

(This piece was originally ghostwritten for Bonaverde Founder and CEO Hans Stier. He sent me his thoughts in an audio file, I put them together as this. I take credit for none of the ideas, only the way they're shared. You can find the original, with fancy formatting and all, [here](#))

Eighteen People Building a Box: A Testament to the Power of Small Teams

Scenario: Eighteen people try to build a box for a coffee maker.

The team is divided up into three task forces, one working to grow the customer base, one charged with enhancing the company's reputation, and the third concerned with logistics of manufacturing and distribution. Constructing packaging, it would seem, is a job for this final team. As this pragmatic squad sets to the task, however, the crew responsible for the company's reputation chimes in. They have concerns. The packaging doesn't appear to be environmentally friendly, which isn't in line with the company's image. At this point, an ambassador from the team working to grow the company's customer base pops their head in the door. "Sorry to interrupt," they begin, "but if we're going to have an environmentally friendly box, we'll want to communicate that to our customers. And we'd like to take a look at the design for marketing purposes, please." Soon all eighteen people are huddled up in a room, all talking about this box. A box that never quite seems to materialize.

This was Bonaverde at it's largest. Eighteen people in a chaotic spiral of spinning wheels and wasted time. It was one of the heaviest mistakes I've ever made. After a series of the kind of painful HR meetings that come with shrinking down a bloated business, I vowed to myself to never let the team grow that big again. Bonaverde would stay compact. So far, I've kept that vow. I had learned a valuable lesson from the experience:

Small teams are set to win. Large teams will drag you down.

Today, Bonaverde is a core team of three, supported by a squad of ridiculously talented, enthusiastic professionals all over the world. It's efficient, cohesive and straightforward. We're a family, united by a common mission to bring the Bonaverde concept to the world.

The core group is Ricardo, our creative genius, Jergus, the engineering wizard, and myself. We convene every morning, either with a call or a meeting, to line up the mission of the day. Sometimes it's even a morning weisswurst, getting organized as we munch on savory Bavarian sausages accompanied by spezi (a coke orange lemonade mix that is both Ricardo and Jergus's favorite). In the evening, or late in the night, we check out, going over the progress of the day. Sometimes this occurs well after midnight, reconvening with stars shining overhead, closing the day in the glow of vibrant Berlin lights.

After five years together, we don't really do feedback talks anymore. I'm not sure I could change them if I wanted to at this point. What we do do is make sure everyone's happy. What I tend to do a lot, to Ricardo and Jergus's total annoyance, is invite them out on a little stroll around the city. We grab ice cream, wander the neighborhood, embark on small adventures they wouldn't make time for if I didn't insist.

With Jergus, this often means meeting in a coffee shop and enjoying a casual cigar. It's then that our hip young engineer calms down, letting go of reservations and facts and figures.

Shoulders relaxing around his ears, he runs a hand easily through his hair, takes another sip of whiskey, and explains why he's chosen this course or another, what he's not sure about, what's going on with him that's carrying into his work. These meetings are not only enjoyable, they're productive, providing valuable insight into the rapidly turning gears of Jergus's exceptional mind.

When Ricardo and I stroll, I pick his mind for whatever thoughts I can find. At 23, Ricardo may be one of the sharpest minds I've ever met. He's fantastic, not because he's so young, but even though he's so young. I try to bounce every idea, every decision off Ricardo. Some brilliant insight always bounces back. He's curious, passionate, and invested. He has to be. He joined us at seventeen, and has invested four valuable years of his life in the Bonaverde concept.

Working closely in this personal way, fostering working relationships over the course of four or five years, we've reached a level of cohesiveness unattainable for a large team. Our relationship is almost familial. In fact, my wife, with maternal concern, insisted on buying Ricardo a biking helmet lest he continue cycling the Berlin streets unprotected.

There's a familiarity between us that begets organic productivity. There's also a lot of love.

Larger teams, of course, can find cohesiveness. It just takes a lot more work. Small teams build visions together and sync up fast. They adapt and evolve the vision organically and with ease. There's no need for company-wide memos when there are three people in your office. As a collective organism, a symbiotic ecosystem with a common goal, you find that most changes reach the hive mind almost instinctively. Small packs of idealists, united in vision, are powered by something beyond a paycheck. One of the things that makes a small team so quick and adaptable is its ability to not only quickly see what needs to be done, but its collective willingness to do it, with no hesitation about putting the vision first.

The world isn't about the size of the company you work for anymore. It's about the projects you produce. This is why I love freelancers, the self-motivated talents packing Berlin's coffee houses. These Millennials with their MacBooks and tablets are the new face of work, prizing well-crafted projects over amorphous markers of supposed productivity. When we have a task that requires skills outside the toolboxes of our team, we reach out to freelancers. The result is incredible work we'd never produce hiring a full time employee.

See, people get bored on a job. They don't get bored on a project. Talented humans thrive on personal accountability, responsibility, and pride in a job well done. There is an intrinsic reward in doing a job on your own terms and receiving direct recompense for that job, with no intermediaries or corporate entanglements between. Knowing this, why would we develop an app when app agencies are so good at what they do? Why would we build a website when an incredible designer will throw 100% of their talent behind the project?

It's a principle that carries over into our small team, and perhaps is the true underlying secret to its effectiveness. The smaller a team is, the more responsibility everyone in that team has. At 27, Jergus is responsible for making sure our machine works. At 23, Ricardo runs all of our branding and communications. This is why they get up each morning and throw themselves into building the Bonaverde idea. Not for a paycheck, or equity, though those things are necessary supports. They do it for the opportunity to really achieve something, to be a vital part of an endeavor bigger than themselves. United in that kind of passion, driven by forward purpose, our small team flies.

And let me tell you, they build a damn good box.