The Nimble Scale Playbook: How Linear Grew to $1.25B with 80 People

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Intro

I joined Linear after Stripe and Notion because they understood something most companies don't: you can't hire your way out of a strategy problem.

Linear serves 15,000+ customers with roughly 80 people, and we're growing faster in 2025 than 2024. How? We spin up teams for urgent projects then disband them. We wait until a role hits 150% capacity before hiring—if that means I'm writing customer stories myself before bringing on a marketer, so be it. We run 2-5 day paid work trials for every role because we'd rather wait months for the right person than fill a seat fast. The frameworks below are exactly what's made this possible.

You can scale to $1B+ valuation with <100 people if you're ruthlessly focused on:

1. **Structural flexibility** (collapsible teams)
2. **Productive dysfunction** (fast pivots with clear reasoning)
3. **Hiring discipline** (patience over pressure)

This doc is meant to serve as a guide on how to put tactics in place for all three.

Part 1: Design for Flexibility (Collapsible Team Structure)

Why traditional org charts fail startups:

- Teams get attached to scope, not outcomes

- Reorgs become dramatic, political events
- People work on "their area's priorities" vs. company priorities
- You're constantly hiring for structure, not actual needs

Linear's alternative: The Collapsible Team Model

Core Principle: Teams form around **high-priority projects**, not permanent departments.

How It Works:

- **Base Structure:** Geography-based (US/EU teams for timezone alignment)
- **Project Structure:** Spin up → Execute → Ship → Spin down → Reassign
- **Result:** Every engineer/designer works across the full product surface area on the most important things

Your Collapsible Team Audit:

Step 1: Map Your Current Teams

- List each team and their "permanent" scope
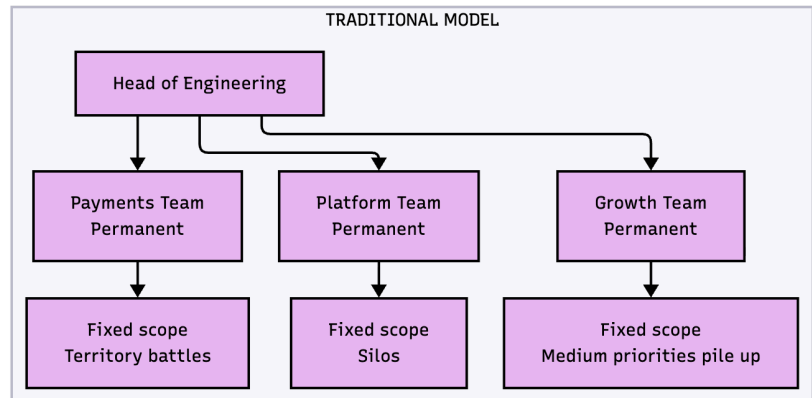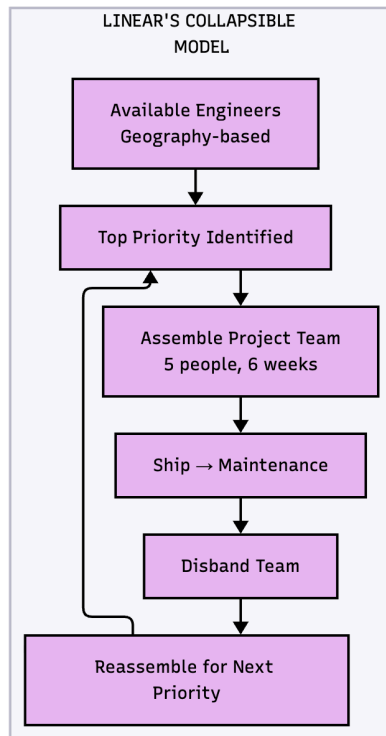- Ask: Is this scope consistently top-3 priority? If no, why is this a permanent team?

Step 2: Identify What's Actually Important Right Now

- What are your top 3 company priorities for the next 6 months?
- Do your current team structures map to these? Or to last year's priorities?

Step 3: Experiment with One Collapsible Project

- Pick one initiative that spans multiple teams
- Assemble a temporary squad with best-fit people (regardless of current team)
- Set a ship date and dismantling date
- Notice: How much faster did this move?

Visual Template (Make it your own [on mermaid.live](https://mermaid.live))

LINEAR'S COLLAPSIBLE MODEL

```
Available Engineers
Geography-based
        |
        v
Top Priority Identified
        |
        v
Assemble Project Team
5 people, 6 weeks
        |
        v
Ship → Maintenance
        |
        v
Disband Team
        |
        v
Reassemble for Next
Priority
```

TRADITIONAL MODEL

```
              Head of Engineering
           /          |            \
          v           v             v
  Payments Team   Platform Team   Growth Team
  Permanent       Permanent       Permanent
      |               |               |
      v               v               v
  Fixed scope     Fixed scope     Fixed scope
  Territory       Silos           Medium priorities
  battles                         pile up
```

Part 2: Diagnose Your Dysfunction (Is This Chaos Good or Bad?)

