

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/learning-to-lead-teams>

Matt Rogers, co-founder and vice president of engineering at Nest, recalls how working on projects at Apple from beginning to end put him in a position to lead teams. He also talks about how a great career can be built by taking on projects that others think are unworthy.



## Transcript

I went back to Apple in '05 as I finished my Masters and started out as a software engineer in the iPod team, basically, on the tail end of that first iPod Nano.. And being the new guy in the team who had built some credibility, but was still pretty much the new guy, they said, let's give him the kind of the least important project and something that may not ever ship, but we need someone to work on it because we've got to have a resource on this project.. And that was this new prototype project called the iPhone.. If it's funny like you guys laugh, at the time we laughed too.. We were like who cares about this phone thing.. We make iPods here, like we're never going to sell any phones.. Seriously, I'm not joking.. So we started this very, very Skunkworks kind of thing out in Apple, very, very small team, it was like a hardware guy, antenna designer, myself and a program manager, really, really small team to start the first iPhone.. And that first prototype did not really work.. It was kind of a disaster..

But we learned a lot along the way and 18 months later kind of after hundreds of people's efforts, out popped the first iPhone, which was a completely different story for a completely different time and many books have been written about that year.. But it was nonetheless a very exciting year, which we learned a lot.. And I think for me, the most important thing I learned was how to lead programs.. So when you're the first guy working on something, what happens next is like the second guy has questions on like the stuff the first guy worked on and hopefully the first guy is able to articulate what he did.. And if you can imagine that cycle perpetuating when you have guy 100 joining a project, it's good to have a fountain of knowledge.. So that's kind of the kind of culture we built at the time and the reputation I developed was that if you had a question, had a problem like talk to Matt he probably built it, and ask him how it went.. And that's kind of my informal introduction to leadership.. That's how I kind of learned.. It was never something I thought I'd get into; I'm a really introverted guy.. Super, super quiet, like I don't speak in public..

Albeit, speaking in public right now.. But as you can imagine one of the things that you learn is that the kind of building these connections with your fellow co-workers and project mates is that like you start to build a team and it's like building Robotics back in high school or playing soccer and you're on the team, you're working with each other and if someone misses a shot, you try to help them out.. So that's what we did and I learned how to lead teams through that and learned how to communicate and how to build project plans and kind of learned how to do the end to end.. And throughout the kind of the rest of my career at Apple, I was kind of the guy they gave new stuff to go build teams.. So when we started kind of taking over and doing a new Shuffle, like Matt can you start the new Shuffle program, no problem I'll go do that.. By the way, no one else wanted to do Shuffle, it was one of those kind of like hobby projects that no one else wanted to do, but it turned to be a really big success for Apple too.. So again like building your career on things that many people think are not important, but sometimes are worth taking a bet on.. There is a couple other things like that too like manufacturing, like manufacturing is not like the glory work of Apple as you can imagine.. Like the UI work and the industrial design is kind of the big sexy stuff, but it turns out manufacturing is really important.. And you can learn how things are made that way and build a whole career out of it, which I kind of did actually...