

Management

How Facebook's VP of Product Finds Focus and Creates Conditions for Intentional Work

When we asked [Fidji Simo](#) what she wanted to share with our readers, she polled her team at [Facebook](#) to see what they would highlight as her core competency. What attribute or habit has prompted her rocket-fueled rise through the company's ranks? There was quick and enthusiastic consensus: **Simo has the uncanny ability to juggle many important projects and priorities without losing focus.**

As Vice President of Product at Facebook, this emphasis on intentional work has helped her team of more than 400 product managers and engineers develop countless innovative products for News Feed across video, news and advertising, including [Facebook Live](#). Her knack for focus shows in these products. But it became even more apparent to her two years ago when she needed to manage her team remotely while on five months of bed rest during her pregnancy. Her continued success depended on rigorous prioritization and execution.

"It required immense focus," Simo says. Working remotely meant she was forced to say "no" to anything that wasn't critical, which created the time and space — physically and mentally — to put 100% of her effort toward the most pressing and important projects. **By cutting out anything nonessential she was able to focus on the most strategic priorities, not only for the product team, but for herself.**

"I actually felt so much more productive than when I was in the office," she says of her time working remotely. When she returned, she brought this commitment to focused

work with her — eager to share it with her team.

“We have the luxury of working in an industry where there are endless opportunities and low-hanging fruit lying everywhere,” she says. It’s extremely tempting to do it all. But ‘doing it all’ is as impossible as it is impractical, particularly when you’re building products. **It's not just people who can lose focus — products can too.**

“It’s so easy, no matter how experienced and talented you are, to end up with ‘Frankenstein products’ because you’re trying to achieve all the goals at once, without a clear sense of what’s most important,” she says.

Simo stresses that focusing isn’t simply about avoiding the temptation to multitask until a priority project is complete. Instead, **it means truly understanding what you want to accomplish and centering your activities entirely around that.** In this interview she shares the tactics, practices, habits and mindset that have made focus not just integral to her work, but to her entire team and what they produce for billions of people on Facebook.

Focus on the Intention of Your Work

Focus is doing things with a clear intention and making sure that all your decisions match your intention.

Questions to ask to find focus on a project:

What is the main problem this product is solving?

Who are the people we are solving this problem for?

What is the emotion/feeling that we want our product to create or evoke?

Is this particular implementation aligned with the problem we're solving for?

Is this the product/feature most likely to successfully solve that problem?

Simo asks these questions during weekly product reviews, when teams come in to present their plans. It's particularly important to ask them and get comprehensive answers at the beginning of a project — but continuing to ask throughout is an overlooked tactic that ensures work doesn't veer off course unintentionally.

I spend a lot of time making sure there is real clarity of intent before digging into product specifics and implementation.

To maintain collective focus and maximize the odds of successful product development, her Facebook product team is now organized and mobilized by the intention of their work, instead of the initial name of or label on a specific project (which can be stickier and harder to shake than you might think) or even the proposed product vision.

"I had a team focused on the problem of **helping celebrities engage with their audience**," Simo explains. "One of the main things that team was working on was a Q&A product that helped celebrities respond to fans via text in comments. But in talking with actual celebrities, the team realized most of them found it more fun and efficient to respond with video. That became the impetus behind Live."

Had they not focused on the problem (instead of the product they had in mind), they might have continued focusing on tools to make answering questions easier. Instead, they were able to pursue the bigger opportunity to define a completely new form of engagement between celebrities and their audiences.

With an intended outcome as their North Star, product teams are no longer bound by preconceived notions of the possible “products” or “features” they can build — freeing them up to iterate and innovate until they find the best possible solution, even if it’s one they never sought to build when they first got started.

“Had the team been defined by its product, calling themselves ‘the Q&A team,’ they probably would have been much less open to shifting toward the much better solution: live video,” Simo says.

