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IDEAS | ESSAY

What I Learned From Having Steve Jobs Swear At Me

It turns out that criticism can be effective even when it's not constructive—
at least, at Apple



ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT NEUBECKER

By Ken Kocienda

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Imagine that your boss told you straight to our face that your project is “dog shit.” Next, imagine that this boss is Steve Jobs. That’s what happened to me when I was working as the principal engineer of iPhone software during Apple’s golden years.

What was the right way for me to react? It would have been a bad idea for me to agree with Steve, raising the question of why I would offer him inferior work. But it would have done no good to disagree either, unless I was willing to enter into an on-the-spot debate with a famously mercurial CEO—and at that moment, I wasn’t.

Thankfully, his blunt comment wasn't the opening salvo in a long-winded tirade. It was just a single statement, so I stood and took it without comment. During my 15-plus years as a software engineer at Apple, I learned that before the demo was done, I would find out why he was displeased.

It was 2009, and we were developing software for what would become the iPhone 4. That was the model that unfortunately became known for the "Antennagate" controversy: It could experience network connectivity problems if you "held it wrong." The executive responsible for phone hardware soon departed the company.

Steve looked at each phone screen, pulled his round-rim glasses up so they rested on his forehead, stared again closely, then put his glasses back down.

The iPhone 4 also was the first Apple smartphone with the "Retina" display, a screen with individual pixels so small they can't be seen with the naked eye. My job was to come up with a new font to show this new screen to best advantage. My Apple career wasn't immediately in jeopardy, but I needed to get Steve's approval. The pressure was on.

I prepared eight choices, many of them variations of our old font, Helvetica, with a couple of others mixed in for contrast. But every one of them had a problem: If you increased the magnification, the vertical strokes of the important capital 'M' (as in Mail, and Message, for instance) looked smudgy rather than sharp—no better than with the previous non-Retina display.

Steve looked at each phone screen, pulled his round-rim glasses up so they rested on his forehead, stared again closely, then put his glasses back down and returned each phone to the table in front of him. Then he expressed himself. I was left wishing I had a plastic bag in my pocket to clean up my work.

I went back to comb through fonts with colleagues, and in a couple of days, we discovered Helvetica Neue. This Neue (German for "new") version had subtle improvements that made every letter look perfectly sharp on the new screen. Steve approved it on sight.

I took two points away from this experience. The first is that brand-new work is frequently no good. Excellent results only come at the end of a long chain of effort. Rounds of iteration are often required to transform an idea into a finished product. And when another round is needed, it's usually best to say so clearly, without mincing words.

The second point sometimes gets lost in the conventional view of Steve Jobs as a bully or a jerk: Criticism can be effective even if it's not constructive. Steve had no problem issuing a rejection without explanation. If he didn't like something, he just said so. His style of feedback was direct, and he was willing to say that an idea was no good even when he couldn't explain why in terms that were clear and concise.

Steve could be unpredictable and moody, and luckily, I was never on the receiving end of one of his full-on harangues. But let's be honest: Most of us swear. The key to making harsh words count is to have a trusting environment where everyone knows that comments are about your work and not about you.

The other time I almost got a Jobsian tongue lashing was when we were trying to develop a software control to lock the screen orientation on the iPad, one that would prevent the display changing from portrait to landscape as you turned the device in your hands. I proposed an on-screen button, but Steve hated it. With an elongated sneer, he said I must be “reeeeally confuuuused.” I consoled myself in the moment with the thought that he didn't know the right solution either.

Knowing that you don't have the right solution yet is valuable, even if you're unclear about why. Admitting you're at a “dog shit” phase of a project is a step toward cleaning up the mess. Improving work at a given moment is a matter of honest feedback aimed at eliminating the weak elements and building on the strong ones.

As I learned in my years at Apple, getting something right usually takes many tries, and direct (sometimes brutal) criticism can move the process along—so leave your ego at the door and keep your pooper scooper at the ready.

—Mr. Kocienda worked at Apple from 2001 to 2017. This essay is adapted from his new book, “Creative Selection: Inside Apple's Process During the Golden Age of Steve Jobs,” published by St. Martin's Press.