



Steve Jobs - A Belbin Team Role Case Study



Steven Paul Jobs (1955 – 2011) is revered as the charismatic pioneer of technology revolutions in personal computing, consumer electronics, music retail and animated cinema.

He was also famously co-founder and CEO of Apple, as well as being a leader within other noteworthy ventures such as Disney Pixar, NeXT etc, etc.

He has left his mark as a highly successful entrepreneur, marketer and an inventor. So what were his Belbin Team Role preferences, and how did they influence his success?

Like all successful people he had more than one Team Role style. Our Team Role preferences are a subtle blend of the behavioural clusters arising from a lifetime's worth of experiences, insights and personality traits that are unique to each of us.

For the purposes of this brief article I would like to focus on what I see as the four most evident team roles in the triumphs, and also challenges that can be seen in the story of Steve Jobs. Naturally there is some subjectivity involved here, so if you disagree we'd love to hear from you and we may expand this article with your thoughts and comments (email - Belbin@SabreHQ.com).

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The four Belbin Team Roles I see clearly for Steve Jobs are...

- 1 . The visionary creativity of a PLANT**
- 2. The sales ability and persuasiveness of a RESOURCE INVESTIGATOR**
- 3. The relentless and competitive drive of a SHAPER**

These three Team Roles alone are certainly a powerful combination for any good entrepreneur, and are often found in ground breaking business leaders.

He also possessed ...

- 4. The attention to detail and high standards of a COMPLETER FINISHER**

This fourth Role is not always common where Plant and Resource Investigator reside, but would greatly assist in offsetting some of the associated weaknesses of the PL and RI Roles (often entrepreneurs need to partner with / hire a good CF to provide this valuable offset to their own weaknesses).

Take a quick look at the adjectival "nick-names" that are used within the Belbin Model for describing combinations of these roles in action...

Plant and Resource Investigator - "Explorer"

Shaper and Plant - "Maverick"

Resource Investigator and Shaper - "Dynamo"

Completer Finisher and Shaper - "Pursuer"

Plant and Completer Finisher - "Sculptor"

These nick-names certainly do seem to "ring a bell" when thinking of Apple's Steve Jobs.





Now for an exploration of each Role.

1 - Steve Jobs as the Belbin Team Role of PLANT

Strong natural Plants are typically the "ideas person" of the team.

It's not that difficult to place Steve Jobs here in the Role of Plant when he is frequently described as a *"legendary futurist and a visionary"* 1 and also as the *"father of the digital revolution"* 2, *"a master of innovation"* and *"the master evangelist of the digital age"* 3.

Not only are Plants valued within teams a prime source of ideas and innovation whilst advancing their own suggestions, but they can also stimulate innovations by making criticisms of other's ideas that lead to counter suggestions (often in competition with other Plants within a team, as Jobs may have been with Steve Wozniak, clearly also a Plant, in the early days of Apple).

Strong Plants can also play a truly strategic role at the front end of new ventures visualising new products and approaches whilst initiating forward planning for what are as yet non-existent courses of action. Of course Job's ability to anticipate, visualize and draw attention to opportunities, products and services not yet in existence was legendary. *His ability to take and then run with ideas from elsewhere was also legendary, but we'll leave that for his "Resource Investigator" Team Role.*

Plants are also valuable when teams get bogged down or require the innovation to undertake new lines of thinking or new directions in competitive and rapidly changing markets.

When Job's left Apple in 1985 they clearly suffered from the loss of his Plant contributions, and Apple's fortunes waned. When he returned in 1998 the injection once again of his renewed and visionary Plant energies and contributions was definitely integral to the creation of iMac, iPod, iPhone, iTunes and iPad and Apple's turnaround.

It was said of his return to Apple that... *"The reinvigoration of the company is regarded by many as one of the greatest turnarounds in business history"* 4.





Examples of typical Plant contributions made by Steve Jobs Advanced new ideas and strategies.

He drew attention to major “big picture” issues and visionary courses of action.

Looked for new and exciting ways around existing problems.

Was radical in confronting entrenched ways of thinking.

Was in the vanguard in creating truly original ways of doing things.

