

LEADING TEAMS

# As Your Team Gets Bigger, Your Leadership Style Has to Adapt

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Back when our Facebook design team still fit around a conference table, a new designer joining our merry band was a momentous event. Everyone loved sitting down and showing her how we worked —where we kept our design files, what tools to download, which meetings to attend. We were grateful that someone else had come to help us accomplish more together. Two pizzas were still enough to feed everyone.

A few months later, another person would join. And another. And another. Each time, new faces were introduced to the current team and our existing processes.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly. Then one day, seemingly out of the blue, I realized that the old way of doing things was no longer working. The turning point was walking into a design critique and noticing that our regular room didn't have enough seats for everyone. We found more chairs, but 10 people wanted to share their projects — and we only had time for five or six.

Meanwhile, my own days were getting squeezed. There were more unexpected issues, more announcements to communicate, more decisions to keep track of. This pattern kept repeating itself. As soon as I figured out a better process, a few more people would join and the gears would get clogged once more. The only way to stay effective was to constantly change and adapt.

At each of these points, I felt like I had an entirely different job. While the core principles of management stayed the same, the day-to-day changed significantly.

People often ask me what's different about my job now than when I started. Looking back, these are the five most striking contrasts between managing small and large teams:

**Direct to Indirect Management.** If your team is five people, you can develop a personal relationship with each individual where you understand the details of their work, what they are good at, and maybe even the hobbies they enjoy outside the office.

If your team is 30 people, you can't manage them all directly, at least not to the same degree. If you did weekly 30-minute one-on-ones with everyone, that alone would take 15 hours — nearly half of the workweek. Add in time to follow up on any action items, and you'd barely be able to do anything else. When I got to more than eight reports, I started to feel like I didn't have enough hours in the day to support everyone well while also thinking about hiring, ensuring high-quality design work, and contributing to product strategy.

This is why managers of growing teams eventually start to hire or develop managers underneath them. But this means you're further removed from the people and the work on the ground. You're still responsible for your team's outcomes, but you can't be in all the details. Decisions will be made without your input, and things will be done differently than how you might personally do them.

At first, this can feel disorienting, like you're losing control. But empowering your people is a necessity. One of the biggest challenges of managing at scale is finding the right balance between going deep on a topic and stepping back and trusting others to take care of it. As a team grows, learning to give this trust is essential.

**People Treat You Differently.** Some years ago, when my team had grown beyond the point where I knew everybody personally, I attended a review where three designers presented their latest work. I gave them my feedback. Before we ended, I asked if there were any thoughts or questions about what I had said. Everyone shook their heads No. I left thinking that it was a good and productive meeting.

Later in the day, I saw one of my direct reports who looked upset. "I caught up with the team and they're not feeling good about the review this morning," he told me. I thought he was joking. "What? Why?" "They didn't agree with your feedback," he said. "But why didn't they tell me that?" I asked incredulously. My subordinate paused. "Well Julie, you're kind of a big deal — they were intimidated."

It was the first time I'd ever heard anyone refer to me as "kind of a big deal." It was hard to compute. When did I become the kind of person who intimidated others? I'd always prided myself on my approachability.

What I learned is that it didn't matter how I saw myself. When people don't know you well and see that you're in a position of authority, they're less likely to tell you the ugly truth and challenge you when they think you're wrong, even if you'd like them to. They might think it's your prerogative to call the shots. They might not want to disappoint you or have you think badly of them. Or they might be trying to make your life easier by not

burdening you with new problems or imposing on your time.

Be aware of this dynamic. Are your suggestions being taken as orders? Are your questions coming off as judgements? Are you presuming that things are rosier than they really are because you're not hearing the full story?

Happily, there are some countermeasures you can take to make it easier for people to tell you the truth. Emphasize that you welcome dissenting opinions and reward those who express them. Own your mistakes and remind your team that you are human, just like everyone else. Use language that invites discussion: "I may be totally wrong here, so tell me if you disagree. My opinion is..." You can also ask directly for advice: "If you were me, what would you do in this situation?"

**Context Switching, All Day, Every Day.** When I managed a small team, I spent many afternoons with a handful of designers at the whiteboard, exploring new ideas. We would get so deeply into the flow of our work that hours would pass unnoticed.

As my team grew, my capacity to spend long, focused blocks on a single topic began to shrink. More people meant that we could tackle more projects, which meant that my time fragmented. I'd receive 10 emails about 10 completely different topics. Back-to-back meetings required me to immediately shed the past discussion and get mentally prepared for the next one.

When I didn't do this well, I'd be distracted and overwhelmed, my mind constantly jumping from one topic to another. I'd lose focus during presentations. I'd mutter that *every day felt like a week*.

Over time, I came to understand that this *was* the job. As the number of projects I was responsible for doubled, tripled, and quadrupled, my ability to context switch also needed to keep pace. I discovered a few techniques to make this easier: scanning through my calendar every morning and preparing for each meeting, developing a robust note-taking and task-management system, finding pockets for reflection at the end of every week.

Some days I'm still distracted. But I've come to accept that there will always be a dozen different issues to work through at any given time — some big, some small, some unexpected — and as the manager of a large team, you learn to roll with it.

**Pick and Choose Your Battles.** When I managed a small team, there were days I'd walk out of the office with zero outstanding tasks left — my inbox was cleared, my to-dos were crossed off, and nothing else needed my attention. As my scope grew, those days became rarer and rarer until they ceased to exist completely.

The more you look after, the more likely it is that something under your purview isn't going as well as it could be. It might be projects falling behind schedule, miscommunications that need to be cleared up, or people who aren't getting what they need. At any given moment, I can list dozens of areas that I could be working to improve.

But at the end of the day, you are only one individual with a limited amount of time. You can't do everything, so you must prioritize. What are the most important topics for you to pay attention to, and where are you going to draw the line? Perfectionism is not an option. It took me a long time to get comfortable operating in a world where I had to pick and choose what mattered the most, and not let the sheer number of possibilities overwhelm me.

**People-Centric Skills Matter Most.** I remember hearing about a CEO who made the executives on his team switch roles every few years, like a game of musical chairs. I was skeptical. How could a sales executive be expected to know how to run an engineering organization, or a chief financial officer become a strong chief marketing officer?

Nowadays, I don't think an executive swap is as far-fetched as I once thought. As teams grow, managers spend less time on the specific craft of their discipline. What matters more is that they can get the best out of a group of people. For example, no CEO is an expert across sales and design, engineering and communications, finance and human resources. And yet, she is tasked with building and leading an organization that does all of those things.

At higher levels of management, the job starts to converge regardless of background.

Success becomes more about mastering a few key skills: hiring exceptional leaders, building self-reliant teams, establishing a clear vision, and communicating well.

People who master those skills will be well-equipped to lead teams of any size.

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