

Three Traits to Rule Them All: A Recipe for Exceptional Business Leadership

By Eric Azrak

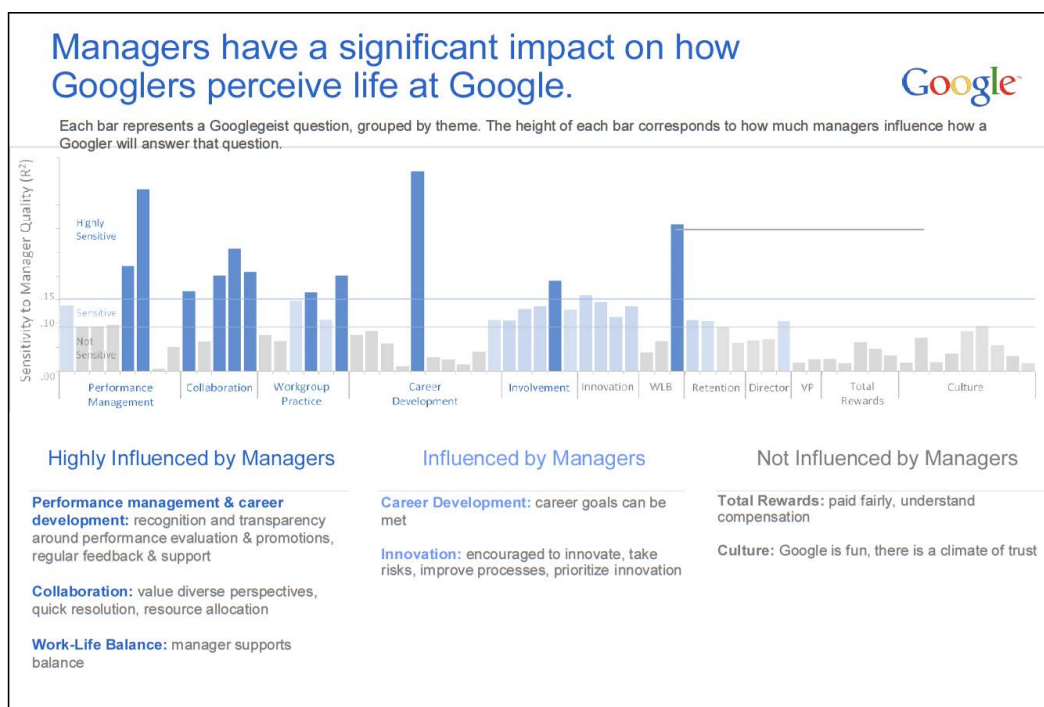
Introduction

How can you extract the very best from your team? It is the function of those who lead to enhance the led, not only as individuals but as part of something greater. While each leader employs their own style inspired by their strengths and weaknesses, a handful of managerial qualities tend to overlap among the finest directors. Understanding those specific traits and their effect on others is the key to taking your organization to the next level.

Section 1: Introducing Google's Project Oxygen

In the early 2000s, Google LLC asked themselves a simple question: Do managers matter? As Google's labor force was mainly composed of engineers, the introduction of subordinate and superordinate positions was not welcomed with open arms. Nadav Eiron, Google LLC engineering director, expounded: "Engineers generally want to spend their time coding and debugging. Many think that talking to direct reports gets in the way of getting that work done. And without training, some engineering managers have a hard time striking a balance between providing direction and micromanaging." Thus, Google searched for hard evidence that would persuade their employees – and perhaps themselves – to believe in the benefits of proper management. Under the leadership of Google's People and Innovation Lab (PiLab), as well as a handful of research experts, Project Oxygen was born to answer Google's question.

Neal Patel and Michelle Donovan, Project Oxygen co-founders and directors, began their quest to prove managers *did* matter by doing the exact opposite, trying to prove managers *didn't* matter. "Luckily, we failed," commented Patel. The team had



turned to performance reviews and Googlegeist scores, an annual employee satisfaction survey regarding leadership, for data on existing management at Google. By comparing high-scoring (top quartile) and low-scoring (bottom quartile) managers, Patel and Donovan hoped to spot significant differences that distinguished the two groups. The discrepancies were incremental but monumental; the slightest variation in manager quality had notable effects on job satisfaction, employee retention, work-life balance, career development, and performance (see **Exhibit 1** above for more). Now that managers definitively mattered, naturally, the following question was, “What do our best managers do?”

