

# Managing Humans: Biting and Humorous Tales of a Software Engineering Manager

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## Overview

This book is a collection of the author's blog posts he's written over the course of his career as a manager at several companies. The chapters include lessons learned, cultural observations, and sets of plays (from a manager's playbook) that are useful both to managers as well as those being managed. I highly recommend reading the book, as his writing is easy to follow and has a narrative structure (i.e., tells interesting stories).

"The Management Quiver" -- management skills are arrows in a quiver.

Concepts	Plays
Being human and understanding the humans you manage	How to check if your team is healthy
Where managers come from and what they do	How to run a meeting
Stables and volatiles	How to detect disasters before they occur
Types of 1:1s (update, vent, disaster)	How to deal with the unexpected
Information and the grapevine	How to communicate with disconnected personalities
Subtlety, subterfuge, and silence	How to understand agendas, players/pawns
Managementese	How to use a mandate
Whether managers should still write code	How to listen more effectively
Roles: Lead, Lead of Leads, Director	How/why to run an off-site meeting
Problems with job titles	How to run a design/architecture meeting
	How to say "no"

"The Process Is the Product" -- People that create process are well-intentioned, but they annoy the people who create (realizing that screw-ups are inevitable regardless of how much process there is). And love it or hate it, the process is how you build a product.

Concepts	Plays
Why engineers seem to hate process	How to get started
1.0: Pitch, people, process, and product	How to take time and think (instead of react)
Hacking as a means of encouraging disruption	How to let ideas "soak" for creativity
Managers are chaos-destroying machines	How to deal with the sky falling (crises)

"Versions of You" -- This section delves more into the different facets of people and teams so that you can understand how the interactions work.

Concepts	Plays
Bellwethers for your interviewing process	How to detect/fix boredom before someone quits
NADD: Nerd Attention Deficiency Disorder	How to manage your first 90 days at a new company
The purpose of a "nerd cave"	How to manage your nerds (i.e., those who build)
The 8 "creatures" you'll find in meetings	How to feed and care for the highly productive
Incrementalists and completionists	How to handle a re-organization
Organics and mechanics	How to manage levels of skill and will
Leadership flavors: inwards, outwards, holistics	How to structure (and read) a resume
The Wolf engineer	How to handle yourself in (or conduct) a phone screen
Old Guard and New Guard as your company grows	How to resign
Why we need leadership	How to determine if someone may be looking for other opportunities

## The Management Quiver

Management skills are arrows in a quiver.

### Don't Be a Prick: Be Human

- A great manager is someone with whom you can make a connection no matter where you sit on the org chart
- Your job is to listen to your people and mentally document how they're built
- The team gets the work done, and your job is managing the team
- You need to be with your people -- you can't manage in absentia

### Managers Are Not Evil: Start with a Basic Understanding of Where Managers Come from and What They Do

- Your manager's job is not your job; anyone outside of your head is a mystery because they are not you
- (1) Where does your manager come from (previous engineer, business analyst)? Does he know what you do? Does he understand your job? **Your manager is your face to the rest of the organization.**
- (2) How is he compensating for his blind spots? Everyone has flaws (run away if they say they don't). Interview question to the employer: "Where do you need my help?" **A manager's job is to transform his glaring deficiency into a strength by finding the best person to fill it and trusting her to do the job.**
- (3) Does your manager speak the language? **A manager's job is to spread information across the org as effectively as possible.** (Ex: what you tell your boss as a summary of your week looks very different than the summary you give your best friend.)
- (4) How does your manager talk to you? 1:1s are your manager's way to learn; managers need to talk to everyone on their team regularly.
- (5) How much action per decision? **Real work is visible action managers take to support their particular vision for their org. Does he do what he says he's going to do? Does he make something happen?**
- (6) Where is your manager in the political food chain? **Politically active managers are informed managers.** Sometimes the org's view of your manager is their view of you.
- (7) What happens when they lose their shit? Your manager is not a manager until he participated in a layoff. **Panic backs a person into a corner and their only means of getting out of that corner is relying on skills that have worked for them in the past.**

### Stables and Volatiles: There are Two Builders You Need in the World

- **Stables** are engineers that
  - Appreciate a plan
  - Value an efficiently run team
  - Calmly assess risk
  - Generate process because process creates predictability
  - Are known for calm reliability
- **Volatiles** are engineers that
  - Define strategy, not follow it
  - Have issues with authority

