



Be Yourself—Everyone Else Is Taken: What We Can Learn from Tim Cook at Apple

Description

The August 8th issue of the *Wall Street Journal* featured an [article](#) called “How Tim Cook Made Apple His Own.” I was immediately drawn to this piece because I know that it is hard to follow successful leaders, especially those with very strong beliefs on how things must be done. It rarely works out as well as planned or is even successful at all. This can be true even if the leader leaving did their best to pick and groom their successor. As the article points out, Microsoft and General Electric both suffered when their respective leaders, Bill Gates and Jack Welch, passed the torch.

In the article, Mike Slade, longtime advisor to late Apple CEO Steve Jobs and former member of Apple’s executive team, noted that in October of 2011, when Tim Cook took over, there was a feeling of “it’s all over.” The notion that an industrial engineer was going to run a company that had been created by one of the most innovative people ever was hard for many to believe. And yet, as it turned out, Tim Cook was the perfect choice.

(Of course, if you’re one of my Auburn friends, you had no doubt Mr. Cook would be successful. After all, he is a War Eagle!)

This column is not about having a successful succession. That topic will come at another time. This piece is more about knowing who you are and building on your strengths, as well as knowing what you are not strong in and creating a team that fills in those areas. While Steve Jobs brought magic to Apple in terms of products, Tim Cook has brought sustainable methodology to the company.

The fact that Mr. Cook had been with Apple under Mr. Jobs leads me to think he had a larger influence in the company’s success than people may be aware of. Since he rose to the CEO spot, the success of Apple has been phenomenal. As the *Wall Street Journal* article reported, since Mr. Cook took over the top spot in 2011, Apple’s revenue and profits have doubled, and its market value has soared from \$348 billion to \$1.9 trillion. Apple sits with \$81 billion in cash and has returned \$475.5 billion to shareholders. Not bad for the 1978 Robertsdale (AL) High School graduate!

What I loved in reading about Mr. Cook is that he did not try to be another Steve Jobs or change his personality as soon as he got the top spot. He has been successful by being the best “Tim Cook” he can be.

Sometimes I give a talk titled “Leadership Is an Inside Job.” My message is that often leadership is about getting rid of things that block you from being the best you can be. In my book *The Busy Leader’s Handbook*, Chapter 1 focuses on self-awareness and coachability. I started with this topic, because when a person gets their “inside” right, what’s “outside” gets better too. They become more positive influencers, and their relationships with others can drastically improve.

I remember a friend of mine who would complain about his wife. He ended up going into therapy and working on himself. Several months went by, and I noticed he had not complained about his wife. When I asked him how she was, he said, “Oh, she is great.” I said, “I guess she has changed.” He looked at me and grinned. We both knew the change was in him.

Years ago, in my first (and not my last, by any means) therapy session, the therapist said, “Quint, you just need to be yourself.” My thought was, *You’re crazier than me. That is the last person I want to be. That is why I am here!* But eventually we got to the point that I needed to learn who I am and who I am not. That is when things began to change.

When people ask me the key to leadership, one point I bring up each time is to “be yourself.” Authenticity is critical. It is not just about whether you are an introvert or an extrovert. It is about being *you*. This does not mean you will not need to adapt from time to time. What it *does* mean is that you need to know who you are.

In reading the article on Mr. Cook through a “self-awareness” lens, several things stood out:

1. Tim Cook knows who he is as a leader. He is an industrial engineer who understands processes and building a system of sustainable growth. The *Wall Street Journal* article quotes Chris Deaver, who spent four years in human resources working with Apple’s research and development teams, as saying: “This is what most people do not understand: Incremental is revolutionary for Apple! No need to break the speed records; just do it organically.”

In my work in communities, I call this approach “small ball.” Economic development should be a hold-and-grow strategy. That means holding onto local companies and helping them grow. It is not about chasing the big whale.

2. He knows what he values, which is excellence. Mr. Cook is well known for being precise and expecting excellence. People are often astounded at how well he knows the details. The story in the *WSJ* is when Apple shipped 25 computers to the wrong address he stated, “We are losing our excellence.” The former colleague who recalled this quote noticed that it seemed like a misstep considering that Apple ships 200 million iPhones annually!

3. He also knows what he is not. Early in his tenure, Mr. Cook did not attend an early meeting on the Apple Watch, which was an exciting new product with a lot of potential. Mr. Jobs loved those meetings and never missed them. But Mr. Cook knew his time was better spent somewhere else.

4. He can be flexible. For example, he changed a long-standing Mr. Jobs position on returning cash to shareholders.

5. He is willing to take a stand and address social issues head-on. In 2014, he met with top executives to let them know he is gay and was going to disclose his sexuality publicly, even though it could pose a risk in sales. He wanted to be a role model for people being bullied or worried their families would disapprove of them. He wanted to show them that a person can be gay and accomplish big things.

6. He does not need to be the star. He was not quoted in this *WSJ* story I refer to. He has been present when someone has misstated something publicly, and he does not feel a need to correct them publicly. When he visits Auburn, he often does not tell administration he is coming. He attends football games and arranges his own tickets. He does not need to be somebody. He is who he is.

We can all learn from Mr. Cook. I know I can. He reminds me that leadership is an inside job. Take time to know who you are and who you are not. Be okay with being you.

Many people know I am a recovering alcoholic. I am now in my 37th year of sobriety, one day at a time. Recently a person called me who had watched a video of me speaking to a large group in Arizona. She mentioned how open I am about my alcoholism. I shared with her that almost every time I mention it, someone reaches out about themselves or a loved one. If I did not share the truth about this, I could not be helpful (although at times, I imagine it has not been good for my career).

Remember, you are fine the way you are. If you do not feel that way, then take some time to work on your inside. I guarantee that when you do, the outside will get better.

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