Utilizing double-blind qualitative interviews, the Project Oxygen team had collected a vast amount of data that pointed them to eight characteristics of great managers. Interviewers were given a script of questions regarding managerial behavior/tendencies, and polled high-scoring and low-scoring managers across all departments, levels, and geographic locations. After combing over the survey responses, thousands of Googlegeist survey comments, and more performance reviews, PiLab identified eight behaviors that were often shared by the high-scoring managers. The eight attributes were soon nicknamed the ‘Oxygen 8.’

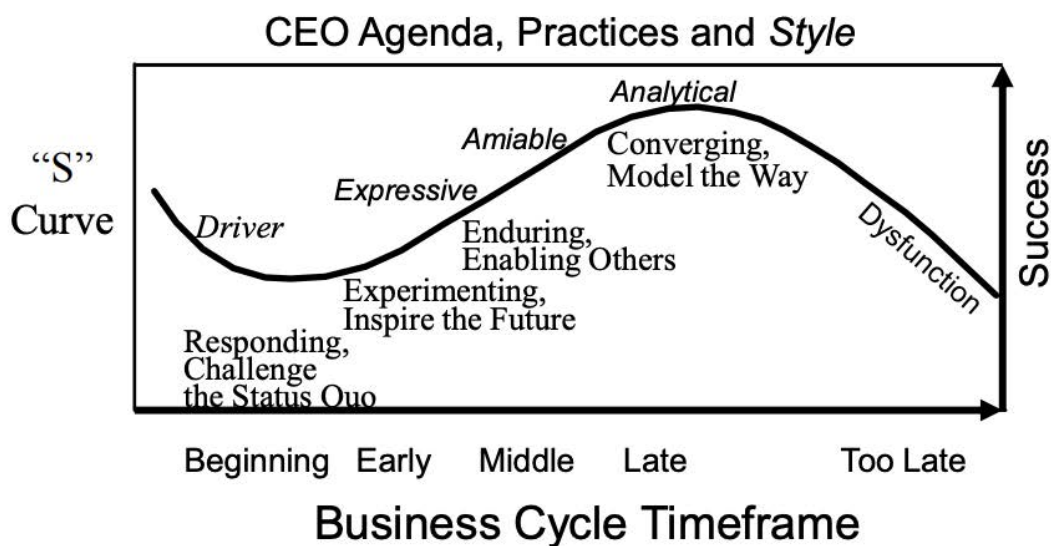
At the top of Google’s Oxygen 8 list came “**being a good coach,**” understanding the niche of employees and pushing them to grow in a healthy manner. At the number two spot, a great manager “**empowers the team and does not micromanage,**” instilling a strong sense of trust within their team yet still available to answer questions. The following trait seems basic, but it’s essential to “**express interest/concern for team members’ success and personal well being;**” care about those who you work with. The fourth quality fits the more traditional role of a manager, as “**productive and results-orientated**” are the cornerstones of efficiency. Next up, trait five emphasizes that communication is key: “**is a good communicator - listens and shares information.**” An excellent manager shouldn’t only care about your personal well-being but also your career’s well-being, and hence, the sixth characteristic, “**helps with career development.**” The seventh trait is an essential function of leadership, underscoring direction, “**has a clear vision/strategy for the team.**” Last but certainly not least, a distinguishing characteristic of any team leader is that a great manager “**has key technical skills that help him/her advise the team.**” On their own, these eight qualities are influential, but as a group, the Oxygen 8 are exceptionally powerful. The aim of this paper, though, is to determine which *three* of the *eight* Google Oxygen traits are the *most* crucial for managerial success, later substantiated by the experience of two notable business leaders.