- Can't conceive of failing (risk is a thrill)
- See working with others as time-consuming; prefer small autonomous groups
- Build lots of stuff, but not very beautiful/stable
- Are reliable as long as it's in their best interest
- Leave a trail of disruption behind them
- Stables are usually volatiles that are recovering from shipping 1.0 and have lessons learned
- You need both; stables have the downside of stagnation, and volatiles have the downside of messy disruption (a.k.a. risk taking)

## The Rands Test: Take a Brief Test to Understand the Health of Your Team

- Do you have a 1:1? **+1** (The point is to have a conversation of substance; status is not the point.)
- Do you have a team meeting? **+1** (Use this to kill lies/rumors/gossip, and fix what's broken.)
- Do you have status reports? **-1** (Rigid e-mail status reports come down to control, lack of imagination and laziness. We often have so many other tools that give us status. Why make the people doing the work dig this info up? *Conversations* about work are different.)
- Can you say "no" to your boss? **+1** (No one is infallible, even your boss.)
- Can you explain the strategy of the company to a stranger? **+1** (Even if you're not a leader, you need to know where you fit in to that strategy.)
- Can you explain the current health of the business (or at least find someone that can)? **+1** (Have a defensible opinion about the state of the business.)
- Does the person in charge regularly stand up and tell you what he/she's thinking? **+1** (Everyone needs access to the CEO, CEO needs to clearly communicate vision for the company.)
- Are you buying it? **+1** (If your version of the truth matches the CEO's.)
- Can you explain your career trajectory? **+1** (Having a map is a good way to get to a destination)
- Does your boss? **+1** (He/she has an equal role to play in getting you there.)
- Do you have time to be strategic? **+1** (Can you point to a time on your calendar where you're growing toward your goal or investing in yourself?)
- Are you actively killing the grapevine? **+1** (You can't stop people from talking, but you can change the quality of information shared. And people make shit up when they don't know.)

## How to Run a Meeting: Tips for Developing Your Meeting Culture

- Alignment meeting -- tactical exchanges
- Creation meeting -- solving hard problems
- 2 critical pieces: **agenda, referee**. Everyone can answer the question: "When do we need to get the hell out of here." Referees ensure progress and that people aren't checking out.
- **If someone is doing anything except listening, they aren't listening.**
- To keep people engaged...
  - Steer conversations toward those who have checked out
  - Wait for focus to come back to you as a ref, then stay silent
  - Change positions (stand up, use the whiteboard, sit down, etc.)
- A good ref knows...
  - When the meeting is avoiding the agenda
  - When someone's rambling
  - If the meeting is doomed (lack of prep, everyone focused on some other fire)
  - When it's time to break it up and reschedule if needed

## The Twinge: Listen All the Time and Use Your Experience to Detect Disasters before They Occur

- Rookie managers believe their job is to be aware of and responsible for their team's every single thought and act. You have to trust and delegate.
- Engineers in training experience 2 emotions: the joy of creation, the satisfaction of learning while gaining experience
- A manager's day is full of stories. The stories you hear are incomplete. You're only getting parts of the story that support whoever's telling it to you.
- When you hear stories, you start sniffing around ("OK so the design isn't done. When will they be done? Can they complete the work in the 1/2 week left after designs are finished?"). It sounds like micromanaging, but you're looking for familiarities with other stories. **Experiences drive subconscious instincts -- the twinge.**
- **Everyone is building a story about what and how they're doing, and they're often optimizing in their favor.**
- You need to heed your Twinges; not doing so is a management failure.
- Companies don't run on twinges, but you need the ability to hear stories and quickly tease out logic flaws.

## The Update, the Vent, the Disaster: The Rules for a Good 1:1 and the Types of 1:1s that Show up on Your Doorstep

- Basics of 1:1s
  - Keep them consistent; it tells people you're there regardless of how busy you get
  - Always do them, otherwise you give the message your people don't matter
  - Give it 30 minutes at least
- "How are you?" Their response (deflect with humor, quick response, long pause) tells you what kind of 1:1 you're about to have...
- **The Update (all clear)**
  - 1:1s are not for project status updates! Investigate, explore, probe.
  - Have at least 3 prepared questions to start meaty conversations
  - Do a mini-performance review
  - Talk about a current disaster in your life and ask them for input (to see how they think about things)
- **The Vent (something's up)**
  - This is not a conversation! You need to listen; don't solve problems; don't comfort, just listen.
  - It will either end once the story is told...
  - It will repeat and turn into a rant (which you should stop after 1 extra retelling)
  - It's a disaster instead
- **The Disaster (oh dear)**
  - The Disaster wants to fight
  - The person you are sitting with is not him/herself; they are super-emotional, and need time to calm down
  - Stop talking; let their emotion pass
  - This is not about the problem; this is about someone being very emotional.

