

Meetings Are A Skill You Can Master, And Steve Jobs Taught Me How

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More brains don't necessarily lead to better ideas. When it came to leading meetings, Jobs had no qualms about tossing the least necessary person out of the room.

This is our second excerpt from Insanely Simple: The Obsession That Drives Apple's Success by Ken Segall, a close collaborator with Jobs for over a decade. To read the first, on how the iMac was almost called the MacMan, go here.

Apple encourages big thinking but small everything else. That is, if you feel the urge to speak or act in a manner reminiscent of anything you learned in a big company, it's best that you do that in the privacy of your own home. Meeting size is a good example. Once Chiat/Day was installed as Apple's agency of record and we'd settled into our work, we would meet with Steve Jobs every other Monday.

Typically there would be no formal agenda. We'd share our work in progress with Steve and he'd share whatever news he had. This was how we all stayed up to date. The invitee list for these meetings was small. On the agency side were the creative people, account director, and media director. On the Apple side there were Steve, Phil Schiller (product marketing), Jony Ive (design), Allen Olivo (marketing communications), and Hiroki Asai (Apple's in-house creative). Special guest stars were invited as required.

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One particular day, there appeared in our midst a woman from Apple with whom I was unfamiliar. I don't recall her name, as she never appeared in our world again, so for the purposes of this tale, I'll call her Lorrie. She took her seat with the rest of us as Steve breezed into the boardroom, right on time. Steve was in a sociable mood, so we chatted it up for a few minutes, and then the meeting began. "Before we start, let me just update you on a few things," said Steve, his eyes surveying the room. "First off, let's talk about iMac--" He stopped cold. His eyes locked on to the one thing in the room that didn't look right. Pointing to Lorrie, he said, "Who are you?"

Lorrie was a bit stunned to be called out like that, but she calmly explained that she'd been asked to attend because she was involved with some of the marketing projects we'd be discussing. Steve heard it. Processed it. Then he hit her with the Simple Stick. "I don't think we need you in this meeting, Lorrie. Thanks," he said. Then, as if that diversion had never occurred--and as if Lorrie never existed--he continued with his update. So, just as the meeting started, in front of eight or so people whom Steve did want to see at the table, poor Lorrie had to pack up her belongings, rise from her chair, and take the long walk across the room toward the door. Her crime: She had nothing to add.



Simplicity's Best Friend: Small Groups of Smart People

What Lorrie experienced was the strict enforcement of one of Simplicity's most important rules: Start with small groups of smart people--and keep them small. Every time the body count goes higher, you're simply inviting complexity to take a seat at the table. The small-group principle is deeply woven into the religion of Simplicity. It's key to Apple's ongoing success and key to any organization that wants to nurture quality thinking. The idea is pretty basic: Everyone in the room should be there for a reason. There's no such thing as a "mercy invitation." Either you're critical to the meeting or you're not. It's nothing personal, just business.

Steve Jobs actively resisted any behavior he believed representative of the way big companies think--even though Apple had been a big company for many years. He knew that small groups composed of the smartest and most creative people had propelled Apple to its amazing success, and he had no intention of ever changing that. When he called a meeting or reported to a meeting, his expectation was that everyone in the room would be an essential participant. Spectators were not welcome.

Many businesses follow a misguided principle: The more critical the project, the more people must be thrown at it.

This was based on the somewhat obvious idea that a smaller group would be more focused and motivated than a large group, and smarter people will do higher quality work. For a principle that would seem to be common sense, it's surprising how many organizations fail to observe it. How many overpopulated meetings do you sit through during the course of a year? How many of those meetings get sidetracked or lose focus in a way that would never occur if the group were half the size? The small-group rule requires enforcement, but it's worth the cost.

Remember, complexity normally offers the easy way out. It's easier to remain silent and let the Lorries of the world take their seats at the table, and most of us are too mannerly to perform a public ejection. But if you don't act to keep the group small, you're creating an exception to the rule--and Simplicity is never achieved through exceptions. Truthfully, you can do the brutal thing without being brutal. Just explain your reasons. Keep the group small.

Prior to working with Steve Jobs, I worked with a number of more traditional big companies. So it was a shock to my system (in a good way) when I entered Steve's world of Simplicity. In Apple's culture, progress was much easier to attain. It was also a shock to my system (in a bad way) when I left Steve's world and found myself suffering through the same old issues with more traditional organizations again.

Back in the early days of NeXT, when all of its promise lay ahead, I heard Steve address the troops one day, telling them to savor this moment in time. He told them that when NeXT got bigger and more successful, they'd fondly look back at this time as "the good old days." Things would surely get crazier. (Not the most accurate of his predictions, given NeXT's constant struggles, but you get the point.) In later years, when I found myself attending larger, less productive meetings at multilayered companies, those words would echo in my head. I did miss the good old days--not just because they were quieter but because they were smarter.

Only occasionally do more brains mean better ideas.

Out in the real world, when I talk about small groups of smart people, I rarely get any pushback. That's because common sense tells us it's the right way to go. Most people know from experience that the fastest way to lose focus, squander valuable time, and water down great ideas is to entrust them to a larger group. Just as we know that there is equal danger in putting ideas at the mercy of a large group of approvers.

One reason why large, unwieldy groups tend to be created in many companies is that the culture of a company is bigger than any one person. It's hard to change "the way we do things here." This is where the zealots of Simplicity need to step in and overcome the inertia. One must be judicious and realistic about applying the small-group principle. Simply making groups smaller will obviously not solve all

problems, and “small” is a relative term. Only you know your business and the nature of your projects, so only you can draw the line between too few people and too many. You need to be the enforcer and be prepared to hit the process with the Simple Stick when the group is threatened with unnecessary expansion.