Focus Is Not About Traveling in a Straight Line

A clear intention is necessary for focused work, but Simo says those intentions should not be impervious to change. You have to build in the flexibility to change course from the beginning. **Focus doesn’t mean you charge single-minded toward a goal. It means you pay rapt and incremental attention to how you need to turn the rudder on a project.**

“I come from a family of fishermen,” Simo says. “It’s much easier to go in the direction you want if you make a thousand small changes along the way, rather than letting the boat go in a completely different direction and needing one big maneuver to get back on track.”

But before you can make those small changes, you must first recognize the need for change. That requires regular reflection, a sense of self-awareness, and the willingness to pivot when new information surfaces.

“When your situation changes, your focus should change, too,” Simo says. “But when you’re really busy — which we all are — you don’t always take the time to question whether your intention is still the right one, and you don’t always question whether the decisions you’re making are still in line with what you set out to do.”

Simo says you must **routinely ask yourself two key questions:**

Are these intentions still the correct ones?

Are my recent decisions in line with these intentions?

She takes these sessions of reflection seriously, calendaring concrete time to evaluate her intentions and actions on a weekly basis. As part of this, she runs through all of the major decisions she made in the last week and all of the incidental meetings she had and evaluates whether they were consistent with what she wanted to accomplish.

These aren't metaphorical meetings, and they're not negotiable. **Simo blocks off between 30 and 60 minutes on her calendar every Monday morning** to ensure that her actions are aligned with and supporting her intentions.

These weekly clarity meetings have a set agenda:

List the broader team or organization's top priorities.

Check that your personal priorities for the week still align with those priorities.

Check for any new information or data that requires a shift in priorities.

Check priorities against your time allocation, meetings and commitments that week.

Make any adjustments to your calendar to better reflect your priorities.

Note any priority adjustments that impact or need to be communicated to your team.

Focus is really about aligning with your purpose – whether it be your purpose on a specific project or your higher purpose in life. When actions reflect intentions, you're in alignment with your personal mission. Only then can you truly shine.

"I also look at the big meetings that I have during the week, and for each of these meetings, I set a clear agenda of what I'm trying to achieve in that meeting, personally and for the group," Simo says. "That way when I go from meeting to meeting during the week it's less jarring because I already know what my goals are."

Having this clarity on upcoming meetings — **literally a checklist of what she wants to walk out with** — and an understanding of her personal priorities ensures that her team's actions and priorities stay aligned.

"My Monday solo meeting informs the things that I'm going to talk to my team about," Simo says. "At the end of the day, they're the ones who help scale this intention throughout the organization."

When you're a manager, founder or leader, constantly communicating your priorities to your team is key, Simo says. A shift in your priorities often means that the team will also need to adjust to keep moving in the right direction.

Being intentional is the ultimate integrity in leadership. It's stating your values and intentions clearly, then putting your money where your mouth is.

This was definitely the case when Facebook Live started to gain traction. All the data Simo and her team were gathering pointed to Live as a critical product — the most social form of video they could put out into the world. The team knew Live was a priority, but they weren't necessarily acting like it.

"If Live is our number one intention, then our actions need to match that intention," Simo remembers saying. "If we keep it staffed at only 10 engineers and continue to do a lot of other things on the side, then we aren't acting according to our intention."

In order to align their decisions with their goal to make Live a transformative tool for creators, Simo and her leadership team decided to pause all other projects and shift their staffing assignments to have more than 100 engineers solely dedicated to the development of Facebook Live.

"This was a massive, drastic change," Simo acknowledges. "But if you're stuck in the notion that some changes are impossible — like shifting 90 engineers over the course of a week — then you're going to miss opportunities."

Whether you're running a tiny startup or directing a massive division, where you put people (including yourself) will always be one of the greatest expressions and realizations of your focus. **You always want to check in and validate that staffing is in line with what you want to accomplish.** Too often these two things fall out of step without anyone noticing.

On a weekly basis, ask these questions to see if staffing (and resource allocation generally) matches your Priorities:

Do I have enough people on this project?

Do I have the right people on this project?

What trade-offs need to be made to answer the previous two questions with “Yes”?

