



The secret coach

A guru to Apple and Google, Bill Campbell is the most confidential advisor in Silicon Valley. How a former college football coach is shaping the character of an industry.

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(Fortune Magazine) -- At the old pro sports bar in Palo Alto, happy hour is in full swing. Stanford kids down pints while watching a game on TV; a birthday party is underway next to a wall filled with old Sports Illustrated covers. And in the middle of the room, gathered around a table with a brass plaque inscribed COACH'S CORNER, is a group of sixtysomething guys clinking beers and eating pizza. Holding forth is a man with twinkling eyes and a full head of gray hair who keeps wrapping his buddies in bear hugs or cussing them out or both. "You're so f---ing full of s---!" he calls out in a gravelly rasp to one of his pals. Hoisting a Bud Light, unleashing a barrage of bad jokes and fake insults, Bill Campbell could be a saloon owner or a football coach.

In fact, Campbell is an investor in the Old Pro and once coached Columbia University's football team. And his regular Friday brew klatch is a great party, sure - but pick a week, and chances are it's also one of the most potent concentrations of brainpower on earth. William V. Campbell, it turns out, is consigliere to the likes of Google's ([GOOG](#), [Fortune 500](#)) Eric Schmidt, Apple's Steve Jobs, Kleiner Perkins's John Doerr, and many other Silicon Valley titans, some of whom are regulars at Coach's Corner.

Yes, the 67-year-old Campbell has had an impressive collection of day jobs during his 25 years in the tech business: He has run Intuit ([INTU](#)) (maker of Quicken and TurboTax), where he's still chairman, and has been on Apple's ([AAPL](#), [Fortune 500](#)) board since 1997, just to name a couple. He has the trophies too - he's rich, has a Gulfstream IV; beyond that, he chairs the Columbia board of trustees. But all that doesn't come close to explaining why so many luminaries - and regular folk, too - talk about the man as if he's some kind of profane cosmic mash-up of Oprah, Yoda and Joe Paterno. Among the testimonials:

Eric Schmidt: "His contribution to Google - it is literally not possible to overstate. He essentially architected the organizational structure."

Bill Gurley, a general partner at the VC firm Benchmark Capital: "When you have Bill coaching the entrepreneurs, it's like having extra wildcards in a game of five-card draw."

Danny Shader, CEO of Jasper Wireless: "Outside of my father, he's the most important male figure in my life."

Steve Jobs: "There's something deeply human about him."

Whoa.

"Deeply human" is not a particularly common attribute in Silicon Valley. Much more common: deeply technological, which Campbell certainly isn't. He hasn't written a line of code in his life. But he does seem to have a preternatural ability to fire people up about their work. That's why people flock to Campbell, whom everyone calls Coach, for advice: He deploys a unique blend of tough love, sweat equity, and a thick playbook culled from decades of hands-on experience both in the Valley and on the gridiron. His goal is to create companies that will be around for the ages, organizations in which all are freed to do their best work, and he specializes in the young company that's struggling with the transition from startup to smooth, well-run operation. Companies at that stage need discipline, focus, and accountability from the CEO down.

Unless you work in the Valley, you've probably never heard of Campbell - and he does everything he can to keep it that way. Most of his mentoring work is uncredited in any official documents; he has never been profiled in a mainstream publication. Why doesn't he want his fingerprints on the many ways he's influencing Silicon Valley, which include the deep commitment to research at Google and product development at Apple? "People (many in the press) want to credit others for aiding the CEO/Founder in these decisions. This result is totally unfair," Campbell wrote in an e-mail, by way of explaining why, other than in this exchange, he would not speak on the record for this story. "CEOs ultimately have to make the decisions and be responsible for them." Yet the CEOs, like giddy athletes, have no reservations about paying tribute to Campbell. He's the Gipper. The Nerd Whisperer. The Coach. All this can take on the sound of locker room clichés, but when you look at the names under his tutelage, it's obvious that something is working. How did it come to pass that a non-tech guy has become the go-to advisor to some of the world's most powerful tech companies? "This," says Intuit founder Scott Cook, "is a story that needs to be told."