Some clear Plant characteristics evident in Steve Jobs

Creative

Individualistic

Unorthodox

His sense of individualism and unorthodoxy was evident not just in his business life, but also in other things like his manner of dress, lifelong interest in alternative medicine, Zen Buddhism and counterculture.

He himself remarked that “people around him who did not share his countercultural roots could not fully relate to his thinking”. 5

Another common Plant trait is that is that Plants often have difficulty (or a lack of interest in) communicating with people that are on a different wavelength to them and will enjoy cultivating interests and pursuits that are not considered “mainstream”.

Was Steve Wozniak actually more of the Plant to the founding team of Apple?

Many fans of Jobs and the Belbin model will have already pegged him as a Plant, but interestingly enough fans of his fellow co-founder Steve Wozniak will often argue that "Woz" was in fact the greater Plant within the original Apple team.

Was Jobs in those days therefore more of a Resource Investigator to compliment Wozniak’s Plant in the early days of Apple? Once again, all successful people have several Team Roles to play with.





According to the co-founder of Apple, Steve Wozniak himself, *“Steve didn’t ever code. He wasn’t an engineer and he didn’t do any original design.”* 6

Another early member of the Apple team, Daniel Kottke observed *“between Woz and Jobs, Woz was the innovator, the inventor. Steve Jobs was the marketing person.”* 7

It is not unusual for a strong Plant to be eclipsed in the eyes of other team members by an even stronger example of a Plant. Clever Plants can with discipline, play their other Roles to advantage also.

In the case of Steve Jobs, whilst he doubtless also had Plant, let’s examine another Team Role style that would have assisted him in his success, and enabled him to promote both himself and his team, and that’s his Resource Investigator Role.

2 - Steve Jobs as a RESOURCE INVESTIGATOR

The Team Role of Resource Investigator is a powerful combination with Plant when considering Steve Jobs as a successful marketer and entrepreneur in a field of new ideas.

Good Resource Investigators have a natural charisma and also tend to have a passion for the shiny new idea. Quite often though, it’s not the idea they have created themselves that the RI is championing, but the one they have simply taken from somewhere else. Jobs was also adept at bringing back to Apple ideas, products and approaches to Apple that they would then develop and enhance (e.g. the MP3 player was not invented by Jobs, but perhaps many look at their iPods and assume that he did?).

A good RI also has a palpable charisma, and like Jobs, are capable of being quite influential and persuasive within their field.

Steve Jobs was both respected and criticized for his overt salesmanship and his ability to persuade himself and others that the impossible may be possible. This often commented upon ability was playfully referred to by Apple team members as a **“Reality Distortion Field”**. Anyone working with a strong RI may see these "reality Distortion Fields" at work for themselves?

A strong RI can certainly “talk a good gig”, and also convince people to see past the risks and the boring details to help them chase the latest "shiny thing" that has caught their eye (unless the team's Monitor Evaluator is on hand to add some sobriety).





Engendering a sense of optimism and enthusiasm for new directions, irrespective of any risks and practicality, can also be a common trait of a strong RI.

RI's typically love to explore new opportunities, and source new resources that are needed for the team and will willingly liaise with the outside world and seek the limelight. Certainly something Jobs would do when developing and then launching his new ideas to the world.

A good RI will also help the team by gathering outside information and ideas, then introducing those ideas and developments into the team or project (sometimes letting themselves take the credit for those ideas also also).

They are adept at contacting and negotiating with other individuals and groups without being directed to do so and engaging in reconnaissance for new ideas, opportunities and also threats.

All traits that Jobs successfully used as an entrepreneur.

His combination of Plant (original ideas, lateral thining and being able to synthesise ideas) with his Resource Investigator (ability to take ideas from elsewhere and also to absorb and champion ideas of other Plants) made him a virtual "ideas Machine".

Jobs major traits in the Role of a Resource Investigator

Explored and reported back on ideas, developments and other resources from outside the company.

Created and maintained external contacts that were useful to the group in other firms and industries.

Negotiated with outside contacts.

Promoted own ideas and those of others, generated enthusiasm internally and externally for exploring new territory.





Characteristics of an RI evident in Steve Jobs

Typically outgoing

Enthusiastic

Inquisitive and communicative

Readiness to see and explore new possibilities

Generated optimism and enthusiasm in others for new ideas

Steve Jobs as a Resource Investigator demonstrated a huge capacity for contacting people and exploring anything new. He was also able to respond to a challenge.