Over the years, Apple’s marketing group has fine-tuned a process that’s been successfully repeated, revolution by revolution. Project teams are kept small, with talented people being given real responsibility—which is what drives them to work some crazy hours and deliver quality thinking. Because quality is stressed over quantity, meetings are informal and visible progress is made on a weekly (if not daily) basis.

Every company wants to maximize productivity and cut down on unnecessary meetings. How they go about it, though, can vary widely. At Apple, forming small groups of smart people comes naturally, because in its culture, that’s “the way we do things here.” Sometimes companies try to “legislate” productivity by offering up corporate guidelines.

In one iconic technology company with which I worked framed sign in every conference room designed to nudge the employees toward greater productivity. The headline on the sign was how to have a successful meeting. The content read like it came right out of a corporate manual, which it likely did. It featured a bullet-pointed list of things like “State the agenda at the start of your meeting,” “Encourage participation by all attendees,” and “Conclude your meeting with agreement on next steps.”

What these signs really said, though, was “Welcome to a very big company! Just follow these signs and you’ll fit in well.” It’s not hard to imagine Steve Jobs, who actively fought big-company behavior, gleefully ripping these signs off the wall and replacing them with Ansel Adams prints that might provide a moment of reflection or inspiration—like those he put up in the halls of NeXT.

If you have any thought of working at Apple, I’m sorry to say there will be no signs on the wall telling you how to run a meeting. Likewise, there will be no signs telling you how to tie your shoes or fill a glass of water. The assumption made at your hiring is that you are well equipped with brains and common sense and that you’re a fully functioning adult. If you’re not already a disciple of Simplicity, you’ll become one soon. Either that or you’ll decide you’d rather not be part of such a thing, which is okay too. Simplicity prefers not having to train a bucking bronco.

If big companies really feel compelled to put something on their walls, a better sign might read:

How to Have a Great Meeting

1. Throw out the least necessary person at the table.
2. Walk out of the meeting if it lasts more than 30 minutes.
3. Do something productive today to make up for the time you spent here.



I'm exaggerating, of course. Meetings are a necessary and important way to make collaborative progress. But we all know that too many unnecessary or overpopulated meetings can rob even the most brilliant people of their creative energy. More than being a guideline for meetings, however, the small-group principle is mandatory for project groups. Many businesses follow an instinctive but misguided principle: The more critical the project, the more people must be thrown at it. The operative theory is that more brains equal more ideas. That's hard to argue with--except that only occasionally do more brains mean better ideas. The more people involved in the effort, the more complicated briefings become, the more hand-holding is required to get people up to speed, and the more time must be spent reviewing participants' work and offering useful feedback. A smaller group offers the most efficient way to succeed--assuming that it also has the smarts. (Promise you'll never forget that part.)

Oftentimes Steve was only doing what many of us wish we could do.

To say that putting more people on a project will improve the results is basically saying that you don't have a ton of confidence in the group you started with. Either that or you're just looking for an insurance policy--which also means you don't have a lot of confidence in the group you started with. Whatever your motivation, what you're really saying is that you don't have the right people on the job. So fix that. When populated by the smartest people, small groups will give management more confidence, not less. When you push for small groups of smart people, everybody wins. The company gets better thinking. The group feels better appreciated and is eager to take on more work. This type of organization actually fuels productivity, project to project.

Apple's agency, originally known as Chiat/Day, succeeded by the same philosophy. Led by the Hall of Fame creative director Lee Clow, our small group matched up well with Apple's small group. Limiting the size of our group helped us produce work quickly, get information fast, and have the agility to react to unexpected events.

The agency's founder, the late Jay Chiat, had set a similar tone decades earlier. Jay and Steve had a unique relationship in the days of the original Macintosh and in certain ways were cut from the same cloth. I had the pleasure of being personally ejected from a meeting by Jay during one of my several stints at Chiat/Day. It happened much like Steve's ejection of Lorrie, except that I was only half of a dual ejection. Surveying the room before the start of a meeting, Jay took one look at my art director partner and me and said, "What are you guys doing here?"

"Beats me," I said. "We're just responding to the invitation."

"You shouldn't be sitting around a table talking about this bullshit," said Jay. "Go create something." At least we got to walk out of the room with smiles on our faces. Lorrie didn't have that option.

The working styles of both Jay and Steve have stuck with me over the years. I can think of no better examples of leaders with a talent for keeping their teams focused on the mission and focused on producing great results. And both built spectacularly successful businesses. It's not a coincidence.

To this day I have a recurring fantasy when I find myself trapped in a big meeting going nowhere. I imagine what Steve Jobs would say and do if he were sitting in that room, enduring what I'm enduring. In my fantasy, it's like having a really good seat for a matinee at the Roman Colosseum. Who would Steve verbally dismantle or eject from the meeting? When would he cut the presenter off midsentence and say it's all bullshit? With all the talk about how rough Steve could be, it should be acknowledged that oftentimes he was only doing what many of us wish we could do. Steve saw no reason to be delicate when his time, and the time of everyone in the room, was being wasted.

This is part of the challenge that we non-Steves must face. Most of us aren't comfortable with the idea of turning into coldhearted control freaks, but we also know that we sometimes need to be tough to keep projects on track. The good news is, being brutal and being respected are not mutually exclusive. In fact, showing a little of that brutal honesty at the right time is a pretty good way to earn respect--and keep those smart groups small.



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Ken Segall worked closely with Steve Jobs for over 12 years, serving as his ad agency creative director for both NeXT and Apple. Ken and his team were ...