Hey, Rock Stars: Take Your Show Someplace Else

By ADAM BRYANT

*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**.*

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 — "dismentor" 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?*

A. We do a lot of work just for ourselves, creating products, pieces of content. I invest fairly heavily in that, in having time. We did a thing this summer called I.P. (intellectual property) Fridays. You take the traditional corporate summer Friday where everybody's supposed to be allowed to leave at 2 p.m., but everybody has to work anyway so they can't and they just feel miffed. So we get a big lunch for everybody and at 2 p.m. on Friday, we close to client work and spend from 2 to 7 working on our own internal projects. And the ideas for those come from anywhere in the company.

We have a little form with a few simple questions on our internal blog, and then a few of us vet the ideas. We want them to be simple, because we want small things that we can act on quickly. So we've got all this stuff out in the world that we created for ourselves, and people get excited about that.

Q. *What other things do you look for when you're hiring?*

A. Traditionally, people look at finished work in a portfolio. I love looking at process and thought process — "Well, how did you get the idea to go from here to there?" The end product can always be polished up, but understanding how somebody thinks really matters. If I see a designer who shows me sketches in their portfolio — that's just the way that they chose to present themselves — they've got a huge leg up with me because it's all about how you get there.

We assume at Big Spaceship that the work will come out at a very high level on the other side. So the question becomes, who's going to be fun and interesting to work with along the way? Who's going to bring out good things in other people?

Q. *Give some more examples about what it's like to work at your company.*

A. I don't believe that creativity is a department. In most of the industry, they talk about the "creatives" and creative directors. I think that's a really detrimental thing. I won't put "creative" in anybody's title. If you're not creative, regardless of what your role is, you can't work here, period. It's cost of entry. And I think in general it should be the cost of entry. If we're in an idea economy, if we're in an information economy, then it seems like everybody needs to be creative.

We also invite people from all of our disciplines into all of our brainstorms. Great ideas come from everywhere. So how do you create an environment where everybody not only has a voice, but also the mandate is to speak up? I want to talk about the pros and cons of things, and I want people to make really compelling arguments. I want people to argue with me or tell me I'm full of it. I have no ego about that stuff. I will state my position just as strongly, but I really relish those moments.

One of my longest-standing clients, a very smart guy, says: "There's two ways to manage. You can hire to be the smartest person in the room or you can hire to be the dumbest person in the room." And I absolutely want to do the latter.

Q. *What about how you designed your office?*

A. About four or five years ago, when we moved into the space we're in now, we went through the process with the architect of talking through what we wanted the space to look like, and they did these drawings of these really awesome, sort of monolithic giant white tables. I think there were seven of them across, and they can seat about 10 people around them. And there was a point maybe three years ago where I could feel a little bit of kind of territorialism creeping in: "Oh, that wasn't us. That was the technology group." And I said I need to nip this in the bud. We were sitting according to discipline. As soon as they're sitting together, it's a department.

So I worked with my core team to figure out a different layout, with interdisciplinary teams seated together. And we changed the layout so that rather than facing each other, they face outward. They can focus on their job, but as soon as something needs to be discussed, all they have to do is swivel their chairs in and they've got a team meeting. And it's wildly efficient. We have teams that have no conference-room meetings at all and are very, very organized.

And we also had the teams name themselves, design logos, really sort of create an identity so they're almost like little agencies within the agency. And I think it's also a way of staying small without being small.

Q. *And what other things?*

A. I think a little bit of chaos is really good, as long as people can focus on what they need to do. In some ways, I just try to enable stuff to happen, and I'm not quite sure what the stuff will be. We give each discipline a monthly budget, a sort of use-it-or-lose-it budget. Spend it on whatever you want, as long as it's related to stuff you're interested in. Designers will buy craft supplies because they want to do stuff with

paper and then shoot it and composite it on the computer. Strategists buy books and go to conferences and things like that.

This is not about creating a utopia. I mean, we're a profit-driven company. But I want a little bit of chaos to be a natural part of the company. Even though that makes things sort of harder, it doesn't necessarily make them less efficient. I think that's an assumption people make that's derived from an industrial era, when efficiency was the defining thing. But it's not defining in what we do. And what we find is that it's more efficient for us to do things that would seem less efficient in another industry.