While Google – and this paper – use the terms interchangeably, “manager” and “leader” aren’t always synonymous. John P. Kotter of Harvard Business Review (HBR) explained: “Management is about coping with complexity; it brings order and predictability to a situation. But that’s no longer enough—to succeed, companies must

be able to adapt to change. Leadership, then, is about learning how to cope with rapid change.” Kotter’s distinction offers a novel perspective to those in charge. While it’s *important* to adhere to Oxygen 8 traits, it’s *vital* to evaluate the need for leadership versus management during times of stress.

Section 2: Essential Context

Any analysis of business leadership would be incomplete without acknowledging the pivotal research that precedes it. Especially relevant to the discussion of Google’s Project Oxygen, *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?: What It Takes To Be An Authentic Leader* by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones explores the notion of authentic vs. quality-based leadership. The pair explain that the greatest leaders must leverage their own qualities to develop their own management style, and “In our view, there are no universal leadership characteristics. What works for one leader will not work for another.” A stark departure from an “Oxygen 8” trait-centric recipe, Goffee and Jones emphasize that leaders come in all shapes and forms. Some are technical experts in their fields, such as Bill Gates, who they dub the “ultimate computer geek,” and others are magnetic personalities like Steve Jobs or Richard Branson. Goffee and Jones also highlight that leadership is fundamentally situational, and success oftentimes depends on how well one’s style fits the current niche. Likewise, another essential piece of leadership literature, *The Leadership S-Curve* (see **Exhibit 2** below) supports the fickle nature of management. Each section of the cycle calls upon an alternate leadership style, ultimately requiring those at the top to shift gears in response. It’s crucial to remain dynamic and avoid stativity.



Section 3: Yvon Chouinard vs. Tim Cook in the Context of the Oxygen 8

In order to effectively sift through the “Oxygen 8” and extract the three foremost important management traits, let’s take a look at two monumental yet entirely different business leaders: Yvon Chouinard and Tim Cook.

Yvon Chouinard

Born in 1938 to a French Canadian farmer in Lisbon, Maine, Yvon Chouinard instinctively inherited the family values, hard work, and appreciation of quality tools. His mother, Yvone, exuded fearlessness and responsibility. She made many of the family decisions, and took that responsibility very seriously. Yvonne also took responsibility in another way, which Chouinard would later note “was probably my first lesson in philanthropy.” Seeking an arid climate better suited for her husband’s asthma, Yvonne had auctioned all of their family’s possessions and landed on Burbank, California. At some point along the 3,000-mile journey across the country, she spotted an Indian hogan, and on it, a Hopi woman with several hungry children. Yvonne gave her all of their preserved corn for the trip - mother to mother.

Even in high school, Chouinard could never be put in a box. He was a straight D-student, and had little interest in the subjects except, of course, for the shop classes. A self-labeled troublemaker, Chouinard would frequently find himself in detention writing “I will not...” lines hundreds of times. A great example of his entrepreneurial spirit, though, Chouinard boasted he would “take three pencils and line them up with sticks and rubber bands so I could do three lines at once.” Chouinard attended community college after his 1956 high school graduation, but taught himself Blacksmithing 101 as multi-day Yosemite climbs demanded. At the time, climbing gear was dominated by the European “conquer” culture; move on and don’t look back. All the gear was made single-use, and once inserted into the mountain/wall, the iron piton heads tended to break off. This didn’t sit well with American climbers. “You [Americans] climb the mountains or visit the wilderness but leave no trace of having been there,” explained Chouinard, who attributed the perspective to a swirling transcendentalist thought.

Recognizing the need for reusable state-of-the-art pitons, Chouinard got to work. He sold out of his garage to friends and then friends of friends for \$1.50 each, pricy next to the European twenty-cent standard, but you had to use Chouinard’s gear for the cutting-edge climbs they were doing. The margins remained slim, yet once he netted enough to fund his own climbs, Chouinard would head back to what he loved: the natural world. He slept two-thirds of the year in an army-surplus sleeping bag and didn’t buy a tent until he was forty.

