



INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW WITH JOE

LEVEL 3

Joe is a thirty-eight-year-old manager of a one hundred and seven person distribution facility for a global retailer we will call Best Brand, the largest of its kind in the world. Joe has worked for Best Brand for seventeen years. His facility is located in a city of about fifty-thousand people. Joe is influential in his town and seems to be admired by everyone who works for him. Above all, he is extremely likable.

I met Joe at his office at the front of the sprawling brick building that houses the sales staff and distribution center. The majority of the building is warehouse, with a large truck courtyard for receiving and delivering their product. Joe was what you might call a good old boy, stout but not overweight, unpretentious, and very welcoming. I suspect that most of the people he manages and knows have the same positive impression I had of him when we spoke.

One of the difficult things about critiquing people whose development is arrested at Level 3 is they often tend to be very likable—remember that they are largely driven by having a congenial connection to others and their circumstances. I have a sense that any criticisms I make here would hurt Joe's feelings, even though I've changed his name and place of work to protect his identity. Nevertheless, this interview is a perfect example of what arrested development looks like at Level 3. It clearly shows how much of Joe's understanding of the world comes from the outside in. He is entirely defined by his role and association with his company. He is constantly evaluating people and circumstances as if they were a mirror to help him understand himself. And even the things he seems to stand for are almost always attributed to some outside source at some level.

Level 3 leaders can be seen as effective, especially in their early 20s when that level of development is expected, and even more so if they're able to memorize and effectively apply the

norms and ideologies of the cultures with which they associate. But because understanding at Level 3 is Outside-In, it is necessarily limited by their capacity to remember and apply the things we learn from those outside sources. This way of understanding self, world, and others limits Level 3 leaders' ability to evaluate their own performance independent of feedback or input they receive from others. They also have a limited ability to develop others because they don't usually allow others to really grow beyond their own influence.

In the following interview with Joe, you will see that he has moved beyond Stan's simplistic, either-or, me-first Level 2 way of looking at himself, the world, and others. Joe is not only able to see what others need, but he also is willing to sacrifice his own agenda to help them achieve what they need—this capacity shows us that he is beyond Level 2. However, maintaining relationships is paramount to Joe, and you will see how important it is to him to maintain his connection with those who work for him as well as maintain his connection to his role in the organization. An overwhelming amount of Joe's energy is spent maintaining these relationships and roles, protecting them from unpredictable crises, and constantly evaluating what he needs to do to maintain stability, a stability defined by circumstances. If things are going well, Joe is doing well. If things are not going well, Joe is not doing well.

The actual Leader Level score was given Joe, based on this interview, was 3.2 to 3.4. As you may remember from the The Map, this means that Joe is beginning to author what he believes is the right thing to do, he is beginning to author his values, and he has authored to some degree the type of person he wants to be. However, Joe is still dominant in his Level 3-ness in that he continues to seek confirmation from various outside sources—a developmental position that we would think is fairly normal for someone in their early twenties. Keep in mind, in the excerpt that follows Joe is thirty-eight years old, and he is the person responsible for the productivity of one hundred and seven employees. We will see in this excerpt that his capacity for knowing what to do, how he is doing at it, and what he stands for is dominantly shaped by circumstances and the input from people and ideologies.

It is important not to evaluate his behaviors—because most people would agree that Joe’s behaviors are admirable. Those behaviors are largely shaped by his Christian faith and his company’s protocols—a company highly regarded as a great corporate citizen. What we should evaluate in terms of his Leader Level is not what he knows or does, but rather how he knows it and where he knows it from. In his reliance on outside sources to make sense of his situations, it is easy to see how novel circumstances cause confusion or uncertainty. It is also interesting to note that Joe takes great responsibility for the well-being of others throughout the interview. He believes others know they are okay because of his input, and he even feels a need throughout the interview to affirm me in the questions I am asking him.

The following excerpt is from the very beginning of the interview when I ask him which card he wants to start with.

JOE'S INTERVIEW

We can start anywhere you like.

Okay. Vision and mission. There are two issues that stay on the top for me. And it's somewhat of a tie between these two, maybe even sometimes leaning more towards the professional side than personal, but they are very close. My mission professionally is to be respected as an overall general manager within Best Brand. What is, I guess, unique for me is that nowhere else will work. It's got to be Best Brand. I can't go to work for Global Brands and feel successful. If I were the CEO of Global Brands, it would be a total failure—to *my* way of thinking.

Why is that?

