesday, September 27, Apple sent media invitations for a press event to be held October 4, 2011 at 10:00 am at the Cupertino Headquarters for a major announcement. Several prominent industry analysts proclaimed with hopeful optimism that the firm would announce the return of Apple founder Steve Jobs.

Sadly, Steve Jobs did not appear for what turned out to be a product announcement of the iPhone 4S. In fact, Jobs had stepped down as CEO on January 17, 2011, a year and a half after returning from medical leave. He stated that Tim Cook, Apple's Chief Operating Officer, would run day-to-day operations as he had previously done during Jobs' 2009 medical leave.

The analysts' wishful thinking had some basis in more than cult like denial of Steve Jobs' mortality. In fact, despite that medical leave, Jobs had returned for the iPad 2 launch on March 2 and the iCloud introduction on June 6. The analysts were among many constituents around the world who were to be tragically disappointed. Jobs actually had resigned as CEO on August 22, 2011 saying, "I have always said if there ever came a day when I could no longer meet my duties and expectations as Apple's CEO, I would be the first to let you know. Unfortunately, that day has come" (Isaacson, 2011). Six weeks later, a day after the new iPhone press conference, he died (Isaacson, 2011).

The grief within Apple's ranks across the globe was profound, but enthusiasm for his product legacy soared. In the first 24 hours after its October release, 1 million 4S models were sold. A key Jobs goal was reached posthumously as Apple became the largest mobile handset vendor in the world by revenue in 2011, surpassing Nokia, then the long-time leader. That quarter, Apple reported historic high earnings with 53 percent of its revenue derived from sales of 37 million iPhones.

In the life stage of monarchies, the palace crier proclaimed, "Long Live the King" followed by, "The King is dead," and then "Long Live the King." As Apple rallied

around the leadership team which survived the death of founder Steve Jobs, customers, media, and investors wondered how Tim Cook, the new CEO, especially after an underwhelming product launch the day before Jobs' passing, could possibly be "the new Steve Jobs" (Sonnenfeld, 2011b). Disappointed, Apple watchers reexamined the long term Senior Vice President of iOS Software, Scott Forstall, Apple global marketing executive Phil Shiller, and iPad developer Jonathan Ives for traces of the Jobs mystique.

Such leadership searches would not be satisfying. There is no known clone of Steve Jobs even though new reports suggest a reborn Apple University is about to ambitiously launch a curriculum to institutionalize the charisma of Jobs (Sonnenfeld, 2011). Such endeavors must be mindful that Jobs, a college dropout and maverick, was not himself the product of management seminars and leadership simulations. He learned from reflecting on the wild ups and downs of experience and confided in trusted mentors such as David Packard and Robert Noyce – good potential role models for a board of directors.

Cloning Jobs in Seminars

It was as much his experience that defined him as his intellectual genes – or given his deliberate casual look, some would say his jeans. To find the next Steve Jobs means first defining Steve Jobs. He is a global household name known across all segments of society and all life stages. He was not merely a successful or even merely an inspiring business leader. Steve Jobs was a classic folk hero and folk heroes are not simply the product of carefully designed organization charts, diligent inventory management by HR department replacement tables, conventional MBA courses, messianic external searches by board committees and recruiters, or other neatly planned succession conveyer belts.

Instead, they are the product of restive souls struggling through the rocky road of uncommon risk, grandiose dreams, disappointment, failure, and fear of mortality. Not always pleasant people to be around, they produce change through this never satisfied quest. Sigmund Freud's (1929, p. 29) masterpiece *Civilization and its Discontents* argued that "One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of 'Creation.'" Similarly, painter Robert Motherwell once explained why artists sneak in at night to touch up their "completed works" already hanging on gallery walls. "One wonderful thing about creativity is that you're never wholly satisfied with what you're trying to do. There's always the anguish, the pleasurable challenge" (Sonnenfeld, 1988).

