

Tim Cook's pursuit of simplicity was central to Apple's success

Achieving simplicity requires focus, discipline and an obsessive willingness to keep working until only the essential remains



Neil West

Friday August 28 2026, 6.00am, The Times

The defining trait of Tim Cook's 15 years as Apple's chief executive was his disciplined pursuit of simplicity. That realisation crystallised for me in Milan, when he asked to spend time with the composer Ludovico Einaudi.

As head of Apple Services in southern Europe, it fell to me to arrange the meeting. Einaudi was an interesting choice. He's the most-streamed classical artist on Apple Music, but he's much more — he's a master of minimalism, a composer whose music derives much of its impact from what he leaves out. "You can create something strong in art with just a few notes," Einaudi once said.

Cook seeking out Einaudi reminded me of a declaration he made a year after becoming Apple's chief executive: "Creativity is people who care enough to keep thinking about something until they find the simplest way to do it."



Tim Cook kept Apple focused on a small number of initiatives
MICHAEL BUCKNER/VARIETY/GETTY IMAGES

I set up the meeting at Casa degli Atellani, the 15th-century residence in [Milan](#) where Leonardo da Vinci — credited with the observation that "simplicity is the ultimate sophistication" — lived while painting *The Last Supper*.

Watching Cook and [Einaudi](#) give each other their complete attention, in that historic setting, made the lesson unmissable: simplicity is a timeless discipline, a source of power and, for a business, a huge competitive advantage. It can often look like an absence — fewer notes, fewer words, fewer things. But achieving it requires the opposite: focus, discipline and an obsessive willingness to keep working until only the essential remains.

I spent another decade at Apple after Cook became chief executive, sometimes working with him directly. Tim, [Rosalía](#), the bestselling Spanish singer, and I introduced HomePod (a high-fidelity speaker) to the Spanish media. Together we discussed plans with some of my region's leading app developers. He came to see performances at the iTunes Festival that my team helped produce.

Over those years, I came to appreciate Cook's laser focus — he was always completely present, in every situation — and see his pursuit of simplicity as being central to how he grew Apple's value more than tenfold.

He kept Apple focused on a small number of initiatives. People love to speculate about the insanely great new products Apple might have launched had Steve Jobs lived. A more revealing question is what mediocre products Apple might have launched under a less disciplined successor. Jobs famously defined focus as "saying no to the hundred other good ideas" and said he was equally as proud of what Apple hadn't done as what it had. I suspect he would have been extraordinarily proud of all the things Cook didn't do.

Cook's two greatest expansions — wearables and services — turned a collection of products into a coherent ecosystem. The Apple Watch, AirPods, Music, TV+ and Fitness+ made Apple's other products more useful, while making increasingly complex technology feel simpler to Apple's customers.

An unavoidable cost of simplicity is hard work. Rarely is simplicity achieved by stopping work an hour earlier; more often it requires working an hour later. [Apple Silicon](#) demonstrated Cook's willingness to take on this work. Transitioning Apple to custom, in-house processors was a monumental undertaking. Yet by owning and managing that complexity upstream, Apple delivered something simple to the customer downstream: faster performance, longer battery life and a seamless integration of hardware and software.

Cook brought the same clarity to Apple's values. By elevating user privacy above a series of commercial trade-offs — and holding to that position even when it became difficult — he gave thousands of employees across Apple a simple basis for making complicated decisions. When privacy and convenience conflicted, everyone knew which way to lean.

The cumulative result is one of the most remarkable corporate performances in history.

Tim Cook didn't try to imitate Jobs's particular form of creativity. He practised another form of brilliance: the patient, disciplined pursuit of simplicity. And in doing so, he may have proved every bit as creative as the visionary he succeeded.

Neil West is the former head of music at Apple Europe, and author of *It Just Works: The Nine Simple Rules of Apple's Success* (Macmillan Business, £22)