

Steve Jobs's 10–80–10 Rule Is Even More Useful in the AI Era

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This is an article about how a principle known as the 10–80–10 rule can help you manage teams in the age of [AI](#). But to really get a sense of how this rule works, it's helpful to take a detour into the evolution of Steve Jobs's [management style](#), and how the legendary Apple boss went from [micromanager](#) to big believer in the 10–80–10 approach.

Young Steve Jobs was a micromanager

Steve Jobs may be a leadership legend now, but when he was young, he was a micromanager. At least according to [Andy Hertzfeld](#), a member of the original Macintosh development team during the 1980s. Hertzfeld [shared a story](#) of working with Jobs to create the Mac's calculator

function. After creating an initial demo, his team brought it to the boss for comment.

“Well, it’s a start,” Hertzfeld reports Jobs saying, “but basically, it stinks. The background color is too dark, some lines are the wrong thickness, and the buttons are too big.”

The team went back to the drawing board, fiddling with various details before returning again several times for Jobs’s input. He was never satisfied. Finally, another engineer on the team came up with an out-of-the-box solution.

“The next afternoon, instead of a new iteration of the calculator, Chris unveiled his new approach, which he called ‘the Steve Jobs Roll Your Own Calculator Construction Set.’ Every decision regarding graphical attributes of the calculator were parameterized by pull-down menus. You could select line thicknesses, button sizes, background patterns, etc.,” Hertzfeld says.

Jobs played with the menus for several minutes before settling on a design he liked. “When I implemented the calculator UI ... for real a few months later, I used Steve’s design, and it remained the standard calculator on the Macintosh for many years,” Hertzfeld concludes.

The management style that made Apple great

Compare this anecdote of Steve Jobs personally dictating every design detail of the calculator app interface with how he [described his management style in 2010](#).

“Teamwork is dependent on trusting the other folks to come through with their part without watching them all the time,” Jobs explained. “That’s what we do really well. We’re great at figuring out how to divide things up into these great teams that we have and all work on the same thing, touch bases frequently, and bring it all together into a product.”

He added, “If you want to hire great people and have them stay working

for you, you have to let them make a lot of decisions.”

That doesn't mean Jobs wasn't into the details later in his career. [By all accounts, he was](#). But over the decades, Jobs seems to have moved from being a constant meddler to being the kind of leader who understands you need to set a direction, let smart people do their jobs, and then act as a final (if demanding) check for quality, execution, and strategic alignment.

Steve Jobs followed the 10–80–10 rule

Steve Jobs's more mature style resulted in some of the most successful tech products of all time. And while his [personal charisma](#) may have been unique, the overall structure of his approach can be borrowed by any leader. My Inc. colleague Justin Bariso has even offered a handy name for this mixture of vision and delegation paired with attention to detail and sky-high standards.

“Steve Jobs followed the 10–80–10 rule,” Bariso has written. He explains the rule this way:

- Spend the first 10 percent of the time communicating your vision for the thing.
- Allow others to spend the next 80 percent of the time moving the thing forward.
- Spend another 10 percent of the time polishing the thing, and helping others understand why and how you're tweaking.

Of course, “these numbers aren't meant to be taken exactly,” he notes, “but they give a general idea of what's needed to create high-quality work.” They are also a pretty good description of the leadership principles Jobs laid out in 2010.

Applying 10–80–10 in the age of AI

This has been a long walk through the storied career of Steve Jobs. But what does the 10–80–10 rule have to do with leading in the age of AI? I

recently stumbled on a fascinating Business Insider piece by [Alan Magee, CMO at Empire Portfolio Group](#), arguing that 10–80–10 works just as well for managing AI output as it does for managing human talent.

“There’s a 10–80–10 rule that’s floating around in the [marketing](#) world: 10 percent human input, 80 percent AI execution, 10 percent human review,” he says.

As with the original, human-centered 10–80–10 rule, these aren’t hard and fast percentages. But the general idea neatly captures a few key principles of working well with AI.

First, AI is no substitute for human judgment. We are still far from trusting machines to define what needs to be done and with what approach. Setting parameters and having taste are still very much human skills. You can’t hand over that initial ten percent of work to a machine.

But you can and should aim to offload 80 percent of the grunt work. That’s a big number, but it aligns with the advice of [AI boosters like Mark Cuban](#) and [Shopify boss Tobi Lütke](#), who insist business leaders who aren’t aggressively experimenting with AI are, in the salty words of Cuban, “f-cked.”

Finally, the last 10 percent might be the most important. Research shows a shocking [92 percent of users don’t check the work spit out by AI](#). As these tools are still prone to hallucinations, inaccuracies, and uncanny valley creepiness, that’s insane. A final layer of quality control and human touch is essential.

It works for humans and bots

Back when Steve Jobs was running Apple, today’s AI capabilities were the wildest dreams of university researchers and [oddball true believers](#). But that doesn’t mean the underlying leadership principle that helped Jobs build world-changing products doesn’t still apply today.

These days, you might be delegating more tasks than ever to bots rather

than humans. But you still need to strike the correct balance of micromanagement and disengagement. The 10–80–10 rule was a great principle to keep in mind then, and it's a helpful guide in the age of AI, too.

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