Moving key people, or even large teams, to a critical project is all about clearly conveying importance and intention. “The difference between change (which can be good) and thrash (which is always bad), is that with the former everyone understands the intention behind the shift in direction,” says Simo.

With Facebook Live, she gathered all 100 people into a room and showed them the data, painting a picture of how large the opportunity was to get the product into people’s hands, especially those of creators and media companies. She also ran through all the other existing projects on the team’s docket to show why and how they could be pushed out in order to seize the greater opportunity.

“The only way to have this type of flexibility is to build a culture that makes change totally expected and acceptable — that’s what will make these instances less painful,” says Simo. “You create this culture by putting people in charge of a problem, not a product; reinforcing again and again that you’re all working in a market where assumptions change and that’s okay; releasing products early to get initial feedback and adjusting accordingly. **If you do all that, you create an organization that can absorb change** — and that’s vital.”



Creating Ideal Conditions for Focus

"My calendar is my most powerful tool for enforcing my prioritization," Simo says. "It's important to be proactive with how you want to spend your time instead of letting other people dictate how you're going to spend it."

Every three months, Simo's admin audits her calendar, showing her the **percent of time she spent on each project, the percent of time she spent with individual leaders versus in large meetings, and the percent of time she spent recruiting versus managing versus building products**. Together, they adjust these percentages to set goals for the next quarter. During this process, she's looking to see if the breakdown in time supported her intentions. If not, the three-month mark gives her a chance for a reset and rebalance.

This audit also serves as a check on team-wide rhythms. She identifies recurring meetings that have outlived their usefulness — i.e. they no longer serve the intention for which they were created. “I ask myself and the attendees whether each meeting is still the best way to achieve the goals that led to its creation, and we often end up canceling at least one.”

Here's an example of how this meticulous attention to calendaring works in practice: A couple of months ago, Simo's big priority was to clearly lay out the product direction for [Watch](#), Facebook's new video destination. But two weeks into the project, she realized during her weekly Monday reflection that she'd made little progress. Reviewing her calendar, it was clear that she hadn't been making it her top priority. She barely had an hour slotted for it each week, and no meeting scheduled with the broader team to get their input.

“All of the other things on my calendar were less important but were taking more time for legacy reasons,” she says. “There were recurring meetings that didn't require my attendance anymore, meetings to make decisions on less important topics, etc.”

Running this basic check-in allowed her to change her schedule for the coming week to allocate more time to crafting the direction for Watch. **A check-in like this built into every week as a routine exercise can transform someone who is reactive into someone who can proactively take on the most important items on their list.**

Instead of thinking of it as a quality or skill you bring to bear on something, consider focus to be the force you exert to stay in line with your intentions.

Too often “urgent issues” pop up throughout the week and sneak onto your calendar, filling it up and edging out the projects, issues and opportunities you intended to focus on. This is how you get overwhelmed and eventually burn out — but it's usually unnecessary.

"The truly urgent stuff — the stuff that cannot be postponed and needs to take your focus away from your strategic priority—that's pretty rare," Simo says.

Having a specific theme for each week makes it easier to see what's truly important, and can help you identify which proposed meetings don't align with your priorities enough to make it on the calendar that week, she says. By theme, she's referring to a particular wave of productivity — for example, analyzing data to make a particular decision, setting the narrative for a product, digging deeper on the designs for a specific area, building out a particular feature set, testing out functionality.

While you can't simply stop responding to meeting invites or answering emails, you can manage your calendar in a more proactive and defensive way.

"If you set up a viable alternative to a meeting request that doesn't line up with your goals, it usually ends up being okay," Simo says. When a requested meeting would unnecessarily draw attention away from your primary objective for the week, she suggests clearly re-stating your focus for the day or week and then proposing an alternative solution that keeps your focus intact.

What to say when something can wait: "I'm focused 100% on X this week, so if this isn't an urgent issue, let's re-evaluate next week."

What to say when you need a little time: "I'm fully focused on X right now, so I can't meet about that this week. But if you send me an email, I will get back to you with an answer by Y."