After the Vietnam War came knocking in the fall of 1962, Chouinard reopened the shop closer to the waves in Ventura, California, in 1966. Demand soon outgrew supply, however, forcing Chouinard to scale up with advanced machinery and new recruits. Chouinard Equipment mostly hired friends, and Chouinard added that “none saw the

business as an end itself. It was just a way to pay the bills so we could go off on climbing trips.” Fast forward four years, and Chouinard Equip. became the largest supplier of climbing hardware in the United States; it had also become an environmental menace. The continued hammering of steel pitons, which made up most of the business, in and out of the fragile cracks permanently disfigured the very rocks Chouinard adored. Luckily, there existed an alternative in the form of aluminum chocks that wedged in between cracks, and Chouinard Equipment shortly phased out steel pitons.

As the years piled up, so did Chouinard Equipment’s profits, and Yvon Chouinard saw a new opportunity within the climbing market: apparel. In the late sixties, active sportswear wasn’t fashionable. From the cut to the colors, it was a bland trainwreck. So, when Chouinard returned from a Scotland climbing trip in a regulation team rugby shirt, people noticed. Patagonia was born three years later in 1973, and it is now an office and household name fifty years later.

In the wake of Chouinard Equipment and Patagonia’s success, Yvon Chouinard could no longer duck the title of “businessman.” Yet, he was adamant about “distance[ing] myself as far as possible from those pasty-faced corpses in suits I saw in airline magazine ads. If I had to be a businessman, I was going to do it on my own terms.” He further declared that work *must* remain enjoyable on a daily basis, and it should be surrounded with friends who can dress however they choose, even barefoot.



Chouinard envisioned a radical realm that blurred the line between work and family: the office. He read every book on business he could get his hands on and took a special interest in Japanese plus Scandinavian styles of management. Chouinard prided himself on his MBA theory of management, management by absence. He advocated that a company needs an explorer to go out and get the “temperature of the world,” meanwhile Patagonia would continue on. His attitudes and efforts all culminated in Patagonia’s unique environment. Many employees surfed at lunch or played volleyball in the sandpit, and most frequented the slopes for ski and climbing trips - often sponsored by Patagonia! During Chouinard’s tenure, he would regularly bring top managers to Argentina, nurturing their creativity and moral codes in tandem. He would also lead weekly employee seminars to Yosemite National Park or San Francisco’s Marin headlands for the same purpose at a more granular scale. Chouinard, a Zen-Buddhist at heart, gleaned from wherever he could, notably the Iroquois tribe. As a people with a deep connection to the Earth, the Iroquois couldn’t afford to be near-sighted. Therefore, to ensure the needs of the future were considered, they designated one of their own as a representative of seven generations ahead; Chouinard

realized the custom's value and instituted it into Patagonia. The administrative building is devoid of private offices, even for executives. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the office, though, is the on-site child care center, Great Pacific Child Care Development Center, Inc. Contemporaneously, it was one of only a hundred-twenty nationwide; today, there are over 8,000.



Chouinard commented, "The presence of children playing in the yard with their mothers and fathers in the cafeteria helped keep the company atmosphere more familial than corporate." Patagonia also offers flexible work hours, maternity/paternity leave, and job sharing in addition to child care.

Consistency is key, especially with messages. Patagonia was one of the first companies to dedicate itself to impact-conscious business in the seventies with recycled catalog paper, and decades later, their branding or company values haven't budged. Each year, the company donates ten percent of profit or one percent of sales (whichever is greater) to environmental causes, principally grassroots efforts. Since 1985, the business has given away north of \$140 million. Patagonia funds and facilitates employee environmental action, as well as sponsors small groups of peaceful, civil disobedient protesters. In 2007, Patagonia was one of seventy-two original enterprises to incorporate as a B-corporation, a number which has grown exponentially since. When asked why he's in business, Chouinard explained that he wanted to inspire other enterprises to environmental action just as their top-of-the-line gear has inspired other manufacturers. Patagonia's mission statement captures its values quite nicely: "Make the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, and use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis."

Tim Cook

Timothy Donald Cook was born in Mobile, Alabama, on the first of November, 1960. The Cooks lived the quintessential small-town, rural life of the mid-20th-century South. His parents, Donald and Geraldine, had grown up not more than 30 miles apart, and farms dotted the horizon as far as the eyes could see. The two tended to keep to themselves, a trait later adopted by their children, and Donald worked long hours at low-level jobs to support their family. Tim knew his father didn't enjoy it and grew up dreaming of a different – more fulfilling – life, one where he worked at what he loved.