- When your employee believes totally losing their shit is a productive strategy, it's because they believe it's the only option left for making anything change. (This is poor management.)
- 1:1s are for preventative maintenance, for listening to what your employee isn't saying

## The Monday Freakout: Strategies for Dealing with the Unexpected

- Mondays start on Sunday. If someone's going to freak out, it's usually on a Monday.
- Don't participate in the freakout. Listen and maintain eye contact.
- Give them the benefit of the doubt.
- Hammer the person with questions. This moves him/her from an emotional to a rational state.
- Get him/her to solve the problem. They've probably already done a good bit of thinking about it.
- Good news: They're emotional because they care; being checked out means quitting is in the near future for them.
- Bad news: Things were so screwed up that freaking out was their solution.

## Lost in Translation: Communication Strategies for Disconnected Personalities

- Beginners are not burdened with the depth and complexity of understanding; they shine brightly with enthusiasm...until the Fall.
- You will bump into cases where you have a personality disconnect with someone you intend to lead
- When you have a disconnect, you don't know how to communicate. Try asking "What did you hear there?" after you put something to him; this forces him to communicate back what he heard in his own terms.
- When communications are down, listen hard, repeat everything, assume nothing.

## Agenda Detection: The First Step in Getting Out of a Meeting is Understanding Why It Exists

- Identify the type of meeting.
  - **Informational** -- you have talkers and listeners. You can leave when the talkers are done.
  - **Conflict resolution** -- lots of people who couldn't solve a problem through some other format (e.g., e-mail)
- Classify the participants
  - **Players** -- want something; participate
  - **Pawns** -- contribute little
- Identify the players; if you can't, leave because this meeting is a waste of your time.
- Identify the pros and cons. The cons are usually the ones on the losing side, who got pissed and called the meeting in the first place. A common tactic of the pro is to not acknowledge they're the pro.
- Figure out the issue. The pawns don't care, the pros show their ownership, so you're there for the cons. Identify who cares, and who can make a difference.
- Give the cons what they want. Synthesize next steps for the cons, then end the meeting.
- Figure out the issue. If you're 30 minutes in and haven't figured it out, time to bail because it's too complex.

## Dissecting the Mandate: Understanding When and How to Insist on Strategy

- Common quivers... annual review, layoff, mandate

- Mandates are saying "this is the way it is, no Q&A, no collaboration"
- Your job as a manager is to move the team forward without hurting morale.
- Decide
  - When the debate is no longer productive, make a decision
  - Mandates are the friend of the silent majority who just want a decision so they can get to work
- Deliver
  - Tell them what's going on, and that there's no debate. Don't let it degrade into more discussion.
  - You will piss people off. Get over it.
- Deliver (again) / Damage control
  - Express your reasoning to concerned parties to re-enforce what you mandated
  - Yay: you're a motivator according to the winners
  - Boo: you're a tyrant; deliver again
  - Yawn: what took you so long?
- Foreign mandates come from leaders other than you. You need to find out the justification and share it with the team.

## Information Starvation: Each Piece of Information That Arrives Has a Proper Home or Homes

- For each piece of information you see, who needs it?
- Gossip/grapevine occurs because of a lack of communication. When you see it, identify where things have broken down.
- If someone is wondering whether they're going to get fired/laid off, the real signal is "I don't know where I stand in the org"
- You might think something isn't useful for your team; ask first, they may find it really important. If you're debating on passing something along, do it.
- Silence is a tool. If you suggested something controversial and get no pushback, be silent; those who want to speak up will

## Subtlety, Subterfuge, and Silence: Three Leadership Approaches for Traversing Complexity and Making Progress

- "A good manager is a person who is playing to a strategy and isn't merely stumbling around squashing fires all day."
- Sometimes you need to start humbly (you don't have all the answers)
- Example: working on something on the down-low after hours to prove a point (this looks like "disobeying a direct order" on one side and "skunkworks" on the other)
- In silence, you can assess. Management isn't all about leading by talking.

