

Master the Lead

by Tim Elmore, Special to Portfolio.com Jul 25 2011

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple after being ousted, he had a tough task: Put a struggling company back on the map. How did he do it and what can his experiences teach others?

One of the fiercest tensions I face as a leader—[particularly with Millennials](#)—is the tension between leading authentically and modeling the virtues I want in followers. Let me tell you what I mean.

This next generation of employees is [crying out for authentic leaders](#). They want to follow someone who is real; someone who is the genuine article. One young professional said to me recently: “The only thing worse than being uncool is being fake.”



Millennials are drawn to leaders who aren't afraid to display their weakness. People—especially young people—want to see the humanity in their supervisor.

But there is a flip side to this coin. People also need leaders who model the way. This means that those at the top must, at times, act out—or exemplify—characteristics before they feel them.

This often translates to [doing what's right](#) even when it means taking the more difficult path. We all face this when we show up to work on days that we frankly just don't want to be there. We may want to hole up in an office and avoid talking to anyone. But not only do we have to interact with others, we also have to set the tone, make decisions, and keep leading.

This represents the fine line between genuine humanity and essential clarity. People need a leader to act, not *react*, to adversity. They require someone to lead with character, not with emotion—and that may pose a difficult dilemma for some chief executives, especially when they have to rally employees in the midst of tough times.

A Balancing Act

The leader as a performer is one who models behavior hoping that followers will replicate it. Consequently, the leader may act calm even when feeling desperate, or may assume an air of confidence when uncertain, in order to help followers maintain their own emotional stability.

Here's a classic example. As you may recall, Steve Jobs was fired from Apple, the very company he started, in 1985, only to be rehired in 1997 amid declining profits and brand position. As *Fortune* magazine reported at the time of his return: "Apple was in a death spiral. Sales and market share were falling precipitously. Expenses were ballooning out of control. Departments battled one another. Some of the top managers were in denial; many of the most talented were leaving."

Jobs knew he had to come in and make some important, difficult decisions quickly. He had to convey a positive future for Apple and rally support around his mantra: Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower.

But when asked the state of affairs upon his return, Jobs recalls: "[It was] much worse than I could imagine. The people had been told they were losers for so long they were on the verge of giving up. The first six months were very bleak, and at times I got close to throwing in the towel too. I'd never been so tired in my life. I'd come home at about 10 o'clock at night and flop straight into bed, then haul myself out at 6 the next morning and take a shower and go to work."

So, there was disparity between the words he spoke to his employees and the reality he knew he faced as their CEO. His keynotes are always met with great anticipation. They are a demonstration of performance and modeling if there ever was one.

A former Apple insider described his experience with Jobs in the role of the public face of the company: "To a casual observer, it is just a guy in a black shirt and jeans talking about some new technology products. But it is, in fact, an incredibly complex and sophisticated blend of sales pitch, product demonstration, and corporate cheerleading, with a dash of religious revival thrown in for good measure. It represents weeks of work, precise orchestration, and intense pressure for the scores of people who collectively make up the 'man behind the curtain.'"

Let me ask you some questions: Was he deceiving his employees when he spoke in those bleak years? Was he being dishonest? Of course not. He, and everyone in the room, knew this was a critical time for the company. At that moment, what they needed was not someone to remind them of how unsure the future was, but to assert what they must possess if they had any chance of returning to its heyday.

Jobs had to perform.

You may not like to call it this—but his task at the time was to be both sincere and steadfast. He had to model the qualities the employees needed to muster in themselves.

I'm not suggesting that leaders live in denial. Leaders must embrace and communicate the harsh reality they or their organization may be facing. At the same time, however, they must understand that their people are looking for cues as to how to respond. I believe leaders must push past their own infirmities and do what is right, before they feel like it...even if it seems like a performance. It is an optimistic hope that the team will ultimately achieve their mission, despite the obstacles. Healthy workplace cultures come when a leader can balance genuine humanity with the need to perform actions that elicit the right response from their followers. Maintaining that equilibrium while keeping a clear conscience isn't something that can be faked.

Leadership must be based on the need of the people, not the feelings of the leader. Here's to your next great performance.

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