My rule: If you don't like some semblance of dysfunction, startups probably aren't the best place for you.

But how do you tell if your chaos is **productive speed** or **destructive thrashing**?

The Dysfunctional Diagnosis Matrix

HEALTHY GROWING PAINS ✅	UNHEALTHY DYSFUNCTION 🚨
Priorities shift quickly, but everyone understands WHY (mission/goals are clear)	Priorities shift with no explanation or clear reasoning
"The API went down because we're scaling faster than expected" (+ you're actively fixing it)	Same critical issues persist for 6+ months with no action plan
Founder says "Actually, let's reprioritize" and team pivots smoothly	Changes feel arbitrary; team has no idea why they're pivoting
You move fast with few approvals because there's high trust + transparency	You move fast but leave wreckage (burned out people, broken commitments)
Teams spin up/down based on priority; feels nimble	Teams constantly reorganize but nothing actually changes about velocity
Product goes down during hypergrowth (Stripe, Notion both experienced this)	Product goes down and leadership shrugs or blames the team
Someone can explain the company vision in 30 seconds	No one can articulate what you're actually trying to accomplish

Your Dysfunction Audit:

Ask yourself these questions:

1. **The Priority Shift Test:**

- ○ When priorities change, can team members explain why without asking leadership?
- ○ Do people resist change because it's chaotic, or because they don't understand the strategy?
2. **The Timeline Test:**
   - ○ For any major problem, can you answer: "If we don't fix this in X months, it's a serious issue"?
   - ○ Are you actually tracking whether you fix it in that timeframe?
3. **The Learning Test:**
   - ○ When something goes wrong (downtime, missed target, failed hire), do you reach out to other companies/leaders who solved similar problems?
   - ○ Or do you just keep trying the same approach?

When facing a tough challenge, talk to 3-5 people at other companies who've solved it. Don't be the first company to fail at something others have already figured out.

Part 3: When to Actually Hire (The "Desperate Enough" Test)

If your team structure is flexible and your dysfunction is healthy, you might still be stretching too thin. Here's when to hire:

The 4-Question Hiring Filter:

1. Is there a clear, sustained bottleneck?

- Not "we're busy" but "this specific thing cannot get done and it's blocking progress"
- Example from Cristina: Sales team had no competitive collateral, no one had capacity to create it, and it's needed for every enterprise deal going forward

2. Is this 150% of a normal person's workload?

- If you assigned this to someone today, would they have to drop other critical work?
- Can you articulate what "full-time" looks like for this role over the next 12+ months?

3. Can you (the leader) do it yourself in the short-term?

- If yes → Do it. See if it's truly ongoing work or just a sprint.
- If no → Might be time to hire (especially if it's not your skill set)

4. Do you know what "great" looks like for this role?

- Have you worked with someone in this role before?
- If not: **PAUSE. Go interview 5 people currently doing this role at other companies first.**
  - Learn what they do day-to-day
  - Understand how the role differs at different company stages
  - Build your network for referrals
  - THEN start your search

Red Flags You're Hiring for the Wrong Reasons:

- Board pressure ("Why don't you have X hire yet?")
- Comparing yourself to other companies' team sizes
- Trying to match a certain headcount for your stage/valuation
- Filling a role just because you have budget
- Hiring to make a current employee feel less stretched (vs. hiring for sustained need)

The Linear Hiring Philosophy:

- Longer recruiting process (2-5 day paid work trials for every role)
- Higher bar means some candidates drop out → That's okay
- **Patience over pressure** (even board pressure)
- Cultural dilution is harder to undo than short-term slower progress

Your Hiring Checkpoint:

Before you post that job description, answer:

- What specific bottleneck does this solve?
- What does "full time sustained work" look like for 12+ months?
- Have I done this work myself to understand the time/skill required?
- Have I interviewed 3-5 people who currently do this role? (If no → do this first)
- Am I willing to wait for the *right* person vs. filling a seat?
- Can I articulate how this role connects to company mission/priorities?

The One-Page Summary: When to Use Each Tool

Use Collapsible Teams When:

- You keep doing reorgs
- Teams fight over resources/priority
- People are bored or working on low-priority projects
- You don't know what your priorities will be in 6 months

Use Dysfunction Diagnosis When:

- Priorities keep shifting and team morale is suffering
- You're not sure if you're moving fast or just being chaotic
- Leadership feels out of sync with team
- A critical problem has persisted for months

Use Hiring Checklist When:

- You're getting pressure to hire (from board, team, yourself)
- Something important isn't getting done
- You're considering your first hire in a new function
- You want to ensure you maintain culture/quality bar

This content was adapted from an interview Cristina gave for Rippling's First Principles, a show that surfaces unconventional tactics for a new way of startup building.

For more resources on how to scale your startup from first principles, check out our full resource hub [here.](here)