In school, Tim was a shy intellectual who never failed to submit homework on time. He was named “Most Studious” by his classmates for several years, and set his eyes on Auburn University. During downtime, Cook could usually be found with fellow members of the school band or socializing with the athletes and drama students. He was the school yearbook business manager, and facilitated quarter-page ad sales from local businesses. Notably, Cook was the first in the position to collect payments periodically instead of scrambling to grab the lump sum at the deadline, according to his teacher, Ms. Davis.

Early on in his life, Cook was forced to reconcile the racially divided nature of his surroundings. One day in middle school, as he was riding home on his bicycle from school, Cook stumbled upon a crowd of hooded men standing in front of a burning cross driven into the front yard of a local Black family. He shouted, “Stop!” and was shocked when one of the men shifted his gaze toward him, lifted his hood, and was revealed to be a deacon from a nearby church; Cook pedaled away as fast as he could. The scene stayed with him for decades.

In 1977, Cook tore open his long-awaited letter of acceptance to Auburn. He had started on his goal to be an engineer and enrolled in the industrial and systems engineering department. He had learned to question everything and challenge those who argue, “It’s just the way it’s done.” Not surprisingly, he was offered a position at Anderson Consulting and General Electric in 1982 but ended up at International Business Machines. At that time, IBM’s Personal Computer (or PC) had just flown off shelves and netted the company nearly a billion in sales. The environment at IBM was perfect for Cook, riddled with bureaucracy, structure, and engineering jargon. It was the soulless corporate empire to its inspiring rebel rival: Apple.

Cook was a natural. He quickly made his mark in materials management, and was classified as a HiPo (high potential) by senior management. Recognizing his immense promise, IBM soon paid for his MBA at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business, and Cook took on a new appreciation for marketing, finance, and other foreign business disciplines. In 1988, he graduated in the top ten percent of his class and headed back to IBM until 1994, when Louis Gerstner became CEO. At that moment in time, IBM was transitioning from primarily product-based to service-based, a shift that would diminish the company’s relevance in Cook’s eyes. Fortunately, Intelligent Electronics poached Cook shortly beforehand for an operations position, which he accepted as a way out of IBM.

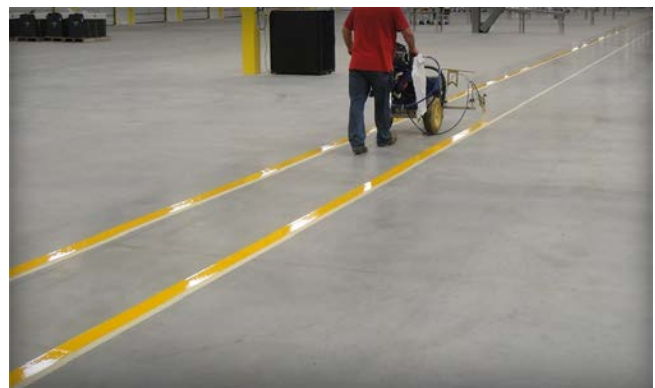


Cook's timing couldn't be worse. Cook quickly learned that Intelligent Electronics (IE) was an operations disaster. Wasted warehouse space and convoluted software systems as a result of sloppily acquiring rivals left IE's margins paper thin. Even after Cook came to the rescue, total profits still sank, leading the company to ultimately agree upon selling the business. Competitor Ingram Micro offered a price that Cook thought to be too low, and while some executives pushed to sell, Cook convinced them to patiently wait for a higher bid. He eventually persuaded Ingram Micro to raise their price by several millions of dollars, striking a \$78 million dollar acquisition.

In 1997, Cook headed to, arguably, the number one tech company in the world at the time: Compaq. There, he was confronted by another inventory headache with the ratio of warehouse-to-manufacturing space at two-to-one. In response, Cook worked to shorten the amount of time between product manufacturing and delivery; it did the trick. Only a year later, however, Cook decided on exiting Compaq after picking up a call from Rick Devine, executive recruiter at what would become the number one tech company of all time, Apple.

