BE LIKE STEVE

STEVE JOBS’ UNTIMELY death, as well as the just-released best-seller biography of this genius, has triggered intense national focus on the Apple co-founder and his groundbreaking methods. It’s almost impossible to read of Jobs’ approach to confounding business problems without wondering how he might have applied himself to the transportation industry.

First, consider Jobs’ “reality distortion field.” Apple’s Bud Tribble apparently coined the term in 1981 (during the Mac project), based on a Star Trek reference. The RDF enabled Jobs to convince himself — and others — to believe almost anything was achievable. Although some deride the idea as simple self-delusion, people close to Jobs refer to the remarkable productivity resulting from the sense that perceived boundaries were illusory. The fruit of this thinking, and the extreme loyalty it engendered in Job’s employees, is legend.

Early in my career, I saw RDF-like leadership from L. Stanley Crane when he turned around Conrail. He convinced employees, the government and customers that if they “Let Conrail be Conrail,” success would follow. He was right. Unfortunately, I’ve also seen RDF gone “rogue,” where only the CEO understood the distorted reality and all employees had to ride shotgun to the company’s demise.

Jobs also is lauded for his keen sense of design and his uncanny ability to anticipate customers’ wants and needs. He inspired consumers to covet all-new products, creating markets where none previously existed. We have seen a similar phenomenon in the transportation industry.

Malcom McLean’s adoption of containerization may be the best example. But where Jobs was a perpetual hit machine, McLean was essentially a one-hit wonder who made two disastrous decisions (Sea-Land’s SL-7s and United States Lines’ Econships) on the direction of the market. Stories also abound about transportation industry leaders “behaving badly” when customers wouldn’t adopt products they had endorsed personally.

Jobs also overcame the Innovator’s Dilemma, in which a company becomes unable to develop radical innovations once it becomes an industry leader. Jobs is said to have once told industry observer Steven Levy, “If anybody’s going to make our products obsolete, I want it to be us.” Levy labeled this “Innovator’s Gyre” where each radical innovation led to another.

It’s practically impossible to conjure up examples of this level of confidence and mindset in the transportation industry. Bold, bet-the-company moves, such as J.B. Hunt blowing up his long-haul trucking business to replace it with intermodal, are rare. The prevailing rule in transportation seems to be, “Don’t cannibalize our business. We’ll let our competitors do it for us.”

The New Yorker’s Malcolm Gladwell recently described Jobs as a “tweaker,” referring to the artisans and engineers who adjust and fine-tune existing forms to perfect their application. APL’s Don Orris tweaked — and ultimately perfected — the double-stack rail concept Sea-Land had developed. Like Jobs, Orris transformed an industry by integrating hardware and software. Once APL achieved industry primacy, however, the Innovator’s Dilemma took over.

Jobs’ interpersonal relationships also have been scrutinized. One of the more intriguing involves his “frenemy” Bill Gates. Each believed he was smarter than the other. Jobs looked down on Gates because he couldn’t program, and Gates — although he envied Jobs’ personal charisma — thought of himself as a stronger businessman.

In his best-selling biography of Jobs, Walter Isaacson describes how the two innovators evolved from contentious disdain to grudging respect. Jobs’ triumphant return to Apple was made possible by a deal with Microsoft, which solved financial problems that threatened to destroy Apple.

The transportation industry has its own legendary figures. But with charismatic leaders comes the inevitable risk that the power of personality will override common sense, to disastrous ends. Indeed, we have been witness in recent days to a veritable outbreak of examples of the darker side of leadership.

Harvard professor Stephen M. Walt recently asked, “What do Joe Paterno, Moammar Gadhafi, Silvio Berlusconi and Rupert Murdoch have in common?” His point is that all of them became “less and less accountable, and increasingly insulated from candid, face-to-face criticism.” Also, in each case, “the events that ended their long runs seemed to catch them unawares and unable to respond.”

All four of the transportation industry leaders I mentioned ended their careers at points nowhere close to their historical apogees. Nevertheless, they promoted historical developments that transformed our industry. We now await the new innovators who will dare us to plan beyond our understanding of what is and isn’t attainable, to challenge our vision of transportation’s future.

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