Good leaders are essential for any business, but a successful company arguably also needs risk-takers and visionaries who disrupt the industry and have the power to set it on a new course, according to leadership expert Richard Brandt.

At AMCHAM’s recent ABAL, Brandt explored the idea of disruptive leaders and how they can influence an entire industry through their vision and drive.

Brandt is the Director of the Global Village program at Lehigh University’s Iacocca Institute in Pennsylvania, where every year over 100 students and aspiring business leaders train with industry professionals to build their leadership and entrepreneurship skills.

Speaking about iconic Apple Co-founder Steve Jobs and Elon Musk, who is the CEO of Tesla Motors, among other achievements, Brandt outlined how these types of innovators think outside the box, upset the status quo and along the way create success stories.

“Unfettered Conviction”

With what Brandt called “unfettered conviction” and a “unique brand of genius”, Jobs turned not just one but several industries upside down, including mobile communications, but also music sales, computers and animated films.

Meanwhile, Musk turned the electronic car from an unattractive eco-box into a trendy sedan and sports car, bringing in 2 billion USD in revenues last year. Additionally, he managed to outbid world space programs for space transport with his company SpaceX, while also being a leader in solar energy in the U.S. and founder of online payment service PayPal.

These disruptive leaders can “see around corners,” Brandt said. They dream big and are able to imagine broader eco-systems and enter the head of the future customer.

They are a different breed of entrepreneur, combining system-level thinking with creativity and a sense for business. They follow ideas bigger than themselves and are not limited by the as-is state of affairs but look towards the world of what-could-be.

They believe and push for their beliefs. But major success often also comes with a stroke of good luck, Brandt added.

A One-star Review

However, being a disruptive leader can also come at a price. While Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, for example, has created a successful business and made a fortune along the way, he is not exactly known for best practices.

Former employees have revealed that they were publicly humiliated by Bezos when they failed to meet his high standards. He is known for intense staff meetings, during which employees read six-page memos in absolute silence, and reportedly all public documents are red-penned before publication by the CEO himself.

For his book The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon, journalist Brad Stone of Bloomberg Businessweek interviewed friends and foes, as well as former employees, uncovering a confrontational leadership style and a gladiator culture, based on the survival of the fittest.

The book received a one-star review by Bezos’s wife, MacKenzie Bezos, on amazon.com.

The Price for Success?

For Brandt, all of these characteristics go against what he teaches young people at his leadership seminars, where he promotes consensus-building and team work, respect and good communication.

However, Brandt asked, “How can you argue with success?” One way to argue with it emerged during the Q&A following Brandt’s presentation, where he explained that in most cases, these trailblazers are surrounded by a network of people who, not too seldomly, clean up after them—from HR and PR professionals to number-crunchers.

Being passionate requires focus, and disruptive leaders often plough ahead without the instinct to look left or right. However, as John Donne famously said, “No man is an island,” and while the right-hand men and women of visionaries such as Steve Jobs or Elon Musk might shrink in their shadows, arguably they couldn’t have done it without them either.