Society's Choice of Folk Heroes

At times, various occupations from explorers and frontiersmen, to warriors and statesmen, to inventors and business leaders speak to this societal need – depending on where society's greatest uncertainty and disruptions appear. When American society no longer needed images of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, heroic images of legendary frontiersmen like Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Davy Crockett, and others arose. Then inventors such as Samuel F. B. Morse, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Luther Burbank, the Wright Brothers, and Henry Ford captured the

public imagination. They, in turn were followed by FDR, George C. Marshall, Douglas McArthur, Omar Bradley, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. At a later period, leaders such as Gordon Moore and Robert Noyce of Intel, Ken Olsen of Digital Equipment, An Wang and David Packard of HP, Bill Gates of Microsoft, and Steve Jobs of Apple emerged.

Folk heroes provide people with a path to navigate through highly uncertain times by simplifying frameworks for a complex world and the personification of transformation in calming human dimensions. They are characterized by five key criteria: 1) common origins; 2) resilience from crushing adversity; 3) transformative technologies; 4) mythic making mystique and unique self-promotion; and 5) wider societal visions (Sonnenfeld, 1988).

First is the idea of the common touch – often through humble origins. Thomas Edison, who founded General Electric and invented the electric light, the phonograph, and motion pictures, was the son of a rural lumber mill operator. Car maker Henry Ford was a farmer. Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie was the immigrant son of a poor Scottish weaver. Steve Jobs, was born out of wedlock, an orphan abandoned by his natural parents, a Syrian Muslim political scientist, and a USC graduate student.

Secondly, business folk heroes triumphed over life's adversity from career setbacks to personal health crises. Both of Henry Ford's first two automobile firms failed. Walt Disney's first two companies failed as well and he lost control of his first cartoon characters. Thomas Edison was cruelly outmaneuvered by tycoon Jay Gould and lost the rights to many of his own early significant inventions such as the simultaneous transmission of several messages on the same wire.

Steve Jobs, of course, showed incredible personal stamina and resilience in his five year struggle with pancreatic cancer. Jobs was forced out of the firm he created in 1985 and he did not return to Apple until 1997 when the company purchased his new company NeXT. As he recounted in his 2005 Stanford Commencement speech:

> So at 30 I was out. And very publicly out. What had been the focus of my entire adult life was gone, and it was devastating. I felt that I had let the previous generation of entrepreneurs down - that I had dropped the baton as it was being passed to me. I met with David Packard and Bob Noyce and tried to apologize for screwing up so badly. I was a very public failure, and I even thought about running away from the Valley. But something slowly began to dawn on me - I still loved what I did. The turn of events at Apple had not changed that one bit. I had been rejected, but I was still in love. And so I decided to start over. I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again (Stanford Report, 2005).

His business comeback was unrivaled in industrial history. The Apple he returned to was a dying enterprise but by the time he died 14 years later, it had become the world's most valuable company. The second chance was essential. His greatest legacy may have been his creations after his comeback in his 40s – similar to other folk heroes ranging from JFK and Martin Luther King to Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson.
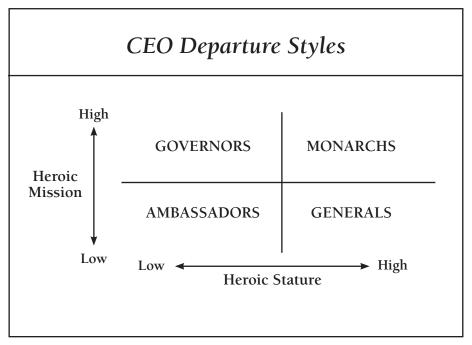
Thirdly, business folk heroes championed revolutionary technologies, discovering new markets and setting new standards of business performance. Edison, with 1,093 patents opened doors to vast new industrial frontiers in the fields of electricity, appliances, entertainment, and communications. Carnegie's transformation of steelmaking facilitated sweeping changes in transportation and construction – while introducing popular new concepts of cost control in the production process. Ford's vision of bringing the automobile into the hands of the average American through his process of mass production was adopted worldwide much the way Jobs' dream of bringing new technology into the average household with his notion of an inexpensive user-friendly personal computer was. Through Jobs' series of blockbuster products from the Mac, the iMac, the iPod, iTunes, the iPhone, and 230 patents, not to mention his pioneering animation studio Pixar, Jobs reshaped telecommunications, entertainment, education, and commercial transactions.

