

How Apple Works

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Who takes over for Steve Jobs?¹ [John Gruber recently posted](#) his argument for thinking it will be COO Tim Cook. The biggest point in Cook's favor is simple: "He's already run the company while Jobs has been on leave." That's true, but it's less meaningful than it sounds. But to understand why, you need to understand how Apple works.

In the same way that Google is a company driven by engineering or Amazon is driven by operations, Apple is driven by taste. Here's how Apple products are created: a team of designers decide exactly what a product should do and how it should look and feel, their work is ruthlessly edited by Steve until he approves, and then the entire rest of the company is given the task of moving mountains to make that dream real.

Tim Cook is in charge of that third step. And he's done a masterful job of it, accomplishing endless miracles never seen by the public. Apple engineers have invented entirely new chips to fit the specified processing power into the tiny cases required by the spec; they build entirely new factories with entirely new production processes just to perfectly match the shade of pink in the original design; they've created a revolution in logistics to ensure these amazing products get into customers' hands on launch day. Cook runs this process, and there's no doubt he's brilliant at it.

But it's about fulfilling Jobs' dreams, not forging new ones. He can continue to run the company while Jobs is away because he's continuing to ensure the execution of designs that Jobs has already approved. But Apple can't run indefinitely on old plans. The only reason it works for Cook to be in charge while Steve is away is because Steve is still around, doing ruthless critiques of yet-to-be-invented products from his sickbed.

The only person with the credibility to helm Apple in the long run is a person who can do those critiques. And for all Cook's brilliance, I've seen no evidence he's a master of great taste. His creativity is at achieving a predetermined goal, not about deciding what goal to achieve.

As Gruber says, whoever takes Steve's place will be someone already at Apple. Not just because all the other options are absurd, but because Steve has spent the past decade or so carefully training his top lieutenants about how to do every aspect of his job. It makes no sense to hire from outside that elite group. But within that group, there's only one person who makes any sense as tastemaker-in-chief: Jony Ive.

This becomes obvious if you just watch the keynotes. Steve Jobs is well known for raising the product keynote to an art form. But the others who have taken over the speaking job in recent years — Scott Forstall, Phil Schiller, Tim Cook — seem like clumsy kids trying to fill the shoes of the master. There’s only one person at Apple who gives talks with the elegance and style of Steve: Jony Ive.

Now the big criticism of Ive is that while he is clearly one of the most brilliant industrial designers in the world, he’s shown no aptitude for software design. It’s hard to know whether this is true. The [Mobile Design Awards credited Ive](#) with the iPhone’s user interface, but [the patent](#) credits Jobs and Forstall and a dozen others, but not Ive.

But even if Ive never designed a piece of software in his life, it’d be beside the point. I can’t imagine Jobs has either. What’s needed atop Apple is not creative brilliance — they have a design department full of that — but editorial taste. Like [the director of a film](#), Apple’s CEO needs to go through the thousands of creative ideas developed within Apple and decide which ones should be approved for production and which ones need to be sent back for more work.

It’s impossible to imagine Apple functioning without this role. (Would Apple splinter and start developing all sorts of random unapproved products like Google under Eric Schmidt?) It’s impossible to imagine Tim Cook filling this role. (How can he be tastemaker for the whole company if he can’t even pull off a decent keynote?) And it’s impossible to imagine this role being anywhere but at the top of the org chart. (It’d be like crediting a film to the producer instead of the director.)

No, if Apple is to continue, it will be with a tastemaker at the top. And there are no serious candidates besides Ive.

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1. This piece was written before Steve stepped down as CEO, but I think it still stands. I mean when Steve really leaves: it seems obvious that even as “Chairman of the Board” rather than CEO, he’s still tastemaker-in-chief at Apple.