It was 2002, and Ben Horowitz was elated. The CEO and co-founder of Loudcloud, a much-hyped California web-hosting company that fell on hard times as the dot-com bubble burst, had dodged a bullet. Flirting with bankruptcy, the executives had done a last-ditch deal with Electronic Data Systems that would give the company cash - but would also require a total restructuring: Roughly a third of the company would be laid off, a third transferred to EDS, and a third kept on in a new company, Opsware, that would focus on selling software to help run corporate data centers.

Horowitz made plans to fly to New York for the press conference announcing the deal. Then he talked to Campbell, who had been mentoring him every week and who offered him some wise counsel. "Bill said, 'The second you announce that thing, nobody in the company's going to care about anything but where they stand. You have to deliver that message,'" Horowitz recounts. So he canceled his trip and stayed in Sunnyvale with the troops to help them deal with their individual fates. "I remember him saying, 'Be there all day - help them carry their stuff to the car.' For the people who left and stayed, that meant something. And it allowed me to live and manage another day. That was the foundation for everything we did after that."

Campbell's influence back then went far beyond Opsware's employee morale. After co-founder Marc Andreessen and Horowitz begged him, Campbell joined the board to give the company some public support. He also dived into deliberations on whether to start a new unit ("Ben, I've got a good rule," he told Horowitz: "Get one f---ing business running before you start another division") and showed up at the company's Friday engineering meetings. "He wasn't doing that to evaluate the product," says Andreessen. "It was a form of applied coaching; the fact that a board member is showing up every Friday means that everyone working on product development knows how important that is."

The coach was getting across one of his core beliefs: that engineering is the heart of any successful tech organization. "It's where the crazy guys have stature, where engineers really are important," Campbell told *The McKinsey Quarterly* last year. "There's not a product idea that I'll ever have that's going to amount to anything."

But what I'll do is make sure that the right people are in the room and that the lunatic fringe has an opportunity to contribute." In the case of Opsware, Horowitz says Campbell argued vehemently for keeping the software-development business going as rivals closed theirs down during the dot-com crunch - and as his investors pressured him to sell it. "The venture capitalists were all saying, 'Get rid of your intellectual property,'" he says. "We couldn't afford it, but he said, 'If you don't have IP, you don't have anything.'" It was the software business that saved the company (Opsware was sold to Hewlett-Packard ([HPQ](#), [Fortune 500](#)) in 2007 for \$1.6 billion).

At Google, Campbell has played a similarly hands-on role since 2001, when Eric Schmidt was hired as CEO and John Doerr, partner at [Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers](#) and one of Google's VC investors, suggested that Schmidt might benefit from a session with Campbell. "My initial reaction was 'I don't need any help,'" says Schmidt, who had previously been CEO of Novell. "I don't need a coach." But he agreed to a meeting and asked Campbell what he hoped to get out of it. "He said, 'I'm doing payback. Life has been good to me. Now I'm trying to help everyone else.'"

Campbell began by asking Schmidt what Google's most interesting problems were. One was building out the executive team. So Campbell got to work, coming in at least once a week as the only non-Gogler attending Google's Monday meeting of the executive management group and, often, the Tuesday product-pitch meetings. His outside perspective helped Google set up a product management group that didn't step on the toes of the engineers. Campbell also has worked with Schmidt on everything from how to run a staff meeting to which topics deserve coverage at a board meeting to helping deal with Google's maturation as a company. "I'll say, 'What should we talk about at the meeting?' and he'll say the three most interesting things and the tone," Schmidt says. "We work as a tag team."

Thanks in part to Campbell's influence on hiring at Google, being supersmart isn't the only criterion for getting a top job there; you also have to play well with others. Campbell doesn't necessarily say much - unless he disagrees with something. "He's careful," says Schmidt. "He's not trying to overwhelm the management team. But you'd ask, 'What do you think about this candidate?' and he'd go, 'Ehhhhh ... no. There's something wrong with his character.'" Schmidt says Campbell has helped build Google's board (which shares two directors with Apple, Genentech's Arthur Levinson and Schmidt). Campbell has also helped defuse internal political problems, as when Chris Sacca, Google's former head of special initiatives, had a conflict with another executive. "It didn't take 15 seconds before he said, 'I'm not gonna lie to you; this guy is not a fan of yours,'" Sacca recalls. The two executives then proceeded to work through their differences.