Fourth, business folk heroes created their own mythic imagery as great promoters. They were not obscure inventors tinkering in their lab; they seized the stage. This tendency for self-promotion has a long history. Alexander III of Macedonia labeled himself "Alexander the Great," fabricating a lineage to Odysseus and Achilles. Thanks to the publicity he generated, historians considered Ford to be better known in the early 1920s than any other American. Edison was also a skilled booster of his own accomplishments, notoriously ignoring the parallel or prior creations of Alexander Graham Bell. A compulsive overachiever, Edison hired platoons of publicity agents charged with elevating his fame. Jobs was such a master of staging, secrecy, and myth-making, many technology bloggers seriously expected that the flat iPhone 4S product launch by successor Tim Cook two days before Jobs' death was a set-up for a cameo visit from Jobs himself – back on stage.

Fifth, business folk heroes generally displayed a strong sense of civic concern and philanthropy. This is the unknown part of the Jobs' legacy. They have used their voices and resources to address societal distress. The remarkable generosity of Bill Gates and Warren Buffet was not emulated by Steve Jobs despite his estimated wealth in excess of 8 billion dollars. Gates and Buffet pledged the bulk of their wealth to communities and individuals in need, similar to the later career philanthropy of Ford and Carnegie who funded educational institutions, libraries, and foundations. Some wonder if Jobs resisted the public displays of philanthropy, curtailing corporate gifts and shutting down his own foundation and preferred to give anonymously or posthumously.

This speaks to the complex nature of Jobs' persona. In 1984, Polaroid founder Edwin Land prematurely dismissed Jobs as destined to fail because he didn't master his technology. By many accounts, Jobs was not a gracious person having defrauded his friend and cofounder Steve Wozniak of an even split in an early project at Atari and then denying for years the paternity of his own out-of-wedlock first child whose mother had to resort to public welfare. He was no fan of contemporary standards of transparency in governance. Former SEC chairman and Apple fan Arthur Leavitt said that once he had met with Jobs when he was being wooed to join the Apple board but after asking too many questions, Jobs withdrew the offer. Notorious for exacting high standards, he was also known for his temper and quickness to not tolerate those who disappointed him (Isaacson, 2011).

Table 1: *CEO Departure Styles*

CEO Departure Styles

	Low ← Heroic Stature → High	
High ↑	GOVERNORS	MONARCHS
Heroic Mission	AMBASSADORS	GENERALS
Low ↓		

Jeffery A. Sonnenfeld, The Hero's Farewell, 1988

Danger of the Boss as the Brand

The post-genius failures are sobering in number and severity. Years ago, the world's second-largest computer company was one most people had never heard of: Digital Equipment Corporation. Its founder, Ken Olsen, ran things for more than three decades, but the company became a casualty of the personal computer revolution. He wasn't an isolated example: An Wang of Wang Labs and William Norris of Control Data were both brilliant engineers and casualties too.

With so much evidence showing the benefits of good planning and the traps that lie in wait for companies too tied to their founders' vision, one would think modern CEOs would know better. Yet many seem loath to acknowledge a future without them in it. At a 2007 panel of CEOs, Warren Buffett asked Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos and News Corp CEO Rupert Murdoch to address their succession plans – and was met with virtual silence. Murdoch, now 79, was questioned about this at an annual shareholders' meeting in Adelaide, Australia eight years ago and replied that his retirement plans had been "put on hold forever" and that he would have to be "carried out," citing the recent birth of his second daughter to his third wife and boasting of his low cholesterol. Buffett chuckled: "Well that is truly leading beyond the box!" (Sonnenfeld, 2011a).

