TINKER IN PEACE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

A closed-source code base is a huge, ever-fading inertial mass. When it begins, with those first exhilarating lines, or even up through the first few releases, you can truly say that you are *writing* it. But after a while, it is more like you are tending it – or feeding it. It becomes an investment, an asset, a castle you are protecting, which means all your strategies are defensive and your dreams will not stray far from your spot of holy ground.

The bigger and more grandiose a code base becomes, the more time and effort it takes to nurture and sustain it, and even with all your love and effort, it still starts to look ragged after enough time – no matter what you do or how much you care. When the time comes for it to become something completely different, you can't just re-form it like silly putty. The best you can hope is to tweak it around the edges and force it into some kind of tenuous interface with the tools of the next generation. Eventually, the details of maintaining that interface start to undermine the aura of technical relevance one needs to sell the software. So it was with MS-DOS, Novell NetWare, and Mac OS 9.

A big company is like a big code base. Often a company is built for one purpose, or at least it is conceived for one mission, but the older and bigger it gets, the more it seems like the product is the company itself – the focus falls on sustaining the corporate culture and projecting the corporate brands, and the actual business of *producing something* is ascribed to a lower level of concern that is akin to a kitchen cleanup task.

No manager actually likes this situation, but the bigger and older a company gets, the more impossible it is to actually do anything about it. Strong-willed CEOs always claim they have the power to alligator-wrestle a whole corporation and put it back on track. Steve Jobs did this once. So did Bill Gates, back in the 1990s, when it looked like the Internet rocket was launching without Microsoft. But this kind of hero-centric management, where a single leader imposes a new vision on a massive multinational operation through a relentless expression of resolve, fails more often than it actually works, and it seems like it has been failing a lot recently.

Former CEO Leo Apotheker had a bold vision for how to fix things at HP, and he didn't even last a year in the job before the board of directors showed him out through the cargo door. Not that all his ideas had merit, but later leaders have shown none of his boldness and still haven't managed to stabilized the company. CEO Stephen Elop took a bold step off the "burning platform" by announcing a revolutionary realignment at Nokia, embracing Windows phone technology at the expense of developing an independent phone OS, and the company has been burning money and customers ever since.

Microsoft keeps trying to recapture that pinpoint, mid-course correction it took in the 1990s. By now, CEO Steve Ballmer must feel that he is in one of those dreams where you keep yelling and no one hears. Time after time, Microsoft strikes out in new directions, with new initiatives that never seem to catch on the way they were supposed to: search, smartphones, tablets, Windows 7, Windows 8.

Note that I'm not trying to argue that all these leaders were correct with their prescriptions. I'm simply noticing how difficult it was for them to define a vision and simultaneously get their company, their customers, potential shareholders, and the rest of the world to embrace it. It would be easy to claim the problem is that mega-mythic CEO-as-superstar leaders like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates don't exist anymore, but it isn't like they were growing on trees back then either. Of course it helps when you have the moral authority of being the founder of the company, but more to the point, high-tech-era companies are simply older, and the industry has matured to a point where they aren't so freewheeling and flexible.

Perhaps most importantly: Everyone is watching. Every change, every announcement is reported instantly across the web, with dozens of formal and informal commentators. Anything destabilizing brings down the stock price, which means the more aggressive the effort to fix the company, the worse it performs in the market, and the less leverage the leader has for further changes.

The dire double-jeopardy of this predicament explains why Dell founder Michael Dell wants to buy his company back from its shareholders, so he'll regain a measure of privacy and will at last get to tinker in peace.

Joe

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