In fact, Campbell has served as the secret glue helping bind Schmidt to two other rather important executives, founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, enabling them to make decisions together despite their sometimes radically different perspectives. He has helped mold a process by which the three work out issues privately, then come together as a united front behind the best choice. Note: This is not consensus-building. "No one was selling out," Sacca says. "They had just been taught this amazing art of decision-making where you express your dissent, lobby each other, hear everyone out, and then get to a decision. There's no doubt that it was all Coach." Recently Campbell has been logging time at YouTube, which Google bought in 2006, meeting regularly with CEO Chad Hurley, and helping find a balance between keeping its own identity and adopting some of Google's methods. "He's the perfect guy," says Schmidt. "It's growing dramatically and full of young managers, and he's seen this 15 times. He walks in the room at YouTube, and everybody smiles."

Had Campbell grown up a half-century earlier, he might have ended up an engineer himself. Homestead, Pa., his hometown, was the Silicon Valley of the late 19th century. The Homestead Steel Works was one of the world's most efficient and innovative mills. But by the time Campbell came along, the industrial might was gone. Western Pennsylvania was pigskin country, where success was measured in sports. Campbell's dad, William Sr., worked nights in the mill and days as a high school teacher and basketball coach, eventually working his way up to superintendent of the school district. In high school, Campbell played guard and linebacker on the football team, so when it was time to choose a college, he went for Columbia, where his dad knew the coach and where Bill could make the team even though he'd stopped growing at 5-foot-10 1/2.

Despite Campbell's size (he padded his official weight by 15 pounds, bringing it to 180), he brought a burst of energy that teammates remember even today. "There was this core - this nuclear reactor - at the center of the team, and that was Billy," says actor Brian Dennehy, who played on the same squad. "He always saw himself as a winner." He was also able to make other people winners - a rarity in Columbia's beleaguered football history. In 1961 the team, captained by Campbell, battled its way to a tie with Harvard for the Ivy League championship.

Like the dad he looked up to, Campbell seemed destined for a career in teaching and coaching. He got a master's in education at Columbia, worked as an assistant football coach at Boston College, and then in 1974 landed the head coaching job at Columbia. "Ballsy," as he was known in college for his gutsy play, was back. He motivated, inspired - and lost, a lot. By the time he quit after the 1979 season, his record was 12-41-1. It was, say friends, the most crushing defeat of his life, never mind the fact that Columbia doesn't have the size, facilities, or obsession to compete with the big-name Ivy football programs. Campbell was even hospitalized for exhaustion - a concept that's hard to imagine for anyone who's watched him hold court at a bar until 2 A.M., then run an 8 A.M. meeting. His fatal flaw, he told friends: He wasn't quite tough enough in asking his players to put football above all.

Recently married, the 38-year-old Campbell needed a new start. A football buddy worked some connections to get him a job at the ad agency J. Walter Thompson, where he showed enough flair for sales and marketing on the Kodak account that the film company hired him away. Then John Sculley, who had just left Pepsi to be CEO of Apple and whose brother-in-law was a Campbell buddy, persuaded him to take a job at Apple in 1983 after giving the recruit a look at a top-secret new product called the Macintosh.

Campbell was looking to jettison his jock background, not capitalize on it. But it turned out that his motivational skills worked much better with salesmen than they had with linebackers. "It would be pretty unusual today to hire a football coach to be your VP of sales," says Sculley. "But what I was looking for was someone who could help develop Apple into an organization. We had a dealer network in those days, and he gained trust both inside the company and in the dealer channel. He was just a natural."

A classic Campbell moment from those Apple days was his role in getting the company's famous "1984" ad on the air to introduce the Mac during Super Bowl XVIII. It was a lavish production directed by Ridley Scott, and there was concern within the company that it was too costly and too controversial, and that Apple should try to resell the expensive broadcast slot it had bought. E. Floyd Kvamme, then Apple's EVP of sales and marketing, laughs as he recalls what happened when a sales executive told Campbell and Kvamme that she had found someone willing to buy the 60-second spot Apple wanted to unload. "We looked at each other," says Kvamme, "and Bill says 'Did she say anything?'" The two never told the board or other top executives that they had a potential buyer for the time slot, and the ad aired. It helped Apple establish its iconoclastic brand; Advertising Age later named it the greatest commercial ever made. From there, Campbell took over Apple's software unit Claris, building it to almost \$100 million in revenues and mentoring the likes of Donna Dubinsky, future co-founder of Palm and Handspring, and Bruce Chizen, who would become CEO of Adobe Systems.