Why would a Jobs, a Murdoch, or an Olsen think he had anything more to prove? They all transformed their industries and had sweeping commercial impact across

countries and continents. But in the modern age, they became heroes of a sort – which is embedded in their self-concepts – and they can be susceptible to the foibles of heroes. These sorts of business folk heroes have complex character challenges which raise concerns over when the boss becomes the brand. The challenges include grandiosity, self-righteous omniscience that combine to forge an imperial identity that defines their heroic stature. The other challenge is a heroic mission which is based on a quest for immortality and indispensability.

The *heroic identity* drive can be manifest as grandiosity and narcissistic self-worship – such as with Occidental Petroleum's long running autocratic leader, Armand Hammer who led the firm until he died at age 92 and had a life sized bust of himself in the headquarters lobby, as well as a four foot oil picture of himself in the boardroom – although he only owned one percent of the company he led. James Dutt, as CEO of Beatrice required that every employee have a portrait of him hanging in their offices and cubicles.

When the CEO's name is fused with their firm, their health and conduct become corporate concerns stripping away claim to rights of privacy entitled to the rest of us. As Jobs' health declined, he initially put out false statements on his well-being, misleading investors, employees, and customers. Jobs cultivated a strong, loyal, and balanced top management team which had virtually no visibility, as they routinely were forbidden from talking with the media and all product launches featured only Steve Jobs as master showman. On the other hand, his soaring standards for excellence improved the quality of the average person's life. Great enhancements in healthcare and advances in education were enabled through his creations and also provided employment to thousands and created wealth for many.

What Jobs accomplished at Apple was, of course, monumental. Having unleashed a tidal wave of brilliant, trend-setting, consumer friendly products: the iPod, the iPhone, and the iPad, Jobs improbably turned Apple into the world's most valuable technology company. He also lured firms, industries, and cultures into a new future. When iTunes and the iPod arrived, people switched to buying their music online and the dire fears of the Napster days faded. Later Jobs' iPad forced publishers of books, magazines, and newspapers to rethink their own businesses.

Jobs succeeded through his unyielding vision and his obsessive oversight of Apple's quality standards. He was a master at bringing simplicity to the macho complexity that tech culture embraced, and he would not compromise. Charging into a smart phone market dominated by the button-festooned BlackBerry, Jobs demanded the iPhone's front face sport a single physical button. Now stores are filled with sleek phones that look like iPhone clones.

Jobs can also be thanked for exacting standards for transforming the telecommunications industry in the past few years. When developing the iPhone, Jobs decided he didn't like traditional voice mail, which forced owners to listen to their messages in sequential order. He said he wanted "visual voice mail," letting users choose and hear messages in any order. The feature meant overhauling huge phone systems – but AT&T agreed, got the iPhone, and signed up millions of customers.

Jobs was a folk hero but not necessarily a benevolent deity. Many of these business folk heroes dispense with the niceties and courtesies common at work because they are driven on a mission – a quest for immortality through their work.

In the 2005 Stanford speech, Jobs said:

> When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: 'If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right.' It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?' (Stanford Report, 2005).

The renowned psychoanalysts Otto Rank, Ernest Becker, and Robert Jay Lifton had described the unusual need of folk heroes to justify themselves as primary value in the universe as a quest for immortality. In the *Denial of Death,* Becker (1973, p. 66) wrote that many leaders "must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest contributions to world life, show that he counts more than anyone or anything else."

Haunted by their fear of mortality, folk heroes are in a hurry but it is through their unique identity and profound contribution that they can create an immortal legacy. As Jobs confided again at Stanford:

> No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true. Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition (Stanford Report, 2005).