There is therefore another Team Role style that not only loves a challenge, but that also have the drive, competitiveness and will to win in Steve Jobs “entrepreneurial” profile, and that’s SHAPER.

3 - Steve Jobs as a SHAPER

Tales from both Apple insiders and the evidence of his rise in business reveal clearly the competitive drives of a strong Shaper.

He was renowned for being driven and demanding.

This was demonstrated in him making **Fortune Magazine’s 1993 list of “America’s Toughest Bosses”** for his tough and uncompromising leadership style. Common traits of a good Shaper in a leadership role.

The Shaper is typically motivated to give strong shape and form to a team’s purpose, and also a constant sense of urgency. They are not afraid to "crack the whip" to get the job done.

Shapers also like to have a strong hand in shaping the group's roles, boundaries, responsibilities tasks and objectives, and will push the group towards agreement when it seems indecision or fear to make a call takes hold. They are about taking action and being decisive, especially when under pressure or in a competitive environment.





The clashes and internal conflicts that ultimately contributed to his removal by the Board of Apple in 1985 after several messy power struggles are evident also of the volatility and bluntness that can come with the Shaper Team Role.

Shapers will rarely have an issue with stepping up to a good power play or a fight, especially in a venture that they have founded. To be marginalised or put into even a perceived subordinate role in what they see as their domain, would greatly discomfort a good Shaper.

Whilst his Shaper may have hastened his departure from the Apple leadership team over issues of power and territorial matters in 1985, it also gave him the resilience to make the comebacks that he is famous for and to ultimately press his way back into leadership in 1998.

Shapers don't like to give up the fight, and are great at overcoming obstacles (internal and external) and adversity in business. They have an inner drive to succeed and to win.

Examples of the Shaper at work for Steve Jobs at Apple

Strongly and very directly influencing the way in which effort was applied.

Directed team energy and attention to setting difficult and challenging goals and priorities.

Imposing his own drive and focus into group discussion and on the overall drive for outcomes.

Involved in power struggles with other Shapers and also Co-ordinators on boards.

Shaper characteristics evident in Steve Jobs

Dynamic

Competitive

Outgoing

Tough and uncompromising when in command





Willingness to openly challenge complacency and apathy

Not letting people off the hook (Apple employees often feared being suddenly fired by Jobs)

Happy to hold and champion a minority opinion

Prone to provocation

Showed impatience with slow moving people, committees or boards

There is one more important Team Role style that clearly contributed to Steve Jobs leadership style, but at first glance surprises many. He was often described not just in “Plant” terms with regards to his penchant for design, but also as a ‘*perfectionist*’, so the COMPLETER FINISHER Team Role in Jobs is also worth investigating.

4 – Steve Jobs as a COMPLETER FINISHER

In tandem with Jobs ‘Shaper’ behavioural traits, he was known for his attention to detail and was regarded as being an adept “refiner” of designs and ideas.

*"Jobs was a demanding perfectionist."*⁸

Completer Finishers provide such attention to detail and dedicated follow-up, emphasising the need for task completion and the observance of high standards and deadlines.

They have an ability to spot errors omissions and oversights and “near enough” is never “good enough”. He is remembered for not letting go of his designs and ideas, relentlessly following up on the details of his designs and being a constant refiner of innovations such as the iPod.

Completer Finisher characteristics that are evident in Jobs

Painstaking

Orderly

Conscientious and anxious with regards to the final outputs of the team

A perfectionist

Reluctant to completely let go / delegate on a pet project





His ability to combine such a sense of concern with order and purpose gave him the skill for seeing that his ideas and tasks were satisfactorily finished.

His tendency towards perfectionism was also a valuable asset for him in seeing his visions for innovative new designs come to fruition at Apple in the way he intended.

As someone who had Completer Finisher to tap into, he was also able to temper his visionary Plant, inquisitive RI and dynamic Shaper with the self-control and strength of character of a CF.

Naturally in the absence of an actual Belbin profile there is some subjectivity in attempting to identify the top Team Role preferences of Steve Jobs. If you have any other ideas, or disagree, then we'd love to hear from you.

