

# Jason Fried of Basecamp on the Importance of Writing Skills

[nytimes.com/2017/09/01/jobs/corner-office-jason-fried-basecamp.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/jobs/corner-office-jason-fried-basecamp.html)

ADAM BRYANT

9/1/2017

Jason Fried, chief executive of Basecamp. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

This interview with [Jason Fried](#), chief executive of [Basecamp](#), a web-based project management tool, was conducted and condensed by Adam Bryant.

## Q. What were your early years like?

A. I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. My parents forced me to get a job as soon as I could. So when I was about 14, we went to City Hall to get a worker's permit so I could get a part-time job at a grocery store.

## Was this under protest?

I was excited to do it. I bagged groceries and did a bunch of other jobs, including working at a shoe store. I love the fact that my parents taught me that you've got to work for your money. And I probably didn't realize it at the time, but through those jobs, I saw firsthand different management styles and leadership styles.

The woman who owned a store I worked at didn't trust anybody. She thought everyone was stealing from her, and the interesting thing was that people did end up stealing from her. But I had a manager who shielded me from all that, and he trusted me.

I worked at places that had similar dynamics. I was building a kind of matrix, thinking that if I ever start my own company, what kind of place would I want to work at?

## Other early influences?

My leadership style is probably a hybrid of all the people I've met along the way — people I admire and people I don't admire. I don't like micromanagers. I don't like people not trusting you. I don't like people telling me what to do so I don't like to tell other people what to do.

## Any favorite family expressions?

My dad, who was a private investor, always told me no one ever went broke taking a profit. And I think that's probably the best business advice, period. But a lot of the tech world is obsessed with growth and revenue and not profit. They're obsessed with ego. They're obsessed with all the things that I think are bad business.

The other thing that is weird about the business world in general is the obsession with domination and winning and destroying and fighting. Why? What is that about? It doesn't ring true with me at all. Can't you just build a nice



business and can't other people have a nice business?

**But somebody might say it's good to have an opponent – just like in sports – to get the team pumped up.**

I do think it's good to have an enemy, but to me, the enemy is more an idea that you're opposed to, rather than another business. For example, we're opposed to the prevailing idea in our industry that you have to work 60, 70, 80 hours a week to do a good job. We believe 40 is enough.

**When did you first start managing people?**

I didn't feel like I was managing anybody until we probably had eight people. Until then, I felt like we were just working together. At a certain point, every group needs something that points them in a direction and brings the personalities together. For some reason, I think eight is the number when things change.

**What were some early leadership lessons?**

I found that leadership is infectious in a positive and negative way. So if I'm worrying, other people begin to worry. If I'm confident, people tend to be more confident. Whatever you are bleeds into others, and earlier in my career, I was a little bit more high-strung and I worried about things that didn't matter. Some of that affected others on the team.

I also realized that each individual is motivated by different things. There's really no such thing as a group of people. There's a physical group of people, but everyone's an individual, and you've got to pay attention to what drives each person. Early on, I thought in terms of a mass of people versus individuals. Once I figured that out, it really helped quite a bit.

**How do you hire?**

Our top hiring criteria — in addition to having the skills to do the job — is, are you a great writer? You have to be a great writer to work here, in every single position, because the majority of our communication is written, primarily because a lot of us work remotely but also because writing is quieter. And we like long-form writing where people really think through an idea and present it.

This is one of the reasons I don't like chat services. When companies start thinking one line at a time and everyone's rushed and you have to get your conversation in before it scrolls off the screen, I think it's a terrible, frantic way to work, and people are burning out because of it.

**So you give writing tests or ask for samples?**

We focus initially on the cover letter, and if you don't write a cover letter, and you just e-mail us a resume, you're out. We tell people to write us something explaining who you are, what you do, why you want this job. That's our initial filter — are you a clear thinker and a clear writer?

Then there's a lot of writing throughout the hiring process. We'll take the finalists, pay them to do a project for us, and I ask them to write up their thought process, and then we talk about it. And I'll push back on ideas even if I agree with them because I want to see how they handle disagreement.

**What career and life advice do you give to new college grads?**

First, most of the stuff you'll worry about won't happen. Second, get really good at saying no. There's going to be a temptation when you're new to want to prove yourself by taking on too much and saying yes to everything. So it's good to get back to the habit of being very selective about what you say yes to, and say no more than you say yes.

For people going into business, I'd say get a sales job to learn how to sell. Your entire career is going to be filled with sales in some way. You have to sell yourself. You have to learn how to persuade people.