## Managementese: The Language You Use Defines Your Leadership

- There are unique spheres of language that exist in each part of the corporate organizational chart. Without managementese the different parts of the org aren't going to be able to communicate with each other.
- Managers are hubs of communication
- Don't talk to your reports with managementese; talk to them using the familiar languages of a friend

## You're Not Listening: Look Them Straight in the Eye and Never Look at the Clock

- Don't jump in with the main question ("that meeting was horrible; what's going on"); start innocuous (e.g., "What's up")
- Eye contact is the easiest way to demonstrate your full attention, and it's also the easiest way to destroy it.
- Be a curious fool (assume they have something to teach you)
- Stop and listen; "What I hear you saying is..."
- If people don't trust you, they aren't going to say shit
- Listening skills can be faked, but the recipient feels like they just left a used car lot. It was an empty conversation facilitated by manipulation cloaked as listening skills.
- GOAL: Continue to build trust with the people I depend upon who, in turn, depend on me

## Fred Hates the Off-site: A Meeting Designed to Help You Set or Reset Strategy

- It's helpful to meet up outside the office to get to know one another. (This is difficult to do at work because "Their normal instincts regarding getting to know those around them are buried in their goal of being recognized as a person who is also in a hurry.")
- You can sometimes have offsites to brainstorm a new direction or to "embark on an epic journey" (it's time to start something)
- You can't invite everyone; this isn't an all-hands.
- Everyone presents or at least speaks
- Have them somewhere else; you need a sense of "elsewhere" to get a new view and be free of typical office distractions
- Designate someone to be the MC and the note taker (probably not the same person)
- Avoid goofball exercises like trust falls - they're uncomfortable and irrelevant to the problem you're solving
- Don't have an outside facilitator; people inside actually care whether you succeed or not
- "Bright-and-shiny inflection points [which you discover at the off-site] are full of energy, but unless that energy is carefully channeled back into the building and immediately acted upon, all an offsite represents is a frustrating opportunity to dream, but not to act."

## A Different Kind of DNA: A Design and Architecture Meeting with Teeth

- We need leads and managers as a means of scaling responsibility and communication; not every engineer should be a manager
- DNA = "Design 'n' Architecture"
  - It shines a light brightly; use this when you have a big decision
  - Bring respectable firepower; bring engineers that know *and can teach*, and are also drama/politics-free
  - It has teeth; if you don't contribute, you don't get invited back; people need to bring their A-game; rule by consensus, not by mandate
  - Has absolutely nothing to do with management; this is cultivating technical leadership

## An Engineering Mindset: On the Topic of Whether You Should Still Code

- Author says the typical argument is flawed:
  - Stop coding; you must learn to trust those who work for you to care about this



- (Bad) managers' first reaction when things go to crap is to revert to things that built their confidence (writing code)
  - You are no longer responsible for yourself; you're responsible for the team
- Stay in touch with how your team builds stuff
- Understand the general architecture for your products to understand change
- Write unit tests

## Tear it Down: There Are Three Leadership Roles

- The Lead
  - Focused on the team instead of the work
  - Know how to do the work (they just left this role)
  - Mostly tactical, but starting to see strategy; realizing there's a bigger game
- The Lead of Leads
  - Leading multiple teams; likely no hands-on responsibility (that's what Leads are for)
  - Focused on teams, not individual team
  - Still know how the work is done to form opinions, but better understand the company
  - Keeps the inner machinery working
  - These are the people really running the show
  - MIDDLE MANAGEMENT: Make sure you stay informed and focus on leading, not just managing. It's easy to coast, become an island and not build bridges.
- The Director
  - Focus is outward; interface between the company and the rest of the world
  - Thinks strategically
  - The Lead of Leads is responsible for translating the Director's vision into tactics

## Titles are Toxic: Titles Place an Unfortunate Absolute Professional Value on Individuals

- Titles started out as a means to give people a path toward growth, but they often help external people try to understand who they're talking to (you're a VP of X so you must be important)
- Be wary of people who equate title with their value. A title and a job are not the same thing.
- **Leadership path** -- once you get large enough, you need help maintaining communication so you need leaders/managers (for efficiency, communication, accountability); this is to help scale the company
- **People path** -- people need to grow too, even though everybody isn't going to be a manager
- You can't compare two people with the same number of years of experience; they are snowflakes, each with their own strengths.
- "Titles allow leadership to bucket individuals into convenient chunks so as to award compensation and measure seniority while also serving as labels that are somehow expected to give us an idea about expected ability."
- Business cards, resumes, and titles are dead. These are not accurate ways to accurately size people up.

## Saying No: The Single Most Powerful Arrow in Your Professional Quiver

- You have to say no to bosses who are punch drunk with power and have you doing too many things at once.

- The boss is the boss for a reason, so he must be right. Right? Watch out for managers who never have their decisions questioned.
- "Saying no forces an idea to defend itself with facts."
- As a manager, involve the team as much as possible. With great power comes great responsibility.