Well, I believe in Best Brand. I couldn't go to work for Global Brands and be the CEO and feel good. I have to be successful with Best Brand to feel good. I'm not even sure another product line in our Best Brand operation would work. It would work in a crunch—if someone just said thank you but we don't need you anymore. I would probably go find another product line in our Best Brand system to work for somewhere. But nothing would satisfy me professionally if I was not working for Best Brand and being respected. I don't have to hear about it necessarily, but I want to know that people like our CEO and my direct managers—I want them to think, *Joe's location is one place we don't have to worry about because Joe is there, and nothing is going to go wrong when he's there.* That's very important to me. Now, do I want commendation letters and all that? I don't care about that. I want to sense that whether anything is said or not, wherever I am is thought of as safe grounds for the company. That's very, very important to me. And it wouldn't work anywhere else.

How do you know when you are doing well? How do you know when things are going well and that people don't need to worry about your location?

That's an interesting question. On a direct supervision level, based on performance reviews, that's more of a formal evaluation of your performance. But more than that, I just pick up on it—you can sense these things. When you have visitors who aren't here very often, you know when they

walk in the door what their preconceived ideas of your performance are. And I know when someone comes in and says, "Well, I liked what I saw today, but that's what I expected to see." That lets me know that people I don't hear from regularly have said he does a good solid job.

So, you pick up on those kinds of indirect cues in lieu of the annual . . .

And if, out of nowhere, you get people saying, "Well, we understand that there may be some problems. We're here to try to help you fix them." You have to wonder, *Where did that come from?* I mean, if you don't know what that is, that means the opposite of what I just said.

When you identify a problem and you fix it, how do you know when you've done a good job fixing it? For example, if you've got a distribution kink or something that you need to work out?

Well, we have a variety of technological aids that are fully integrated into many different systems. I can directly identify anything I want to know about my business—cost, sales, profitability—that's more objective feedback. The more subjective feedback I get by watching my employees.

What exactly do you get from them?

They will tell me when the operation has kinks in it as long as I'm available to them. And this door being closed right now, if my people walk by and see that and see that my vehicle is outside, will say, "What in the world is going on with him today?" They'll think that something must be really serious going on in that room, because I rarely close that door. And I speak to every employee I pass. Every day I walk through and speak to everyone that I pass by name and ask, "How is it going?"

What do you think they get from that?

I think that they get comfort. I call it "catastrophe insurance." They're not going to come to me and say, "Joe, I'm sick of these working conditions, and I think we need to do something about it." Well, obviously you know what that means. That's a red flag for days. That means here comes trouble within your organization. But the ones who have been here any amount of time at all are going to say, "Well, if you feel that strong about it, I would go see Joe." "Oh, I can't go in there man, you know,

that's my . . ." "No, don't worry about it. He wants to hear about it." And I may just happen to be walking by right then and say, "Hey Bill, how is it going?" "Alan, how is that East Side route working out for you?" "Tom, how is your golf game?" Then I will walk off and they are saying, "See, it's no problem. He's really there; he works like we do."

So you think that walking around like that gives them a comfort level that they might not otherwise have to come and bring problems or personal situations to you?

Catastrophe insurance. Not little things. When something really bad is happening, if I had a middle supervisor working under me who is mistreating employees, being that somehow I didn't isolate it, and I have one out there that is beating their employees to death. They are not going to go to an outside agency to be heard. They are going to walk right in here and say, "Joe, I don't mean any disrespect, but why is so and so talking to us like he is?" I'm going to fix it. And it's a catastrophe because to an employee—a line employee like that—that is a catastrophe.

Earlier you said there were two pieces that were almost equally important. One was being respected as a professional. What is the second piece?

Financial security.

That's one of your visions or missions?

Well, it may come more under success, but my mission is to be financially independent to my standards. Now, what does that mean? How are we going to quantify how much "enough" money is? Obviously, it's different to different people. But the second piece that is close to equal is to continue to develop myself as a good husband and father, and part of that, to me, is being a provider. There is a certain life I want for my children. Do I need a hundred million dollars to accomplish that? Probably not. Do I need fifty thousand? Probably more than that. So somewhere in there, and I don't have an exact number in my mind where when I accumulate that much, my life's work is complete. But part of my vision is to continue to do well so that my financial world continues to strengthen. I want to feel better off now than I did last year, a little safer this year than last year. And it's not the

safety that comes with, *well, as soon as I get here, I can quit working and retire.* It's not a retirement desire. It's a safety desire that no one event could put me in what I call my danger zone. And basically, that is if I fell down tomorrow and banged my head and I couldn't think anymore and, therefore, I was ineffective as a manager, would I have two or three years' worth of reserve income until I could figure out what to do? As long as I can feel like that, I'm okay.

I'm picking up on this theme both in the management style and in the personal mission that you don't like to be put in a situation where if something big happens, you are not going to be able to control it. So there is sort of the catastrophe insurance that you buy by walking around, so to speak. There is the catastrophe insurance that you have personally by having some means to get by should something happen.