Campbell's next job managed to enhance his reputation even though it ended in failure. Go Corp. was the Betamax of its day, the first mover in the hyped-up pen-computing market of the early 1990s. Founder Jerry Kaplan had come to realize the company needed a "professional" CEO, and John Doerr, who had backed Go as a VC, suggested Coach. "I was a very analytical kind of guy," says Kaplan. "I learned [from Campbell] that trying to argue rationally about things is not necessarily the best way to motivate people." Go's technology was spotty, and it was competing with the deep pockets of Microsoft ([MSFT](#), [Fortune 500](#)) and Apple. But that didn't matter: The employees worked with a Campbell-esque fervor. He set the tone by traveling to Japan more than 30 times in search of an investor, including one trip two days after he broke 12 ribs in a bike accident.

When it became clear that the company was failing, however, Campbell engineered a sale to AT&T that saved some jobs. "We were doomed probably a year before," says Danny Shader, then a product manager, "but we all stayed until the very end. Bill got everybody to believe that they were in it for something bigger than themselves." The Go venture was a train wreck, but train wrecks are part of the mythology of Silicon Valley. If anything, the

experience grew the network of Campbell's admirers; Go alums have had quite a run, ending up at the top of such companies as VeriSign, Netscape, and LucasArts Entertainment. "Bill was at his finest when we were winding down Go," says Doerr. "His most important thing was that we take care of the people, that they leave that venture with dignity."

Campbell learned a lot too: In addition to how to shut down a company, he became an expert at working with founders. It was that background that helped persuade Intuit founder Scott Cook to hire him as the company's first outside CEO in 1994. And this time Coach put points on the board. In his four years as CEO the company managed a merger of equals, grew from \$210 million in revenues to \$562 million, survived an aborted takeover attempt by Microsoft, and evolved into a company that today is a regular on Fortune's list of Best Places to Work. When Campbell stepped down as CEO in 1998, Cook did something very brave for a founder, giving up his chairman's slot so that Campbell would still have a formal role. "I wanted to keep him connected deeply to the company," he says. And Campbell remains on call for the Gipper moment, says current CEO Brad Smith, recalling an inspirational speech Coach gave the engineers about three years ago, when Microsoft entered the small-business market and Intuit had to respond right away. "He talked about the good old days, when we had to ship in pizza and it didn't feel like we were working around the clock, about times of war and times of peace." Smith credits Coach for getting the engineers so pumped that they not only finished the new product on time but were able to add eight extra features.

An important element of Campbell's teachings is the system he's developed for reviewing employees, which many of the executives he mentors now use. Rather than simply focusing on whether a manager has achieved his financial goals - which can lead to short-term thinking - Campbell gives equal weight to four areas. The first is traditional: performing against expectations. But then he looks at management skills, working with peers, and innovating. If you aren't good at all those things, you aren't good. "He taught me that you can increase operating earnings but not fund R&D," says Opsware's Horowitz. "You may meet your goals, but you may be such a jackass that none of the people that depend on you can meet your objectives. Bill figured out a way around this."

For Schmidt and others, having a foulmouthed angel on their shoulder - one who isn't on the payroll, with no overt political agenda - is a dream come true. "He loves people, and he loves growing people," says Jobs. "He went from being one of the prize stalks of corn on the farm to being the farmer." At Apple, Campbell is not just a board member; he's also Jobs' friend, and the two take regular Sunday walks around the streets near their homes in Palo Alto, where Jobs says they discuss "the things that have got me concerned and things I haven't yet figured out." Of particular interest to Jobs is Campbell's marketing background, as well as his magical impact on the troops. "He has learned to get A and B work out of people," says Jobs. "And Apple doesn't make four billion semiconductors. Apple is only its ideas - which is only its people." One executive who knows both men well says that Jobs trusts Campbell completely. "Bill is nonthreatening," he says.

No one can complain about the cost of Campbell's advice. He typically tries to refuse payment for his efforts, saying he doesn't want to be perceived as a mercenary. At Opsware, Campbell wouldn't take a dime until Andreessen threatened to donate the money to the Republican Party. (Campbell is a Democrat.) He finally accepted stock options - on the condition that they go to his family foundation. In any case, Campbell has done just fine: He is worth at least \$200 million, an estimate based in part on his Apple and Intuit stockholdings. Schmidt won't discuss Campbell's compensation at Google, but he does have a coveted parking space.

