Sue Thompson's BeExceptional

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The Horrible Boss

Steve Jobs was all the things people have written about him—a visionary, a man consumed with excellence in design, a perfectionist at the intersection of form and function, someone who seemed to have an otherworldly ability to anticipate what people would desire once they saw it and used it. He was famously complex: a tyrant, short-tempered, unkind, demanding, but also someone who garnered genuine affection because of what he brought out in others. People who worked with him hated him but were also awed by his talents and his ability to force them to dig deep and produce what they thought could not be produced.

He could be remarkably eloquent and poignant. I reprinted his 2005 Stanford commencement address here, in the fourth issue of my newsletter. What he had to say about the unexpected twists and turns on his road to success is marvelous.

But here's the thing: Steve Jobs was a horrible man. He was vindictive and hateful. He took advantage of people without a thought, unapologetically, without remorse. He experienced no guilt over discarding people who wanted to do nothing but help him. He was famously cruel and unkind. One wonders why someone who once expressed a desire to become a Buddhist monk found it okay to treat people so indecently.

I've had more than one soul-less, loathsome boss, and I share the lessons I learned in my experiences in my presentation called "Sheer Living Hell: Surviving a Torment Work Environment" (see a clip here). I will be the first to tell you that there most definitely *are* lessons embedded in the agonies of working for these terrible people, and I can't deny that sometimes their business senses are stellar. But does it have to be this way? Is this the best way to learn a lesson? If you're a boss who believes that despotic, heavy-handed control is the best way to manage employees, or that manipulative game-playing will create the most success, well . . . I can't tell you you're

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wrong. Steve Jobs is testament to the fact that it can work.

But I don't want to work for a person like that, no matter how phenomenal. I don't want to work for people who have no character, who suck the life out of the room and out of those they employ, who use others and then dump them without so much as a glance back at the wreckage they've caused. I don't want to work for someone who is the emotional equivalent of a hit-and-run driver of a dog or a child, who worries only that he or she may be arrested but doesn't give a whit about the victim.

I believe managers get a whole lot more out of people by being what author and consultant Liz Wiseman calls "multipliers"—those who value the contributions of their teams, know they're not smarter or better than those they manage, who draw out the best qualities of those who work for them. They may not always be sweetness and light, but they have an appreciation for the talents of others and for respectful relationships. There's been research on character-based leadership, and it shows correlations between a leader's humanity, wisdom, and humility and employee engagement, commitment, and satisfaction. It's just the truth.

I may never get to produce the way a Steve Jobs might get me to, but I think I'll be okay. I'm grateful for the lessons learned from horrible bosses, but I'm fine now, thanks. On to the good ones. ✳

Building a Character-based Workforce

Character is an almost indefinable thing, along the lines of the famous 1964 quip of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when he said he couldn't fully explain what pornography was, "but I know it when I see it." We know it when we see it. We know it when we experience it. We certainly know when character is absent, because we see the effects: everything from the entitled, self-absorbed rudeness of the general population, to coworkers who knowingly throw us under the bus, to psychopathic drug lords and child abusers. People become these things because they have not had character instilled in them. They haven't been taught. They don't know why they need it.

Which is why we *can* build character into our places of work. It may not be easy, but it can be done, and if you want to do your best to

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see that your workforce won't steal from you, disrespect and sabotage you and/or each other and/or your clients, respond to adversity with vindictiveness, show an appalling lack of wisdom and maturity, and behave like children raised by wolves, you've got to apply as much attention to it as you do to making sure they know how to use the company phone system. Instruction and reinforcement are just as powerful here as in implementing policy.

What must be taught? Here are a few considerations:

Respect. We have to begin by explaining what it means to treat others as we wish to be treated. We must provide workplace examples of how we deal respectfully with others, the necessity of civility, the difference between respecting the person and respecting the position (I may not like my supervisor, but I respect her right to speak to me about my behavior on the job).

Honesty. What we euphemistically refer to as "CYA" has been going on since Adam and Eve, so explaining the value of being truthful in interactions and activities at work can be challenging, particularly when management operates a culture of dishonesty. If you're willing to model it, you can demand it of your employees. You'll need help in this, because it's impossible to look at that spot between your shoulder blades without a mirror.

Forgiveness. If ever the corporate world needs a character strength, it's this one. Every single day, we deal with people who have no character. We're pummeled by others' rudeness, unkindness, and psychopathic disregard of our feelings, whether from customers or coworkers. Forgiveness isn't just for religious people. It's an essential job skill, and its importance can be taught.

Bravery. People have to have some backbone to confront inequities and wrongdoing. Do you want them to keep embezzlement a secret? Do you want them to keep silent about that employee who lies to your clients? Or do you just want them to be terrified they'll lose their jobs for speaking up? Like honesty, this one begins with you, boss, so be willing to create the culture that encourages it.

Self-regulation. Yes, it's elementary, but it's necessary to state the obvious so no one misses the importance of it. People want what they want when they want it, and they're unclear on why it's necessary to leave some things wanting. They don't understand why controlling their tempers might be more beneficial than unloading their venom. It's the foundation for ever other character strength.

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Perseverance. If we don't keep working on something, we won't figure out what works. If we don't fail, we won't succeed, because humans learn from failures. If you encourage people to keep going, if you create the expectation that they will hang in until the work is done or do what it takes to satisfy the customer, you will develop a workplace where people feel really, really good about what they do, and they'll want to do it even better the next time.

Everyone has the potential for good character. Everyone has muscles: some muscles are developed, some are not. Even people whose childhood training consisted of knowing when to avoid being slapped have developed a character strength or two, just as those with poor muscle tone can still manage to walk up a flight of stairs. If you care about it, you can build your own character, and you can give your employees the tools to build theirs. Do you care? ✳

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(from Scott Adams' comic strip "Dilbert")

I need a job where my immense ego seems normal.
Dogbert

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The job market is getting worse every day. Employees will be afraid. Our power to abuse them grows stronger by the minute.

The Pointy-Haired Boss

About Sue

Sue Thompson is a personality expert, etiquette trainer, and an instructor in life lessons. Her work on recognizing and developing talent, identifying personalities and working effectively with the people who possess them, responding appropriately to difficult experiences, treating others with respect, and behaving like a professional have caused companies and business organizations throughout the country to value her consulting skills. She trains those entering the workforce how to present themselves with style and authority; new employees in the importance of respecting one's work and the workplace; managers in the value of understanding employees' talent and temperament; and everyone in the timeless rules of behavior that will always bespeak excellence.

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