Well, this one is pretty easy. I feel this is somewhat of a value system issue here for me. And that is, I believe that morally if you are given certain talents and you don't abuse them, you don't abuse privilege or power, be it small or large, that is given to you, by being self-absorbed, and I know that I understand how to operate a sales and distribution center in this town, I understand that. I have the abilities to do it, the skills and the desire to do it. I know I know how to do that. But I also know what comes with that is here there are 107 other people who—whether I like it or not—I'm affecting their lives every day. And it feels good to me to go home, put my head on the pillow, and go to sleep. I don't know that I could be the kind of person who can just be self-absorbed.

Where do you think that comes from? How did you come to that value system?

That's interesting. I would say there are several factors. I'm sure there is some religious influence there, the way I was raised, you know, basically to be a good person.

I understand what you are saying.

And the other influence is the people I've watched and learned from. I watched how my grandfather operated, how my dad operated, how the CEO operates from afar. I saw how they were firm but honest, and how they took personal responsibility.

Let me follow up. You said you've noticed bits and pieces of different people, different situations that you've liked. How do you know you've pulled together the right mix?

That's a great question. I have in my mind what I think is right—what's going to be effective and pass the morality test—the *Can-I-put-my-head-down-and-go-to-sleep-instead-of-rolling-around-all-night?* test. I have in my mind what I believe is the most motivating and right thing to do in a particular situation, and I watch until I see someone do it. And I say to myself, *Yeah, see, that's the right way.* I'm not really thinking, *Oh, that's a great idea.* It's more of a confirmation of what I thought it was.

It sounds like you're a good observer.

I watch and analyze people all the time, almost everybody I come in contact with. I'm doing it with you right now.

Really?

I don't talk about it. I just do it. And this value system I'm talking about isn't fixed; it changes with different issues that come up. For example, my cocker spaniel got out. We were playing in the yard, and I was raking pine straw, and my dog got out of sight. A minute before he was just playing around with me. And I look up and within two minutes I see he's gone and I call him and he comes back over and I see blood on him. Someone has hit the dog with a baseball bat or a board or a stick with nails in it. And what I thought is, *How could anyone do that?* You know, if it's a foaming-at-the-mouth Rottweiler that's coming at your kids, yeah—but a cocker spaniel? A cocker spaniel waddles up to you, you know, like he's gonna lick you to death.

Right.

I've heard of this kind of thing, but this was a new experience where I was thinking to myself, *How do I react to that?* Instinctively, you want to go right up to the person and be confrontational: "You bad guy, how could you do this?" Then I thought to myself, *I think I know who did it—it's the neighbor across the street. I don't know him, but I've watched how he interacts with people.* And I'm

analyzing the situation based on personal experience and personal feedback. I think, *If I go over there in a confrontational mode, it's going to be a testosterone showdown.*

So what did you do?

So I'm thinking, *What am I going to accomplish here?* I'm not willing to do what he might be willing to do—I wouldn't embarrass my family by getting myself hurt or being violent, you know. Plus, I can see the headline that says, "Local Best Brand Man in Violent Confrontation." So I just...

Did you just let it go, then?

Well, of course. I got my dog to the vet and had surgery done—and he lived, by the way. And I thought that it really is my responsibility not to let my dog out of the yard. So, I'm not without responsibility in this. You're not supposed to let your dog leave your property. Now, morally and ethically, what he did was appalling. I could never do what he did. But I just said to myself, *That's his nightmare to live with.* There's nothing I can really do because I can't prove he did it. I would be accusing someone based on my feeling that I saw my dog coming from that direction, and based on the way it seems like they live, he seemed like the kind of guy who would do it. That's not enough. So, yeah, I let it go. I didn't want to embarrass my company or my family over something that's not worth the fight. If it were my children, maybe. . . . That's an entirely . . .

I have written down here that you said the value system sometimes changes depending on the situation. But even in this situation, I'm hearing a value system that's consistent with what you told me over the last forty-five minutes or so.

Well, I brought this up because it's a situation where I didn't have any prior experience. I couldn't call on that experience that says . . .

You said, "How is this going to look for my family if this turns into a confrontation? How is it going to look for my company?" Were those the guiding principles?

Well, first of all, I was mad as hell. My dog is a thirty-six-pound, long-haired puffball. There was no chance of anyone thinking, *Uh-oh, I see a cocker spaniel coming; I better ward it off.* No way. It was callous and cold, and I had a normal reaction, which was pure anger.

Sure.