Assisting the Hero's Farewell

When these challenges of heroic mission and heroic stature drives are combined to form a four cell diagram (Sonnenfeld, 2011b), folk heroes are often classified as *monarchs* – people who live for their job, have no other interests, and consider engagement in their position as the source of their health and vitality. Hence, they crowd the spotlight of others and will not groom equally strong personalities as potential successors. Clearly Warren Buffett is in no hurry to leave at eighty years old with a half century of running his public enterprise. Fred Smith has ruled FedEx for an astounding forty year reign with a long series of talented executives who parted ways when it was clear there was nowhere for them to go internally. By contrast, *ambassadors* who are at peace with their legacy, often groom strong successors such as the generations at UPS, DuPont, Microsoft, and Intel with the exiting encumbants remaining constructively on the board.

A life time Xerox generalist, Anne Mulcahy saved the company from near demise in a close partnership with her successor Ursula Burns. Intel can proudly point to a long lineage of strong leaders succeeding each other from Gordon Moore, Robert

Noyce, and Andy Grove, to Craig Barrett and Paul Otellini. Similarly at Verizon, Ray Smith was succeeded by Charles Lee, Ivan Seidenberg, and Lowell McAdam – all strong visionary leaders who stayed engaged to help in continuity after they left office. *Generals* feel strong identification with their role as leader and a responsibility after leaving office and can often feel the need to return to battle and reassert their power– as has happened to Jerry Yang at Yahoo, Larry Page at Google, Howard Schultz at Starbucks, Phil Knight at NIKE, Martha Stewart at Martha Stewart Omnimedia, and Michael Dell of Dell. They removed their successors and stepped back to perform tough tasks, challenging accumulated doctrine which only they had the authority to dissolve. *Governors* serve a bounded term of duty and then turn to a series of other life challenges, leaving their old role completely behind. Examples of this include Jack Welch of GE, Bill Donaldson of DLJ, The NYSE, Aetna, and the SEC, Jim Clarke of Silicon Graphics, Healtheon, WebMD, My CFO and Netscape, as well as Meg Whitman of Ebay and HP.

With *monarchs,* there can be an unhealthy overdependence on the folk hero. Juan Trippe, who launched Pan American Airways, was essentially the Steve Jobs of aviation. Trippe built his vision of a worldwide air-travel network by meticulously crafting relationships with key diplomats and politicians in countries around the world to ensure Pan Am would get favorable treatment on routes and gates. That gave Pan Am a hugely profitable dominance in international air travel. Trippe was also a Jobsian showman when it came to selling his product to consumers, using nautical terminology to evoke the luxury of cruise ships. But Trippe got so obsessed with company infighting that he didn't notice the world was changing around him. Pan Am's board found him to be arrogant and secretive but felt powerless to make changes. Many key company records seemed to exist only in Trippe's head. When deregulation arrived, Pan Am was ill prepared to transfer power to a new generation.

Many people do not understand how *ambassadors* lingering around the shop and on the board can be a constructive force. Things work well when the founders establish a line of successors. Computer chip giant Intel was founded by Gordon Moore and Robert Noyce – legendary engineers who left Fairchild Semiconductor to pursue their vision for microprocessors. They handpicked their senior executives, sculpting a clear succession process and cultivating a successor who was, if anything, even more creative: Andy Grove. Moore and Noyce were confident in their legacy, never threatened by Grove's ascension. They took the title of chairmen, with Grove acting as CEO. Yet it was Noyce who originally shaped Intel's carefree "follow your bliss" management style – shunning executive perks like private jets and dedicated parking spaces – that thrives there today and around Silicon Valley. He was the model for later Intel CEOs, and Intel's headquarters is named for him. Intel's leaders kept the revolution young by redefining themselves technologically, but not culturally. They've evolved from their early focus on chips to other key components such as graphics chips and flash memory. Now Intel is working on such new technologies as electrical transmission and generation.