## The Process Is the Product

People that create process are well-intentioned, but they annoy the people who create (realizing that screw-ups are inevitable regardless of how much process there is). And love it or hate it, the process is how you build a product.

### 1.0 - The Hardest Thing to Build

- "In your career as a software developer, you're going to be screwed at some point. My advice is keep thinking, don't yell, treat those you work with decently, and you'll be fine."
- Most startups fail because they don't understand the difficulty of 1.0
- Pitch > People > Process > Product
  - **Pitch:** If you don't have the idea, you don't know who to hire. *You're in a hurry; don't forget it.*
  - **People:** Founders to ask hard questions to help them start making decisions about the product. Your first 3 hires aren't for defining the roadmap; they're to get things moving. You don't have a company until 1.0 is done. *No one is indispensable; fire people that aren't getting 1.0 done.*
  - **Process:** Engineers translate this to "busywork" and "management trying to justify itself". *Process defines communication. Each layer shapes and moves those near it.*
  - **Product:** *You don't have a company until you have a product.*
- A failure of pitch is a structural failure that affects your entire company
- "A successful 1.0 is measured by the success of the product that ships, but it is built by a seemingly endless amount of decisions, arguments, failures, and successes that you can't plan for that will teach you everything you need to know, but are, inconveniently, trying to kill you."

## The Process Myth: Process is a Seven-Letter Word that Begins with P that Engineers Hate

- "Engineers don't hate process. They hate process that can't defend itself."
- There needs to be a good answer to the question about why they're doing what they're doing; "because this is how we've always done it" isn't a good answer
- **The Old Guard** -- folks that have been around; understand the culture because they've been living/breathing them; becomes frustrated explaining the obvious
- **The New Guard** -- confused because no one has explained things to them, don't have a map of the company in their head, others are too busy to orient them
- Old Guard says to New Guard, "Duh, fix it. It's your company. That's what I did." This useless platitude only enrages the New Guard, because while they desperately want to fix it -- they don't know how. Eventually you need someone to document the Old Guard's process.
- "Insist on understanding, because a healthy process that can't defend itself is a sign that you've forgotten what you believe."

## How to Start: A Nuts and Bolts Analysis of the Time before You Start

- "I believe the many states of preparation are your brain cleverly and proactively trying to help you begin. Unfortunately, many of these states really do look like goofing off."
- Stress is a creativity buzzkill. When you're stressed, you're in reaction/survival mode. The elegant solution requires offense, and the lower the stress, the better the offense.
- Find things to stir your creativity
- Different times during the day will have different levels of momentum. Feeling the urge? Go for it! Feeling like gravity is pulling you down? What's the minimum thing you could do to kick the idea further down the street?
- "We're addicted to quick fixes, top-ten lists, and four-hour work weeks, but the truth is that if it wasn't hard, everyone would be doing it, and a hard thing is never done by reading a list or a book or an article about doing it. A hard thing is done by figuring out how to start."

## Taking Time to Think: Are You Reacting or Are You Thinking?

- "You can't think because when you're busy, you're not thinking, you're reacting."
- Two meetings: **brainstorm** and **prototype**; at least an hour each, have a gap in between
  - Driver: someone to keep the meeting on track (too much structure kills creativity, not enough leads to chaos)
  - Don't invite obstructionists
  - First brainstorm meeting... relive the pain of the last release. Come out with 5 hot topics that folks want to address.
  - First prototype meeting... documented evidence that will eventually turn into mockups (focused on remembering, not implementing)
- As the weeks pass...
  - Making decisions?
  - Revisiting decisions? (constant revisiting is a problem, though)
  - Players changing?
  - Basic truths about your design showing up?
  - Therapy or work? (okay to vent, but need focus by week 3)
  - "Holy shit" moments occurring? (shows you're learning)
  - To-do list size? (grows early in design, shrinks/stabilizes toward the end of it)
- Don't become too addicted to thinking; get answers. "Better is the enemy of done."

## The Value of the Soak: Let Your Mind Stumble and Strike Out in Random Directions

- **Soak**: "when you plant the seed of a thought in your brain and let it bump around in a rich stew of ideas, facts, and whatever other random crap that seems to relate." Goal is original thought.
- **Active soaking** -- you direct things and gather content
  - *Ask dumb questions.* A manager's job is not to be knowledgeable, but to be clued in.
  - *Pitch a stranger.* Explain back to someone what you think you understand.
  - *Write it down, throw it away, write it down again.* This makes sure you really understand it.
- **Passive soaking** -- just point your brain in a random direction and pray
- Some of this is like letting your mind go idle. It's design work. It's strategy. It's removing emotion and ignorance.

