

Make a Ding in the Universe: Steve Jobs and 21st Century Healthcare

John W. Kenagy, MD

December 1, 2011

A few weeks ago Jeff Selberg (COO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement) and I were talking about innovation in healthcare. Not surprisingly, Steve Jobs' name came up.

Jeff has been impressed with Steve Jobs' new biography by Walter Isaacson. In an interview on *60 Minutes*, Isaacson spoke about Jobs' attitude regarding his own cancer, which he was slow to treat. "I think that he [Jobs] kind of felt that if you ignore something, if you don't want to something to exist, you can have magical thinking."

Perhaps the first lesson we in healthcare can learn from Steve Jobs is counterintuitive – it's not what to do; it's what not to do.

We appear to be following the same "magical" thinking philosophy that did not help Steve Jobs—to the peril of our industry and our patients. We try desperately to connect the dots from patient care to the latest methods to new technology to aligning incentives to cutting costs to improving our HCAHP Scores... By the time all the dots are connected, unfortunately, that "big picture" may not look promising. Like Jobs, we might be ignoring what we don't want to see.

Interestingly, when it came to technology, Jobs' success arose from *not* connecting the dots. In a Stanford University graduation address (2005) he said:

[Y]ou can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. . . This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life.

"Looking forward" involves innovation and, as Jobs pointed out, the dots are not known because they don't exist. I believe the time has come for us in healthcare to grasp this truth—and run with it: *Our success will not come from trying harder to connect the old dots.*

Daniel Pink, in his New York Times bestseller *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (2011), calls Steve Jobs both purpose-driven and someone who wanted "to make a ding in the universe." Apparently Jobs was even trying to "make a ding" during one of his last hospital visits. His sister Mona Simpson recounted in Jobs' eulogy how Steve had asked for a sketchpad in the ICU. "He designed new fluid monitors and X-ray equipment. He redrew [the] hospital unit."

That's not magical thinking; that's making magic. *That's creating the new dots.* We can learn from that lesson.

I have watched Jobs and his various companies from afar for many years and intently for the last thirteen years starting with my research at Harvard Business School. My focus has been on those organizations that adapt and thrive in complex, dynamic, unpredictable environments. Under Jobs, Apple certainly met those criteria.

So, what would Steve Jobs have done in healthcare? First of all, he would have been inspired by the challenges we face. A vital industry that is 17% of the US economy still struggles with outdated, data up/implement down mindsets, methods, strategies and structures. That's not a problem, that's a golden opportunity. Let's do it!

Making new dots, if you will.

Before you make the dots you have to know where you're going. "Knowing where you're going" is the secret sauce of leadership in highly innovative companies. The neurophysiology of the human brain (see my last FYA column or the White Paper under Resources at www.johnkenagy.com) leads successful people to typically repeat what's worked in the past and feel threatened by the unknown.

In other words, when times get tough, our brains are perfectly designed to "try harder" with the same old dots. Innovative leaders work differently by setting a clear, simple, meaningful direction that guides the creation of the new dots.

Jobs would probably look at healthcare right now with this framework:

- Increasing quality by increasing cost is no longer a viable business model.
- Thriving in 21st Century healthcare means doing something different.

How about providing more and better care at continually lower cost? That's different!

Then, I can imagine him thinking, "Hmm, more and better care for less cost. That's something we don't know how to do. It's not a best practice or a current technology. That's an innovation. If you can't buy it, somebody has to make it. Why not us!"

Here's the key next step, as described by economist John Kenneth Galbraith: "There are two kinds of people who predict the future: those who don't know and those who don't know they don't know." Jobs knew that he did not know, which, paradoxically, was key to his success.

It's not just what you do that's important; it's what you do when you don't know what to do that really makes a difference. Steve Jobs was great at knowing "how" to discover "what" to do. That was an art he increasingly turned into a skill and then into a great business. We can do the same and turn it into a science.

According to Matthew Herper's article "Why Steve Jobs' Magic Doesn't Work in Medicine" (Forbes, 10-31-11), Jobs obsessed over an "unwillingness to believe that technology needed to be clumsy, ugly, or difficult."

Must any part of healthcare be clumsy, ugly, or difficult? I say, “Absolutely not.” Fixing healthcare is not more data up to more people in more meetings! Rather, it’s creating organizational DNA that is *designed to adapt* and create the new dots.

What might that look like? How about the *Adaptive, Innovating* side of this graph? Where are you, where do you want to be?

Innovation Questions	Current, Optimizing	Adaptive, Innovating
1. How are innovations acquired or developed?	Current mindsets, methods, strategies and structures make, buy or copy innovations.	Charter new innovation incubators very close to patients with a strategic purpose to discover
2. Where and how are innovation decisions made?	Gather and move data up to people in meetings who analyze, predict and implement.	Develop and coordinate, rapid, improvement opportunities close to patients and their needs.
3. What’s the method of innovation?	Gather data, meet, analyze, prioritize, implement; “connect the dots, thinking innovation”	Link information to action to results; rapid, discovery-based, “make the dots, action innovation”

Instead of pulling together healthcare experts, managers, consultants, lawyers, and policy makers to design and implement Accountable Care Organizations (ACO’s), Jobs would start with the patient by creating more and better care. *Dots*. At continually less cost. *Dots*.

Instead of having the government define “meaningful use” for Information Technology, Jobs would develop simple, flexible, adaptable, low cost technology that we could *meaningfully use* to provide more and better care for less cost. *Dots*.

Instead of exhorting healthcare leaders to “try harder,” he would rapidly test, validate, and improve opportunities very close to patients. In my experience, *new ideas always emerge* when we develop the real-time knowledge and creativity of our people. Ideas not even on the radar screen. *Dots*.

Improving healthcare can and will happen when we choose to make one innovative “dot” after another and get faster and better at doing it. Guided and framed by “more and better care at less cost” a new picture will emerge, one we will look back on with pride and accomplishment.

Working in healthcare is a high calling. “The only way to do great work is to love what you do.” (Steve Jobs, of course.)

[B]elieving that the dots will connect down the road will

give you the confidence to follow your heart,
even when it leads you off the well-worn path,
and that will make all the difference.

(Jobs, Stanford Commencement Speech, 2005)

What will make the difference in healthcare? **Getting off the well-worn path.**

It's not magical thinking. It's much more and better care at continually lower cost.

“Being the richest man in the cemetery doesn't matter to me ... Going to bed at night saying we've done something wonderful... that's what matters to me.

Steve Jobs (May 2006)

Harken: Is that not the echo of a ding in universe?

Dr. John Kenagy is a physician, healthcare executive, scholar, author, advisor, and, most importantly, a patient. His book *Designed to Adapt: Leading Healthcare in Challenging Times* was named 2011 Book of the Year in Healthcare Management. See www.johnkenagy.com or contact him at john@johnkenagy.com for more information.