What to say when someone else can handle it: "This week, I need to focus all my time on X, but if you need an urgent answer, you can reach out to my team lead, Z, who is focused on that issue."

Simo emphasizes that delegating shouldn't be used as a way to push off work, but rather as a way of directing questions, issues and opportunities with forward momentum to someone who is or can be focused on addressing them at that time.

"It's actually empowering my leads and giving them more responsibility," she says. By having a clear understanding of not only *your own priorities*, but those of your team leads and colleagues, you can help support others' key objectives too.

For this reason, priorities are always and routinely discussed in a cascading series of meetings, starting with a Monday morning staff-wide meeting (scheduled right after Simo's own self-reflection). During that time, she always walks through top priorities for the whole org, her own priorities, and those of the team leads who report to her. Sometimes they share the same list, but often they divide and conquer and use this time to establish clear ownership.

After this, she devotes time in every one-on-one meeting (and has her reports do the same) to understand other team members' priorities and how they're tackling them. After understanding a top priority, her next step is always to ask: **"What needs to happen to for project X to go faster?"**

"Frequently, the answer is that they need to spend more time on it — in which case we go over everything else that is or could be distracting them from it and work through pushing off and deprioritizing those items," Simo says. **"All of this might seem totally obvious, but I've seen so many people not have the discipline to run these exercises, and they end up in a state where they know what their priorities are, but they don't enforce them with their time, energy, etc."**

Prioritized focus is all about creating checkpoints for yourself — ideally weekly meetings with yourself, your org and with your manager, so you get some reinforcement and help doubling down on actions that will help you reach your intentions.

This doesn't just work in your professional life. It's also an important habit to master to reach personal goals. Earlier this year, Simo realized she was missing the creative happiness she used to find while painting, but she hadn't "found time" for it in years.

"Again, my actions weren't matching my intention. I wanted to live a creative life, but my energy wasn't spent contributing to this goal," she says. "So I decided to do one art project a week. You would think finding the time to stick to it was the harder part, but it wasn't. What was hard was realizing that being creative was one of my core goals — it was being honest with myself about my priorities first and then enforcing them going forward."

Planning For Potential Distractions

Inevitably, there will be some meetings or issues that can't be handled by someone else or delayed a week — but those shouldn't derail your focus either, Simo says.

"By default, my one-on-one meetings are 15 minutes," she says. She understands why people may want to connect in person to communicate regularly, but it's often just a single point or decision they need to relay, which rarely necessitates a full 30-minute or 60-minute meeting. **Many people don't check in to figure out how much time should be realistically allotted to something. They just default to 30 minutes for a small conversation and 60 minutes for a larger conversation.** This contributes to calendars looking like Swiss cheese.

By booking shorter meetings by default, Simo says she's able to create space for a lot of interactions with her team without filling everyone's calendars with long meetings that inevitably expand to the time booked for no good reason.

Simo also recommends **setting aside blocks of intentional buffer time in your calendar** each day or week to slot in last-minute surprises. Doing so means you don't have to siphon off time from your strategic priorities to handle these unexpected

issues. If no surprises pop up, you can use that reserved time to continue working on your primary project for the day or week.

For example, block out two hours on a Friday and label it “buffer time.” When anyone asks for your time during the week, ask if they can make it only between those hours.

“I’m most focused when I set my own agenda versus when I let others set my agenda,” Simo says. Careful calendar management ensures that her priorities and intentions are always reflected on her schedule, creating the conditions for focused work.

“I don't want to pretend that I have totally mastered it — after all, intention is like a rough diamond. You have to polish and refine it until it really sparkles,” she says. “But when I'm very specific and engaged with what I focus on, when my calendar matches that, my decisions match that, and it's all very aligned — that's when I'm most productive and efficient.”

Focusing on my intentions is where my power comes from. Imagine what you can accomplish when every ounce of your energy gets applied in a way that serves your happiness, or any of your goals in life. You can become a force of nature.