
“Are You Coachable?”:
**Insights from a Trillion Dollar
Coach**

On a January day in 2002, Jonathan drove over to the Google office in Mountain View, where he thought he was going to pick up a formal job offer to become head of the growing Google product team. He thought the job was a lock, but once he arrived, he was escorted to a plain conference room where a gruff, older guy greeted him. It was the first time Jonathan met Bill. He couldn't quite remember who Bill was, and did not realize, at least at first, that this guy was the final gateway on the road to employment at the company. No problem, thought Jonathan, I'm a pretty big deal, SVP from a successful tech company, @Home. I got this!

Bill looked at Jonathan for what seemed like minutes, then told him that he had spoken with a few of the principals from @Home: its cofounder Tom Jermoluk; its first CEO, William Randolph Hearst III; and one of its investors, John Doerr, who was also on Google's board. The consensus, Bill reported, was that Jonathan was smart and worked hard. Jonathan's chest puffed a bit.

"But I don't care about any of that," Bill said. "I only have one question: Are you coachable?"



For many leading Silicon Valley executives, Bill Campbell was a not-so-secret weapon—a trusted advisor who made them household names, even if his own name was virtually unknown outside the Valley.

Campbell—who passed away at age 75 in 2016—was a successful college athlete turned professional football coach, first at Boston College, then at Columbia University. After his coaching career came to an end, he took the lessons he learned (and imparted) on the field and put them to use in business, first as an ad man and marketer at J. Walter Thompson, Kodak and Apple, then as CEO of Claris, GO Corporation and Intuit.

By almost any measure, Campbell was a successful executive. But where he truly made his mark was in shaping other executives, many of whom went on to create billions of dollars in economic value themselves. The list of leaders Campbell coached over the years is a Who's Who of modern tech royalty: Amazon's Jeff Bezos; Apple's Steve Jobs; Chegg's Dan Rosensweig; eBay's John Donahoe; Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg; Flipboard's Mike McCue; Google's Larry Page, Sergey Brin, Eric Schmidt, Jonathan Rosenberg and Sundar Pichai; Handle Financial's Danny Shader; Nextdoor's Nirav Tolia; Twitter's Dick Costolo; Yahoo's Marissa Mayer. Venture capitalists Ben Horowitz, Bill Gurley and Jesse Rogers. University presidents Lee Bollinger (Columbia) and John Hennessy (Stanford). Vice President Al Gore. The list goes on and on.

Campbell's death from cancer on April 18, 2016, was so significant an event that it resulted in Apple postponing its quarterly earnings call for five days to give employees time to mourn.

Afterward, three of the leaders who knew him best—Eric Schmidt, Jonathan Rosenberg and Alan Eagle, all of Google or Alphabet—set out to speak with as many of Campbell's proteges as possible and to codify his coaching and leadership guidance for future generations. The result is the book *Trillion Dollar Coach: The Leadership Playbook of Silicon Valley's Bill Campbell*, published last summer (and from which all quotes in this piece are drawn).

Coachability was one of Campbell's first screens for potential clients. "The traits that make a person

coachable include honesty and humility, the willingness to persevere and work hard, and a constant openness to learning," he once said. Campbell understood that coachability was essentially another way of gauging whether someone would be a successful leader or not.

Campbell's lessons are straightforward and practical, often focusing on the fundamentals of leadership. They are the things we know we should do, but often neglect:

- *"Define the 'First Principles' for the situation, the immutable truths that are the foundation for the company or product, and help guide the decision from those principles."*
- *"Have a structure for 1:1s, and take the time to prepare for them, as they are the best way to help people be more effective and to grow."*
- *"Be relentlessly honest and candid, couple negative feedback with caring, give feedback as soon as possible, and if the feedback is negative, deliver it privately."*
- *"People are most effective when they can be completely themselves and bring their full identity to work."*
- *"When faced with a problem or opportunity, the first step is to ensure the right team is in place and working on it."*
- *"Leading teams becomes a lot more joyful, and the teams more effective, when you know and care about the people."*

Probing questions were at the heart of Campbell's genius. Nearly all his advice can be summed up in this lesson: *"Listen to people with your full and undivided attention—don't think ahead to what you're going to say next—and ask questions to get to the real issue."* Ben Horowitz, the co-founder of venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, says that "Bill would never tell me what to do. Instead he'd ask more and more questions, to get to what the real issue was."

Despite the obvious wisdom in much of Campbell's guidance over the years, not all of his advice will be universally accepted or embraced, nor perhaps should it be. He was the only corporate director on Apple's board who disagreed with firing Steve Jobs in 1985. His propensity for hugging is now less acceptable than it was in the past. His affection for others was often conveyed via profane insults (most of which, while included in the book, cannot be reprinted here). And while much of his advice for boards is admirable—get rid of directors who don't prepare for meetings, have executives talk about both successes and failures—he also argues that "It's the CEO's job to manage boards, not the other way around," a violation of widely agreed-upon good corporate governance principles.