While all the testimonials speak of Campbell as a quasi-religious force for good in Silicon Valley, it's fair to ask whether his close and confidential relationships create a clubby atmosphere that is not always sufficiently transparent to stockholders. At Google, for example, he is a free agent beholden to no one, who possesses more strategic intelligence about the company than virtually anyone besides the CEO and founders, and he is the only outsider to regularly attend board meetings. According to Schmidt, Campbell knew for a year that a key employee was suffering from a serious illness but didn't tell Schmidt about it. (The employee recovered.) Schmidt shrugs it off, believing Campbell's respect for the employee's privacy was the right call. "He is my closest confidant," says Schmidt, "because he is the definition of trust." Another potential concern over Campbell's manifold connections

to other Valley powerhouses is that it could be a threat to company secrets. Yet his colleagues see his network as a plus. Says Intuit's Cook: "What could be better than having a guy around who has insights into companies as hot as Google?"

Instead of wielding power from his office, Campbell often prefers to dispense wisdom in a rowdier setting. Shader of Jasper Wireless likes to joke that Campbell has perfected the art of "management by insult," but management by Bud Light may be just as appropriate. Campbell's friends end up pounding the pints while he listens and learns. "He gets more miles to that one light beer than you can imagine," says Cook.

Tonight it's New York City's Old Town bar (he seems to like his ventures new and his hangouts old), a 116-year-old pub he's been patronizing for years, where he stops off for a pop with some old football buddies. On his arrival, the bartender breaks into a wide grin. Hugs, shouts, and expletives follow. The "perpetual energy" described by Silicon Valley stalwart Regis McKenna is on full display tonight, undaunted after two hip replacements and years of constant shuttling between the coasts. Campbell's day began yesterday, in fact: After taking some pals to a San Francisco Giants ballgame, he flew straight to New York for a Columbia board of trustees meeting. Then he keynoted a dinner event for the university's basketball team before the stop at Old Town. After four hours' sleep, he'll fly back to the West Coast for a Google board meeting, then zip back to New York the following day for a meeting of the Columbia University Senate.

University President Lee Bollinger invited Campbell to join Columbia's board in 2003 - and two years later the board chose him as chairman, to succeed David Stern, head of the NBA. Coach is focused on athletics, naturally, but also on Columbia's ambitious expansion efforts - and he's also managed to get the likes of Robert Kraft, the New England Patriots owner and another Columbia football teammate, to increase his involvement. "You have a hard time saying no to him," Kraft says.

Campbell hasn't given up on football, either: During nine of the past 15 years, since his son, Jim, was in junior high (Jim just finished a master's at Columbia; daughter Maggie will be a senior in high school), he has spent an hour and a half each fall weekday and every Saturday coaching the eighth-graders at St. Joseph's School of the Sacred Heart in Atherton, Calif. His earlier failure to be tough enough is a mistake he seems determined not to repeat. "He's very demanding," says school athletic director Jeff Reynolds. "He'll get right in the face of kids if they're doing something he doesn't like. And kids respond." Campbell has won six championships.

Campbell moves around so much that you get the sense he is afraid to stop. There are always more hugs to dole out, more insults to hurl, more advice to give. The sense of urgency may have increased after the death of his brother from brain cancer two years ago and the catastrophic illness of his best friend and fellow investor in the Old Pro, Mike Homer, a former top executive at Netscape and Opware director, who has Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. After Homer's diagnosis, Campbell called for a blitz and, with angel investor Ron Conway, co-hosted a fundraiser for 300 that has raised \$7 million for research. Weekly, often more, Campbell goes to visit Homer and his three young children.

"How does someone create a rapport where that person comes away believing that Bill cares about him first and foremost?" wonders Randy Komisar, a partner at Kleiner Perkins who has worked with Campbell at several companies. "Bill's impact in the end will be very hard to measure, but it is really important. It won't be in the legacy of a GE; it won't be in the more classic sense of putting points on the board. It will be in seeing the people he's touched go off to do great things." Effing great things, as Coach would say. ■