## Capturing Context: Storing the Thoughts that Made Your Ideas Bright

- Version control is an example of this; it tracks every version of the file and the context of those changes
- When you have ideas or make modifications, you need to capture the context of what was going on because that info fades fast after the changes have been made

## Trickle Theory: Stop. Go do one thing. Now

- "The bug database is the only source of data regarding your product."
- (Context: triage 500+ bugs to figure out beta product status) "My normal approach when faced with an impossible task is analysis, because it gives you data... Once I'm good and lost in that fear, the impossible task, I'm no longer thinking about getting the task done, I'm thinking about the fear."
- Just fix one bug. Just write one test. Just write one paragraph of a report.
- The villain here is the critic: the inner voice who occasionally gets things right by being skeptical
- **Impossibly dull task** -- vast in size, little mental effort
- **Impossibly hard task** -- "We need a new product in 2 months...Go!"
- Don't think about the rest, just think about the first one. Progress + momentum = confidence
- "An individual tends to be very bad at work estimates until they've begun work." Once you start, you tend to pick up speed or learn more about the unknowns.
- "If you're working on an impossibly hard or impossibly dull task and you find yourself mentally blocked by boredom or confusion, stop and go do something else. The benefits of stopping are stunning."
- "I know there is no controlling the world, but I will fluidly surf the entropy by constantly changing myself."

## When the Sky Falls: Concrete Steps to Prop up the Sky

- **Step 1: The Situation in the War Room**
  - Understand the exact state of the current disaster
  - Set up a base of operations (people/table/chairs/whiteboards)
  - You're here because the status quo wasn't working
  - Collect data; don't fix things yet (avoid actions with incomplete data)
  - DON'T SKIP THIS STEP! People think they can assess and solve a problem simultaneously, and action feels like progress.
- **Step 2: The "Bet Your Car" Perspective**
  - Vet your model with 3 other people (who weren't in Step 1)
  - Confidence is not a plan; explore the implications of your fix (which can take longer than Step 1)
  - Once vetted, show your plan to those doing the work; get understanding and assignment of ownership
  - Designate a Directly Responsible Individual to keep the work moving forward and be a point of contact. They don't have to *do* the work; but they are responsible for it.
  - DON'T SKIP THIS STEP! People think they understand the implications of this step. Would you bet your car on the viability of your first plan?
- **Step 3: Constant and Consistent Sky-Propping Pressure**
  - Now your job is internal public relations (the grapevine is your enemy, everyone wants status updates an hour ago, fear/uncertainty/doubt are at play)
  - Overcommunicate to the point where people ask to be removed from the CC list

- DON'T SKIP THIS STEP! You need people to understand that you are actively working to address the issue.
- **Step 0**
  - There's no glory in propping up the sky, as you or your team are probably responsible for this situation
  - You need to increase the chances that you won't repeat this disaster.
  - Again, it's import to not make any decisions on a course of action until you answer "What are you trying to do?" (e.g., demonstrate that we can exceed customer expectations, let people know their trust in us isn't misplaced)

## Hacking Is Important: Encouraging Disruptive Acts

- Barbarians from Central Asia were organized around small, collaborative groups that were far more flexible and fast-moving than entrenched societies. (Kind of like Agile.)
- **Hackers are allergic to process** ("the folks who create process care about control, and they use politics to shape that control and to influence communications...")
- Hackers/disruptors who create new things are needed right along with the process people who keep the trains running on time.
- "The story of every company begins with a clever hack." "The well-intentioned people who arrive after the initial success of a hack don't know of a world without it."
- "A healthy product company is, confusingly, at odds with itself."

## Entropy Crushers: Chaos-Destroying Machines

- Most engineers don't know what a project manager does (or haven't seen a good one); crap project managers have ruined the reputation for the role; you need one, so do your folks want to continue as engineers or not?
- The more people you have, the higher the cost of communication, decision making, and error-correction
- "A good project manager is one who elegantly and deftly handles information." "[Project managers] are chaos-destroying machines... A good project manager thrives on measuring, controlling, and crushing entropy."
- When your team gets big enough, people need to specifically (instead of implicitly) "own" things (i.e., be responsible for decisions)
- An effective project manager instinctively creates artifacts of insights into what's going on
- Project managers need to know their project/team well enough to understand where they are needed most
- Fire project managers who use information to control instead of illuminate
- A lead has three jobs: people, process, and product. Ask yourself whether you want to be a leader or an engineer.

