



Stanford eCorner

Keeping Company Secrets

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2976/Keeping-Company-Secrets>

Based on his research into the inner workings of Apple, Fortune magazine Senior Editor Adam Lashinsky describes the premium the company places on keeping secrets, even when it comes to internal communications and processes. According to Lashinsky, Apple's commitment to secrecy often includes employees only seeing finished products they worked on once the products are revealed to the general public.



Transcript

Far more important in my research to keeping secrets from the outside world is my realization that part of the Apple corporate culture and the way of doing business, and again anathema to the way business is run, is that Apple keeps secrets from itself. They keep secrets from their own employees. If you and I are - work at Apple, but we're not on the same exec team, your business is none of my business and my business is none of your business. What's the - what's an example of this? At Google, one of the reasons that is stated frequently for all the free food is that management wants people to come together and talk to each other in the cafeteria. Talk about what they're working on because there might be some serendipitous learning. At Apple, where by the way you pay for your lunch, it's not free, you don't talk about what you're working on, because it's supposed to be a secret. The - I liken Apple employees to horses fitted with blinders. You don't look left, you don't look right, you look forward and you charge forward with 110% of your energy. On that day that I mentioned to you when journalists and partners gather at Moscone Center in San Francisco, Yerba Buena for product keynotes. Apple employees also gather often in the cafeteria in Cupertino where they watched the same presentation on closed-circuit broadcast television.

Why do they go watch? Because it's the first time they're seeing the products that are being unveiled that day too. And that includes if they worked on those products because it's very likely that they would only have worked on some facet of the product and so they wouldn't have seen the whole thing. I've spoken to relatively senior engineers who work, let's say, on the hardware of an iPhone who had no clue what the user interface was going to look like, up until the day that the product was going to be announced because they weren't on the UI team and that was none of their business. Why do this? I know that someone in the room must be thinking. Well, if all you know what to do is what you're supposed to do, you're going to be incredibly focused on doing that. You're going to be disciplined and you're not going to waste a lot of time because there isn't a lot of time to waste at Apple. Another cultural reason and again, I want you to keep in mind in my opinion this is different from many other company I've witnessed. It's more like a security agency and I have had people as I've gone around talking about this compare - I've met a former employee of the NSA who said that it sounded a lot to him like the way the NSA operates, where this person said to me that he had a mirror on his computer because he had to be sure nobody was standing behind him while he was working, sounds very Apple like to me. A cultural observation. I've been told over and over that there are - that Apple is not a particularly political organization below a certain level.

I approach this comment with journalistic skepticism: yeah, everybody says, there is not a lot of politics, but of course there is politics, because there politics everywhere, right? And then people kept saying it to me. And it dawned on me. Well, they're being truthful, there is not a lot of politics at Apple because when you don't have any information with which to play politics, it's not - it's unlikely that you will be able to play politics. So instead you go to work and you work and that's the - in a short version, the way of life at Apple. It's a need-to-know culture where there is a language of disclosure. If we're going to have a meeting, I need to make sure that you're disclosed on the topic of the meeting, it leads to an awkward kabuki dance, how do I know if

you're disclosed, if I can't mention the topic, but I - we try to figure it out. Physical barriers may go up because if you're not part of a secret project, your badge won't work to get you into that room and you shouldn't be able to see what's happening on the other side of the frosted glass or even the rooms with no glass, these are known as lockdown rooms on the Apple campus, nothing goes in and nothing goes out - information I should say, no information goes in or goes out of the lockdown rooms.