

SmartBlog on Leadership

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Trying to Be Someone Else? Suicide!

Robert J. Herbold

In Apple's most recent highly-publicized product unveiling, where two new models of the iPhone were announced, Tim Cook, the CEO, was widely criticized in the press after the event. Fortune Magazine described it this way "rather than unveiling a game-changing new iPhone or revolutionary new TV or space age iWatch or even a long-rumored deal with China Mobile – instead, Apple introduced two phone iterations, one cheaper, plastic and colorful; the other with a faster processing chip and a better camera. CEO Tim Cook gushed "*Incredible*" about ten times during this keynote. Only it wasn't. "*Underwhelming*" would have been more like it."

One wonders why Apple can only talk about new product features by putting on a Steve Jobs-like show preceded by a big buildup of high expectations. In essence, what a lot of people are asking is why does Tim Cook continue to try to act like Steve Jobs? They all agree he will never be that person. As Fortune put it, "Somehow, Cook is convinced that he has to become a Jobs' clone to be respected. But whereas Jobs was cocky and confident, Cook is wooden and forced."

Jobs was famous in presenting sensational new Apple products with incredible fanfare. He was always dressed the same way; in jeans and a black turtleneck sweater. Cook presents mundane modifications of existing Apple products, wearing almost the same garb as Jobs (jeans and a black open-collar shirt). I guess he believes trading in the turtleneck for the shirt is his signal of his new leadership. As Fortune put it, "Tim Cook needs to be his own man. He should be accessible to the media, change his tone, change his look, and let an increasingly dubious financial community and public understand why he deserves to replace the great Steve Jobs."

There is valuable learning in this example. Specifically, don't pretend to be someone else. I've personally seen it happen a lot. When I was at Microsoft in the 90's, Steve Ballmer was heading up sales and he was an absolute wild man during big sales-employee meetings (jumping, screaming, yelling, etc.) It would really fire up the troops. What was really sad was to see some of Steve's sales people try to act exactly the same way, which never works. Everyone saw what was going on and felt pity for the person trying to act like Steve instead of being themselves. When you do that, you underestimate how quickly the audience understands and discounts your message. You aren't letting them get to know you, how you think, and what are you trying to achieve. Instead, you are acting out a play where you have taken the role of someone else. The key takeaways from all of this are quite obvious:

1. Be Yourself – If you are not, people quickly learn to be suspect of you as a leader. You are just being a lemming, marching along unquestioningly.
2. Be Objective – You can't fool people. In the example above, Tim Cook loses credibility when he marches out modest iterations of existing products with a fanfare that is equivalent to what used to be used for stunning products such as the iPad.
3. Communicate Regularly – People want to hear from the leader. It does you a world of good in building people's confidence in you to constantly describe the key goals of the organization, report on progress to date, and outline key challenges to be tackled. People like consistency and they like to regularly hear from their leaders.

You've got to feel sorry for Tim Cook. He took over an incredibly key job in the technology world and we are actually yet to learn what he thinks about his new job and where he wants to take Apple. Instead, so far he seems to be trying hard to be Steve Jobs, rather than the fresh, new CEO Tim Cook. It isn't working.