Early on at Apple, Cook called an operations meeting to familiarize himself with every detail of the company's infamously terrible supply chain management. Acting head of operations when Cook arrived, Joe O'Sullivan, commented, "I saw grown men cry," referencing Cook's myriad of questions to the operations department. "He went into a level of detail that was phenomenal." The meeting would foreshadow Cook's leadership style, whipping staff into shape with rigorous interrogation at an extremely precise level; there was no room for error. Tripp Mickle, author of *After Steve: How Apple Became a Trillion-Dollar Company and Lost Its Soul*, put it best, "His Socratic style created a tense atmosphere that caused staff to squirm... The operations team learned to scour every aspect of production and prepare to answer any question Cook could imagine. They drilled down into the performance of specific parts and each assembly line's production results. Their boss's appetite for specifics led everyone to become 'almost Cook-like,' O'Sullivan said." Incredibly, Cook soaked up all the new information and began to work at the company's operation troubles immediately.

Cook wanted more. After eliminating all excess inventory (which Cook called "fundamentally evil"), he traveled to Singapore to hear firsthand about operations (ops.) overseas. The Singapore ops. team described their success throughout the prior year and, specifically, how they bumped inventory turns (a measure of the frequency in which inventory was used and replaced) from eight times to twenty-five times per year. Regardless of the rate being second in the industry, Cook had pushed, "How would you get it to a hundred turns?" O'Sullivan



answered, “I knew you’d say that. We’re nearly there.” Stone-faced, Cook asked him another question, “How would you get to a thousand?” Some laughed, but those who knew Cook understood he was serious. In a few years, Apple would soon mark no inventory on their books through a process that would be called Line Stripping or Floor Marking. The ops. team painted a yellow line down the center of factory floors; one side belonged to suppliers and was written on supplier’s books until the components were moved across the line, only when used in on-demand assembly. Thus, on paper, there hadn’t been any inventory. The practice soon became standard across “Big-Tech.” Cook had instilled in them a hunger for pure excellence (see **Exhibit 3** below).

Company politics were anathema to Cook, another one of his leadership quirks. At Apple, known to have its fair share of hotheads and drama, Operations was the odd one out. Toward the end of each fiscal quarter, Cook called for an Operations meeting to discuss any shortcomings. About a dozen higher-ups would write what they felt had been the root cause of an issue on a Posit-It and proceeded to stick it to a whiteboard.

Exhibit 5 PC Manufacturers’ Key Operating Measures, 1997–2014

	1997	2000	2003	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Gross margins (%)								
Apple	21%	27%	29%	29%	35%	39%	44%	39%
Dell	23%	21%	19%	17%	18%	19%	21%	--
Hewlett-Packard	38%	31%	29%	24%	24%	22%	22%	23%
Lenovo	--	13%	15%	14%	15%	11%	11%	13%
R&D/Sales (%)								
Apple	12%	5%	8%	4%	3%	3%	2%	3%
Dell	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	--
Hewlett-Packard	7%	5%	5%	4%	3%	2%	3%	3%

Source: Compiled from Capital IQ and ThomsonOne, accessed April 2012, March 2015.

Note: All information is on a fiscal-year basis. Apple’s fiscal year ends in September, HP’s in October, Dell’s in January, and Lenovo’s in March.

The notes were then grouped, ranked, and discussed. The practice helped Cook weed out top performers from the rest of the team, usually those who were the most “Cook-like”: MBAs with a relentless work ethic. Yet, Cook went out of his way to hire from all areas of Apple in order to have diverse perspectives on problems.

Some describe Tim Cook as robotic - emotionless, calculated, and all-knowing - and it’s not hard to see why. Over his career, Cook’s track record for rooting out all operational inefficiencies is almost inhuman. He has continuously redefined the impossible, and his results speak for themselves. After Steve Jobs’ death on October 5, 2011, many were skeptical about the prospect of Cook at the helm; the two were complete opposites. Thus, Jobs directed Cook to lead Apple and never look back, never question what “Jobs had wanted.” And he did just that. He took the 1984 “Think

Different” branding and flipped it on his head, turning Apple into one of the most recognizable faces of corporate America. Under his leadership, Apple would soon be the first company to be valued at a market cap of a trillion dollars (three trillion as of October 2023), a monumental feat. The small-town kid from Mobile, Alabama, who dreamed of a life different from his father’s now lives in a \$2.3 million condo in Palo Alto, California.