TEAM ROLE LESSONS FOR THE ROLES IN THIS ARTICLE

LESSONS for a PLANT:

Good Contributions for Plants -

Concentrate your attention on the "bigger picture" / major issues and strategies.

Generate new ideas that are relevant to the groups objectives.

Explore possible ways of overcoming problems that confront the team.

Time your contributions carefully to ensure that they are well-received.

Potential problems for Plants

You may try to exhibit your talents over too wide a field.

Avoid focusing only on personal interests and lines of thought that stimulate you rather than what the team may actually need.

Taking offence when others 'Monitor and Evaluate' or reject your ideas and then opting out.

You may find that dominant, extroverted or overcritical groups inhibit you (unless you have SH and RI also). Try not to let this block you from offering your own ideas. Careful timing your ideas and input may be important.





Plants as Leaders

Plants as leaders often require a lot of self-discipline allow their ideas to be critiqued and also to make sure that they listen to their group's ideas (especially those of other Plants).

Plants can become locked into destructive competition with other Plants or Monitor Evaluators.

Plants must also be careful taht they "day to day" pressures and practicalities of leadership don't completely stifle their Plant contributions and frustrate them too much.

Plants can be a valuable resource in a subordinate role, and a visionarily leader if they are careful to offset their weaknesses (either by themselves, or by working with others of opposite Team Role styles).

LESSONS for a RESOURCE INVESTIGATOR:

Contributions for a good RI:

RI's can quickly build and establish business relationships. Use this to extend the range of your team's influence (internally and externally).

Your enthusiasm and interest in new ideas and methods can help you to find new ideas and then introduce them to the group.

In a liaison role with people outside and your team, you can keep the team informed of relevant outside developments, oportunties and threats.

A good RI can also assist in maintaining relationships between your team and other teams and defusing potential for conflict between other departments or firms.

Potential challenges for an RI

An RI may give in to their love of chasing "shiny things" / new ideas that may appeal to them, but at the expense of actually consolidating and following through on projects already started or focusing upon other opportunities that are of more use to the team.

RI's can lose focus, and need to be careful to report back to the group on useful insights, intelligence and new oportunties of relevance to the team, not just the ones that interest them.

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RI's may chase just the fun opportunities, or relax too much when the pressure is off.

Sociability and the "buzz" of contact with others may trap and RI into unproductive uses of time and distractions.

LESSONS FOR SHAPERS:

Good contributions that can be made by a Shaper:

Direct the energy of the team and focus their attention to the needs of achieving important objectives and priorities, and helping to establish these clearly.

Have a direct influence on discussions and pushing teams to sum up actual ways to achieve objectives and hit agreed targets.

Make sure that a pattern exists in team activities by shaping and directing the team members and their contributions.

Keep the team focused on the objective in sight and being honest about whether they are achieving their aims.

"Crack that whip" when the team is off target, becoming complacent, bogging down or when it is appropriate to take command in a leaderless environment.

Potential challenges for Shapers

Try to avoid simply "steamrolling" over the top of other group members when in a leadership position.

Be aware of a tendency to try and assume more authority than your status in the team or situation may warrant.

Beware of clashes and destructive competition with Plants, Monitor Evaluators, Co-ordinators and other Shapers.





As leaders

Shapers can provide valuable action and direction in leaderless situations.

Try to avoid too much intensity, when consultation and subtlety may be what is required.

Try to be a little more diplomatic when in a subordinate role, or the situation requires it.

In an appointed leadership role the ability to cultivate the Co-ordinator team role may be very helpful at times if you have the ability and discipline to do so.

LESSONS for a COMPLETER FINISHER

Useful contributions for a CF

Guard the team from mistakes and omissions, and watch for capability gaps between people and departments that others may not see.

Use your natural perfectionist traits in areas where "finishing" and "follow through" are important to the team.

See and bring to the attention of the team mistakes that may spoil the finished product or decisions of the team.

Improve standards and sense of urgency within the team.

Potential challenges

Don't let too much obsession with the details detract from your ability to see the "bigger picture" .

Try not to be too negative in your thinking or being blunt and destructive in your criticisms.

Be aware that excessive worrying and anxiety can spoil team morale.





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