Many boards and governance activists do not understand the value and way to guide a *general*. Preserving key DNA is also about implanting crucial values throughout the company. Howard Schultz, whose vision turned Starbucks into a global brand, stepped away from management for years. He returned when growth began to slow under his successors – and amid a sense that Starbucks had become too generic, losing

some of the identity that originally attracted customers. To help employees better understand and feel the core values, Schultz advocated face-to-face conversations with as many people as possible and in those conversations, advocated balancing the need to innovate with values that must be preserved.

But admiration of the founder must not become a stifling cult. Michael Dell cautioned about the importance of the founder not creating a religion around himself or herself and takes practical steps to avoid that. Dell said he works to make other stars visible with an institutionalized review process that exposes up-and-comers to the board of directors.

Walt Disney, like Steve Jobs, should be classified as a *monarch.* He imposed his image on the company as the brand. He hosted major TV shows personally, introduced new technologies and business plans alone with great visibility. Disney, like Jobs, had a loyal management team of technical experts but no restive soul to stir the water at Disney. After he passed away, the once creative tight-knit teams in animation studios and theatrical divisions' crew became stale, and under the leadership of Disney's son-in-law, they declined new risk taking. They would hide behind the mantra that a new risk wasn't the way Walt would do things. Instead of being a bold, creative entertainment company, Disney became more like a cult or a religion that worshipped the past. *Disney University,* with the pizzazz of its "imagineers," actually created a cult of conformity until the visionary Michael Eisner and Frank Well stormed the Magic Kingdom and took control in a vicious proxy battle, ultimately saving the enterprise.

In an effort to reassure key constituencies, Jobs' successor announced that Apple still had Jobs' visions, adding that Apple was not going to change, and he reiterated that thought right after Job's death proclaiming to "honor his memory by dedicating ourselves to continuing the work he loved so much" (Isaacson, 2011, p. 600).

This fear of change and worship of a company's past triumphs can be dangerous and even the antithesis of Jobs' actual approach. The board and management must fight the deification of Jobs when it starts to lead to rigid principles manifest in strategic decisions or in clunky doctrines preached at a prospective *Apple University* reportedly designed to teach people to think like Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs' leadership style was not just a product of a freely chosen cognitive style, but largely the emotional product of unique life experiences. In seeking more Steve Jobs-like leaders, they can't be manufactured; they have to be found.

Steve Jobs-like folk heroes are the key to American strength, but management systems often drown the spirit of such creative geniuses because of their challenging, complex and even difficult characters. Thus the next Steve Jobs, whether it is the complex characters of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, or Google's Sergy Brin may not be easygoing congenial personalities, but the world is different because they are in it.

Interestingly, the profiles of these complex characters even parallel those of such heroic international business figures like India's Sunil and Rajan Mittal, creators of Bharti/Airtel, Jack Ma of China's Alibaba, Robin Li of Baidu, or Chinese internet titan, Ma Huateng of Ten Cent. However, such geniuses cannot be indulged without limit. Bureaucratic executive clones should not be cultivated, but unconstrained imperial titans should not be running public businesses without oversight, as was seen in so many governance defaults of the last decade. Yet in balancing those, it needs to be

acknowledged that founders are not like other people.

In this age of self-directed work teams, empowered management and activist boards, Jobs reminds people that bold individuals are still needed as leaders. Apple's board took plenty of flack from governance critics for the risks they knowingly took to not suppress the rare genius of Steve Jobs. It is one of the hardest positions to serve as a director of a company. Governance mantras are often not supported by research. They can be suffocating and classroom routines can come off as superficial and cultivating conformity through jargon and routines rather than actual risk taking, promoting failure, and encouraging genuine and edgy creativity. Mere auditing, oversight, and compliance with rules is not the way to govern with such folk heroes. Boards have to learn how to earn the personal trust of such CEOs and reach them through reason and dialogue rather than threat.

All over the globe, whether in distant seaports, capitals, mega cites, villages, town squares or central parks, prominent monuments to various individuals from history are featured. Rarely are these tributes to a board audit committee or a management task force. Rather, they are a celebration of courageous, quirky and sometimes even difficult individuals who rose above the crowd to lead.

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