Section 4: Oxygen 8’s Best Traits

When considering which three of Google’s Oxygen Eight Traits are the most critical, the backgrounds and experiences of Yvon Chouinard and Tim Cook are pivotal. Against the backdrop of these two mega-successful business leaders and managers, picking and choosing from Oxygen 8 becomes much more manageable. Some qualities are simply much more pervasive throughout the lives of both leaders.

Trait #1

The first quality of importance is “**empowers the teams and does not micromanage**” (quoted from Google’s Oxygen 8 list directly). Take Yvon Chouinard first. As leader of Patagonia, he took pride in developing his own style of leadership, his Management By Absence (MBA) theory of management. Taking off to foreign countries and leaving your company in the hands of your executive team is the ultimate form of empowerment, trust, and not micromanaging. Now, the applicability of this theory, specifically to other companies, is up for debate, but the idea is there: sometimes, it’s best to take a step back. This allows employees to problem solve on their own in order to reach their deliverables, building grit and the ability to adapt. Additionally, a measure of distance oftentimes allows subordinates to develop their own ideas, contributing to a team’s collective intelligence. (Collective intelligence is the wealth of knowledge contained by all members of your group, from the various degrees to the small, random tidbits of information that each person calls their own.) Leveraging collective intelligence, as well as a diversity of perspectives, promotes a variety of potential solutions; natural selection will then isolate which proposal is best.

Looking at Tim Cook, it may be harder to see how he empowers those he manages. It seemed as if he was in complete control of his operations team at Apple, but taking a closer look, Cook empowered his team with his high expectations and demand for excellence. Because he will eventually nitpick all information given to him, those in ops. were pushed to smooth out any bumps before presenting to Cook. He didn’t instruct them HOW to get things done, but more TO get it done. A prime example, Cook didn’t lay out a path for the Singaporean ops. team to reach a thousand inventory turns, rather expanded their horizons to even consider the goal. He genuinely asked O’Sullivan “*How*” they could reach the mark, signaling his trust in the team’s knowledge of operations. And they came through in a big way, developing their ingenious

yellow-line-inventory strategy. The growth of Apple and Patagonia would simply be impossible without Chouinard and Cook's trust in their respective teams.

Trait #2

The second quality that appears over and over again between master operator Tim Cook and eccentric entrepreneur Yvon Chouinard is **“productive, and results orientated.”** While Cook measured results quantitatively via metrics such as inventory turnovers and gross margin, Chouinard saw things qualitatively, choosing to compare himself against competitors' piton quality. The two took different approaches in “measuring what matters” (an executive strategy developed by John Doerr that focuses on establishing and determining key performance indicators), but regardless, both managers zeroed in on results. At the end of the day, if Chouinard's original pitons weren't cutting edge and essential to *the* climbs of the time, his efforts to offset mountain damage would most likely have been futile. If Cook's numbers and track record weren't in the right spot, his passion for detail alone wouldn't have landed him esteemed openings at Big Tech firms. Without a focus on constant improvement and a limitless dedication to polishing a product, even great leaders can fall short. The point is simple: deliver. Ancillary benefits or passions simply don't stack up to results.

In terms of highlighting productivity, once again, both leaders pass with flying colors. A true trailblazer, Yvon Chouinard revolutionized the workplace by allowing employees a degree of freedom (paid maternal and paternal leave, flexible dress code, Patagonia Outings, etc.), which he believed would be a net gain. However, there was one caveat: quality and timeliness of work wouldn't drop. As soon as responsibility fell, so did the privileges. Cook, on the other hand, intimidated the Apple Operations team in order to mold them all in his own image. By asking the right, nuanced questions to presenters, he earned his fledgling employees' trust and lit a fire under them to become increasingly “Cook-like.” This was Cook's version of mentally aligning his team to prioritize the small cogs of the larger operational machine and eliminate all room for error, or in other words, prioritize productivity.

