



CORNER OFFICE Hey, Rock Stars: Take Your Show Somewhere Else

By ADAM BRYANT Published: January 29, 2011

This interview with Michael Lebowitz, founder and C.E.O. of Big Spaceship, a digital marketing and communications agency, was conducted and condensed by Adam Bryant.



Marlynn K. Yee/The New York Times Michael Lebowitz, founder and C.E.O. of Big Spaceship, a digital marketing and communications agency based in Brooklyn, says it aims to avoid a rock-star culture in which a bad attitude can drag down an otherwise positive environment.

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Q. Who were some important mentors for you?

A. I haven't really had a lot of mentors. I've had to sort of figure things out for myself, because I've had a lot of whatever the opposite of a mentor is. I've learned a lot from seeing what didn't work. There should be a word for that kind of boss — "dismotor" or something.

Q. I think you just coined the term. Tell me about some of the behaviors you saw that made you say, "Memo to self: Don't do that."

A. At one job, I watched as a lot of decisions were made behind closed doors and then dictated to the staff without any bridging of the feasibility gap. I remember one Web site where the owners of the company said, "O.K., we promised this really cool idea to the client." At the time, it felt genuinely impossible. That experience has informed tremendously how we structure what we do now — you can't disenfranchise people from the process by just giving them orders.

Q. So what kind of culture did you want to create when you started your company? A. Probably the biggest

lesson I learned as we started to grow was — and this is a more sanitized version of the expression we use — "Don't hire jerks, no matter how talented." I became very attuned to this early on, when we were still a small start-up, and you're doing everything you can to maintain a positive framework. So I'm looking for people I like, because I've seen how, no matter how talented they are, the negative is always going to pull down any positive. The second- or third- or fourth-best candidate who isn't a jerk is going to ultimately provide way more value. Because we learned that early on, we've always guarded against that sort of rock-star culture.

Q. What was the dynamic with those kinds of hires?

A. They say all the right things in interviews, and then they come in and really make people's lives miserable. You spend at least a third of your life at your job. You should have a place you're happy to go to every day. And if you're not making good on that in even the smallest way, it becomes sort of pernicious. It can amplify itself very quickly.

I remember a guy, he really was an incredibly talented designer, one of the best I've ever seen, but he was just surly. No matter how good you are, design is always an exercise in balancing what you think is best with someone else's needs, even arbitrary things. He couldn't roll with that stuff. He had conviction born of great talent, but he was in the wrong business to have that kind of attitude. He was mostly battling with me, but I think it kind of gave permission for that attitude — almost invited it — for the other designers. They felt resentful that I was paying that much attention to that person rather than just sort of saying, "What are you doing?," which I should have done.

I was treating him like a rock star, fundamentally. And I've done that a number of times since and each time I realize it and I have to put a stop to it because that won't play in the kind of environment that I want to create. And so you can't hire the rock star. It really is damaging.

Q. Tell me about your approach to hiring.

A. I actually used to be the last person to interview everyone, and now I try to be first. I completely step back from trying to assess their skills. I leave that to the people they're going to be working with really closely. And so I spend as much as an hour, sometimes 90 minutes, just trying to figure out who they are and if they're going to be a good fit for the culture.

I try really hard to stay away from rote interview questions because those are the ones that people have prepared for. I ask really open-ended questions like: "So what do you do? What do you like to do? What do you do when you're not working?" I try to knock them out of their comfort zone, but also make them comfortable. I also regularly ask, "What would you do on your first day, your first week, and your first month?" I think it's really important, especially with senior people, because if one of the answers isn't "listen," then it's not going to work out at all.

Q. Talk more about the qualities you're looking for.

A. I borrowed the whole idea of the T-shaped person. I believe strongly in that. A depth of expertise is essential. But you also need that crossbar of a breadth of knowledge.

Q. What things do you do to foster the kind of culture you want in the workplace?

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