

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/how-facebook-makes-decisions>

At Facebook, rather than asking permission, teams are encouraged to build and try things and then course correct if necessary, says Jocelyn Goldfein, director of engineering at Facebook. In response to a question from STVP Executive Director Tina Seelig, Goldfein also explains how Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg manages to stay tapped into product development across the organization.



## Transcript

It really depends on the decision.. I think that if you code, you know that you make decisions with every line of code that you write.. And so Facebook is an environment that has the expectation that everybody is going to be making a lot of decisions and so our job as a management team is actually to plug every individual into as much information as possible about what's going on so that everybody can make the very best decisions.. It's a very distributed decision-making environment.. And Facebook takes that a little bit - that sounds like pretty good, that sounds like mom and apple pie, right? But Facebook takes it a little bit to an extreme in the sense of we've worked very, very hard to avoid - to give teams, small teams, a lot of autonomy to pursue their own destiny and so we have kind of eliminated a few of the checks and balances that are more standard at other software companies.. So you generally don't go to other teams - like as you get larger, more teams have a stake in what you're doing, but you generally don't go to other teams and ask their permission.. You generally build stuff and test it and then if that manifests as problems for someone else, then you work it out and fix it.. And so I like to say it's a "try catch" model of decision-making, not an "if then".. And so that has for the most part served us very, very well because it means that just people operate a lot faster, we move a lot faster and even if we're heading in the wrong direction, we figure that out and course correct faster.. Can I just ask you how involved is the senior management, like Mark, in decisions that are very granular? We know of companies that have a tremendous amount of top down control - if a button gets changed its color, the most senior person is looking and saying I would rather have it blue than yellow..

How involved is Mark in that - all of those decisions? Mark will definitely give you advice about pixels.. And when I say advice, I mean make decisions.. So Mark has organized the company so he can spend the bulk of his time on product and product strategy and he has very able lieutenants that allow him to do that.. And he basically has set up his calendar so that each day of the week has a theme and the theme is one of the departments.. So one day it might be mobile, one day it might be platform, one day it might be whatever, and then there will be a block of four hours and just teams rotate through that block and just present stuff to him and talk stuff through with him.. And it's amazing because he is probably the most gifted product thinker in the company and maybe in the Valley, maybe in the world.. That's probably stretching it, but certainly in our space.. And he - and so like having a half hour of his time is just like amazing and, but it's - you do have to learn because he can operate at so many layers of abstraction at once, like sometimes he will say like, yeah, that's not going to work, I think we should try it this way and you have to kind of unpack and figure out like is it your CEO, is he wearing his CEO hat when he is giving you that feedback and that's because of strategy and how you're going to impinge on some other part of the product, or is that - or is he wearing his designer hat or his PM hat, which is about how users are going to receive the feature or how it looks.. And he will jump between those layers of abstraction and you just have to try to follow him.. I mean, and just make the most of it, make the most of every second of his time that you get..

So yes, he will be very involved and he has structured his time to be involved.. But he can only pay attention to so many things at a time too and so there are - if he is not paying attention, like he doesn't expect you to sit around and wait for him.. He expects you to run forward actually while he is not looking, and if he sort of comes back to you a month later and finds that you haven't moved from where he left you, he will be pretty disappointed...