Trait #3

The final and perhaps most critical quality of exceptional business leadership is **“has a clear vision/strategy for the team.”** Initially, the characteristic seems advantageous but not necessary, and it's easy to see why under the traditional definitions of vision and strategy. Vision is not solely about setting a goal or looking ahead toward the future; it's also about noticing new opportunities in the periphery that many others deliberately ignore. In the early '60s, Chouinard saw the opportunity and so did Tim Cook in the late '90s. Whether it be specialized, reusable pitons or a thousand inventory turns, many of the pair's ideas were thought to be preposterous upon conception. Strategy, alternatively, describes the method in which vision is carried out,

but also the path in which mental alignment is achieved by your team. As discussed previously, Cook's strategy for team synergy chiefly consisted of bombarding employees with questions; Chouinard's strategy was much more experiential than Cook's, leading groups of employees on Patagonia-sponsored seminars.

Route and direction. A great leader can provide one, but an extraordinary leader wields both functions of leadership to capture their employees. When employees understand the bigger picture - their role in the company reaching new heights -, suddenly, their actions take on a much larger weight. Oftentimes, this novel sense of purpose can reinvigorate employees and spark them to deliver their best work. Vision (direction) and strategy (route) are pivotal to success, and are leveraged by those at the top to instill meaning to those subordinate.

Conclusion

"The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." In the context of their respective teams, leaders are responsible for the veracity of this statement. Of course, that's easier said than done, which is why Google's Project Oxygen provides such valuable insight to any aspiring leaders. For those struggling to elevate their employees, the Oxygen Eight characteristics of the top managers at Google are a great starting point. Yet, it's difficult to focus on the application of all eight traits at once. Thus, there is a need for a boiled-down version, highlighting only the top three traits of exceptional leaders and managers.

"Why Tim Cook and Yvon Chouinard?" you may ask. The choices seem random, as neither is connected to Google or Project Oxygen. Yet, when considering the diversity of perspectives, experience, fields, personalities, and more between Cook and Chouinard, it becomes a bit more clear that their names weren't pulled out of a hat.

Tim Cook is the face of corporate America. Cultivated in Alabama upon the values of hard work and passion, Cook came from a family with a rock-solid foundation. His scholastic aptitude and natural methodical inner-workings quickly set him aside from his peers at an early age. He was accepted into his dream school, Auburn University, studied industrial engineering, and headed straight to white-collar world: IBM. Cook, eventually, became known to obsess over every last detail in order to minimize risk as much as possible and was poached by an Apple recruiter in 1997. He has made big waves at the company and gained notoriety for his deal with ChinaMobile in 2013 that allowed Apple to tap the billion potential customers in China. Currently, Cook leads Apple (the largest company in the world by market cap) as CEO, but will always maintain his reputation as the master operator.

Yvon Chouinard's story is almost completely opposite Cook's. Chouinard is an entrepreneurial spirit who never fit the education system or corporate ladder; the only place he felt he *truly* belonged was among the Tetons. His love of nature was contagious and would play a massive role in his life and the founding of Chouinard

Equipment (CE). As a leader, Chouinard preached his “MBA” style of management and openly disliked “corporate corpses in suits.” He was adamant about improving employment practices and the work environment. Patagonia Inc., which sprung from CE, is now a model for people management and treatment.

The contrast between Cook and Chouinard is impossible to miss. One an entrepreneur at heart, the other an operator through and through. Yet, the beauty of the two together is that Cook and Chouinard’s differences allow for the essential three traits to really shine. Regardless of company size, type, or reputation, the three traits mentioned above stay constant. At any stage, it’s important not to micromanage and lose the trust of your team. At any stage, it’s important to remain product and results-oriented in order to complete deliverables. And at any stage, it’s **vital** the leader has a clear vision and strategy to guide subordinates. Armed with this knowledge, elevating your organization and enhancing those who you lead is much more manageable. Apply the three golden traits, continuously improve your delivery, and polish your unique management style. That’s the recipe for exceptional business leadership.

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