## Versions of You

### Bored People Quit: How to Detect and Fix Boredom before It's a Resignation

- Many people that write about *motivation and retention* often haven't done the work or have forgotten how
- When people quit there's usually a "diving save" show of force. The employee is effectively saying "I no longer believe in this company" or worse, "I'm bored."
- Detecting boredom
  - Any change in daily routine? (snark, late arrivals, more vacations)
  - Straight out ask them if they're bored
  - They tell you (and you listen), "I don't really know what to do next"
- Always be able to answer...
  - Where are they going?
  - What are you currently doing to get them there?
- You need a piece of work on their plate that make their eyes light up when they talk about it
- If someone doesn't quite know what to do, keep throwing curveballs at them until they hit a home run
- Create time for them to explore what they obsess about
- "My job isn't just building product; I also build people."
- There's always shit work, but if the same person is always doing it, they'll get bored
- Mistake: Promise productive/experiment time and then yank it away at the last moment because some crisis has come up. This signals to your team how little you value their cultivation.
- Your job is to aggressively remove noise from their day

### Bellwethers: Defining an Interview beyond the Technical

- Diversity of perspective is the best tool you have when hiring
- Two interview groups
  - Every person on the team the candidate will work with
  - The bellwether team; these people are your constant and are rarely wrong about thumbs up/down
- **Bellwethers**
  - Technical
    - The most technical people on your team are likely the *worst* at interviewing.
    - Find a technical bully. Who would scare the hell out of you if you were to be interviewed today?
  - Cultural
    - Within the team
    - Within the company
  - Vision
    - Strategic people have an agenda/opinion; they're engaged, but will piss people off because of the intensity of that agenda
    - Tactical; "a database guy"; they want to get their work done without much fuss
- You need to know what your company and your team needs to be successful with this hire
- Gather everyone together who has interviewed the candidate; watch as consensus builds
- Hiring is a risk, no matter how much you prepare

## The 90-day Interview: Eight Steps to Follow During Your First Ninety Days

- It takes 90 days to properly spin up in a new job
- 1. Stay late, show up early -- watch what your team does and when they do it (who leaves early, who gets coffee?)
- 2. Accept every lunch invite you get
- 3. Always ask about acronyms
- 4. Say something really stupid (probably part of the "storming" phase)
- 5. Have a drink (stories are revealed over drinks, not lunch)
- 6. Tell someone what to do
- 7. Have an argument (reveals how decisions are made, tells you about their passion/velocity)
- 8. Find your inner circle
- "Your job interview isn't over until you've changed to become part of a new team."

## Managing Nerds: A Leadership Checklist for Those Who Build

- Nerds are system thinkers -- they want to understand how things work and fit together
- YOUR JOB: Bring calm to their chaos
- Your nerd desires consistency
- Your nerd desires efficiency
- Your nerd is chasing two highs
  - When a nerd sees a knot they want to unravel it (act of understanding)
  - Complete knot domination (act of creation)
- Obsessively protect your nerd's time and space
- What is your nerd's "hoodie" that protect their focus while they work? (headphones, big screens)
- If your nerd is drifting or disinterested... she doesn't want to engage or can't
- Amaze your nerd. Build calm and dark places where invoking the Zone is easy.

## NADD (Nerd Attention Deficiency Disorder): Multitasking As Art

- "How can you focus on anything with all this stuff going on?" Answer: "I can't focus without all the noise."
- Folks with NADD can deal with context switches without much disruption; they have lots of practice switching between random streams of data, trying to make sense of them
- People with NADD have an ability to focus when they choose to; the question is no longer "do you want to learn" but rather "how long do I have your attention?"
- Downsides
  - Lots of work to keep digesting info to find the next big thing
  - You sound like a know-it-all
  - You have little patience for people who aren't like you

## A Nerd in a Cave: The Purpose of a Cave is Not to Insulate, but Germinate

- "Everyone has some sort of **cave**; just follow them around their house. It might be a garage full of tools or a kitchen full of cookware, but there is a cave stashed somewhere in the house."
- Common nerd cave traits:
  - Computer on desk with Internet access
  - World-cancelling features (door, headphones)

- Collection of nerd knickknacks
- Something to drink
- Well-defined layout
- A view
- **The Zone** -- a deeply creative space where inspiration is built
- **The Snap** -- when your zone is interrupted
- **The Place** -- similar to "The Zone" (e.g., playing a video game), but interruptible