Campbell had his flaws. Yet his story is not unique simply because of the advice he dispensed, but also because of the trajectory he took in his career.

Few individuals successfully move from senior leadership roles in sports to senior careers in business, even if the lessons from the stadium are clearly transferable to the boardroom. And while the occasional "business lessons from a championship team" book ends up on the sales display, none have had the impact of their more traditional business-book genre peers. Campbell's grit and determination shine through in each career transition and pay tribute to his own advice to stay humble and keep learning. Others would be wise to learn from his example.

Bill Campbell touched an extraordinarily long list of leaders during his lifetime—yet new generations of executives are emerging in the Valley and around the world. *Trillion Dollar Coach* provides the broader business community with an introduction to the man and his insights, perhaps providing them the opportunity to improve themselves, their team and their organization. The Coach would undoubtedly approve.

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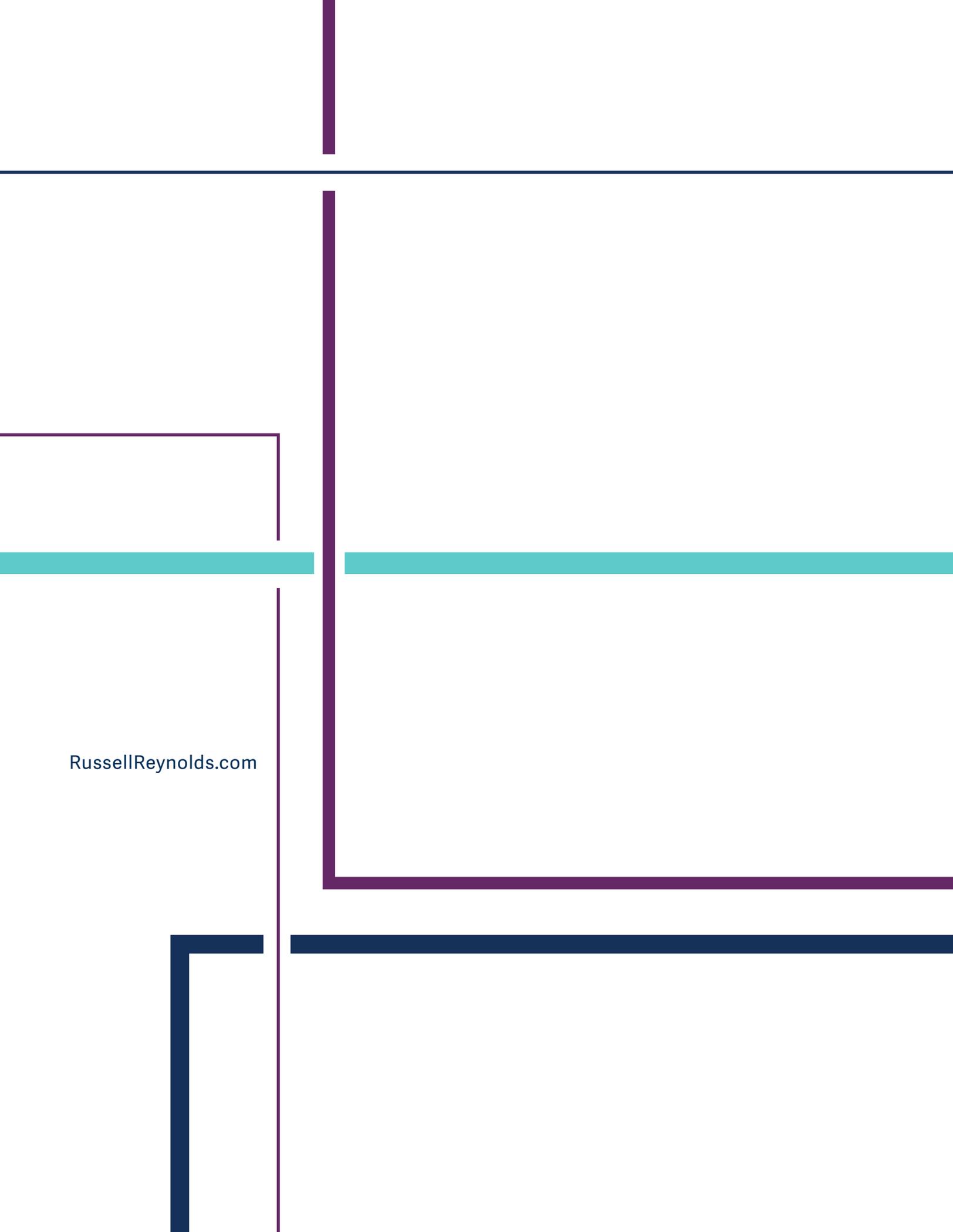
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