But what tempered my anger was thinking, *If I ran cable for the phone company, I could probably go over there and get confrontational. But I'm a manager of Best Brand. I can't do that. We are respected by the world, and I can't just do anything I want to do.* In reality, I had nothing to gain by going over there no matter what my job was. What was I going to do? What was my mission going to be—go over there and beat him up? What's that going to do? There was nothing to gain, nothing to accomplish. So I backed off and basically took one for the team. Because there was nothing to win.

Right.

So my point of that story, relating that to you, was that not everything is cookie-cutter work—when this happens, do this. That was a new one to me. I was in conflict, part of my brain saying confront, and the other saying take one for the team.

Understanding your perspective is very important to me—to understand how someone who is managing this many folks—you've got, how many people did you say?

One hundred seven.

One hundred seven people that you know by their first name—that see you as the boss. When these new situations come up, how do you know what to do? That's a great example of something that happened at home and you weighed a number of things. What are the things that first come to mind when you think, "This is a new situation. How should I handle it?"

Okay. Well, here are the primary things to weigh; this is how I teach my managers. Now, this isn't specific, so I will be general and then if we want to. First of all, is it in the best interest of

the stockholders of this company to take this action or fail to take it, whatever the case is? Do our stockholders benefit from me making decision "A" versus "B"? Second of all, is it morally right to the employees or the people affected, or is it some type of sinister copout— "Well, this isn't really true, but let's make it look that way for others"?

I know what you mean.

That sends a message to your employees that you want me to look right, you don't want me to do right. Don't just talk the game, live it. Don't tell me one thing and act completely different. So the other part of what leads to a decision is obviously the financial, that's the shareholder value. Does this bring value to the shareholders? If the answer is no, you don't do it. If the answer is "Well, not directly, but it positively affects all these other things in the overall good, yes it does," then the answer is maybe. If the answer is that it absolutely directly benefits the shareholders and the other tests are met, you ask, is it right and is it doable?

Sure. Let's say it's right and doable. What's the important thing about meeting your responsibility to the shareholders?

It sounds touchy-feely, but it's not just feel good, touch good. It is in the shareholder's best interest that our employees witness us and are required to act responsibly and moral . . . and it's a great opportunity to discuss with your employees what goes into your decision-making. Is it good for the shareholders? Well, why? And if they want to sell me on some new project, I say, "Tell me why it's good for the shareholders." They will say, "Okay, well, we knew you were going to say that." So—it's a learning process and they are thinking always that we don't do things that are just good for our location. Just good for our location may be great, but what if it adversely affects every other sales center and, therefore, has a negative effect on the shareholders? It was not a good decision.

Right. So that's one of the primary standards then. They know you're going to ask that question.

They know that that is the first question I'm going to ask. And then is it right? Well, I will let them sell me. I don't always know the answer to that. Many times I will say, "Tell me why I should want to do this?" And many times they will say, because it is for this employee, or that employee, and it does the company well. I can be moved and sold. So I involve other people in the decision-making, but I take the ultimate responsibility for it and I hold veto power on everything because that is what I must do in this position. I'm the link of these 107 people to our company. I want them to have input, but I would never say, "Well, almost all 107 out of 107 wanted to take Monday off, so I let them do it." That's ridiculous.

REFLECTIONS ON JOE'S INTERVIEW

Besides being a great example of what it might feel like to be Level 3 dominant in the way we make sense of the world, this interview is a great example of making the distinction between the content of our behavior and how those behaviors are understood. It is easy to see this distinction because most of us reading this are in agreement with Joe's behaviors. The distastefulness of Stan's egocentric understanding makes it easier in a way to be critical of his Leader Level.

In Joe's case, knowing your employees by name, wanting them to feel heard, walking the talk, pausing before you act, caring about shareholder value and doing the right thing are all things most of us would endorse as effective management behaviors. It is in seeing, through Joe's words, that these behaviors, as good as they might be, are not fully his, that we can see the weakness of the leading from Level 3. What would happen if Joe was given unethical advice by the CEO? What will happen when a downturn in economic circumstances dictates a reality that does not return shareholder value? What happens when an employee that Joe really likes or respects does something inconsistent with Best Brand policy? What happens when the "right thing to do" is not covered in the management manual? Joe will be left with trying to figure this out himself, and yet, there is no true self to turn to.

The move to Level 4 is about owning the values, standards, and objectives from the Inside-Out. I work with leaders all the time who, when they grow to a place of Level 4 ownership of the self, not only react with confidence, but are more proactive in mitigating the impact of negative circumstances and relationships. They are able to make decisions that make sense of competing loyalties (i.e., performance versus relationship). They are seen by their followers as someone who knows what they stand for and they are seen as more effective by those same followers even when the followers have differences of opinion with those leaders. This is what Joe should be working towards if he wants to continue to grow Vertically.