## Meeting Creatures: The Humans You Will Meet

- Meetings have people, but they also have creatures (roles/traits/quirks of people that show up)
- **The Anchor** -- "It's All about Me"
  - When this person talks, everyone listens
  - If you need something, identify this person first. (If you don't know how, wait until something controversial is said, and see who everyone looks at next.)
- **Laptop Larry** -- "Pardon me, what?"
  - He's not listening because he's working
  - Ask him to put away the computer
  - A useful meeting is not a speech; it's a debate.
- **Mr. Irrelevant** -- "I'm just happy to be here"
  - Understand why this person is here when it seems like he/she doesn't add much
- **Chatty Patty** -- "I don't shut up"
  - This person will eat up meeting time
  - Ask questions he/she wants to hear (lots of words); ex: "How is QA" becomes, "I've read your test plan, your current test results, and I understand you have a brief assessment for us regarding the quality of the product. Could you please give us a brief assessment?"
  - Don't ever argue with Chatty Patty in a meeting (will never end)
- **Translator Tim** -- "I know every acronym ever!"
  - Speaks the language of everyone in the room
  - This person is on a side, so make sure you have a Tim on your team
- **Sally Synthesizer** -- "What he's saying is..."
  - Grabs the conversation and derives the basic truth of what's discussed
  - Always aware of relative significance of what's said and who's saying it
  - Once she starts to think like an anchor, you have a problem
- **Curveball Kurt** -- "The sky is pancakes"
  - What are you talking about???
  - Dangerous to have Kurt as the anchor
- **The Snake** -- "I'm actually the anchor. Sssssh!"
  - Maybe he doesn't like being in the spotlight, or wants to be a fly on the wall

## Incrementalists and Completionists: Realists at War with the Dreamers

- **Incrementalists** -- realists; have a good idea of what's achievable
  - They are about motion and forward progress
  - They need vision
  - Get them to define/see the plan from soup to nuts
  - It's not about finishing, it's about motion/doing (e.g., hard problem in their hands looks like lots of new ways to fix it without actually tackling it)



- **Completionists** -- dreamers; "If you're going to spend the time to solve a problem, solve it in a manner so that you aren't going to be solving it again in 3 months."
  - They have strategic vision and get frustrated with the short-term solutions from the incrementalists
  - They need action
  - Often lack common corporate/people sense
- Battles between these two are not wrong vs. right -- it's right vs. right
- Both are defined by a common goal; use both of their strengths to bridge understanding

## Organics and Mechanics: Moving Forward Methodically or Simple All over the Place

- Exercise: think of your 3 most recent managers and put them into these categories... I love this guy, Mostly harmless, Worst. Manager. Ever.
- Two populations: those you work with (you speak the truth to) and those you work for (how you manage up)
- **Organics**
  - Ask seemingly meaningless questions
  - Smile through horrible situations
  - Comfortable with chaos, thinks mechanics are uptight
- **Mechanics**
  - Carefully gather information in a structured manner so it can easily be found again
  - Quietly observe, very predictable, thinks organics are chaotic
  - Not great at relating to people so they gather information in a very structured way
- If you work for an organic...
  - Trust that they have a plan (even if it isn't explicit)
  - They will miss details as they meander
- If you work for a mechanic...
  - Learn to speak their language
  - Overload them with data
  - If they keep asking you the same question, tell them you don't understand
- Look out for...
  - Mechanical organics -- slick with finding out info combined with astounding organizational skills
  - Organic mechanics -- depth of knowledge but no obvious thread to tie it together (it exists, but isn't shared)
- You need both. "A purely mechanical organization lacks inspiration. A purely organic organization is total chaos."

## Inwards, Outwards, and Holistics: Flavors of Leadership

- You need to understand your manager's agenda, what he wants, what he thinks about all day, what he's paying attention to
- **Inwards** -- responsible for a small team working on a single project; focused on the team/product
- **Holistics** -- focuses across organization; manager of managers; what's going on everywhere in the org; they are running the company (always gathering info, tapped into the flood); they lean on Inwards to get work done
- **Outwards** -- senior managers/CEOs/VPs; what do people outside of the company think of us? They lean on Holistics to keep the internals working, although Outwards are responsible
- Be wary of agenda-confusing

- If your team manager is thinking holistically, he's not paying attention to his project.
- If an individual contributor is now supposed to be Holistic, inaction will be the problem.
- Outwards turning into Inwards can end up micromanaging
- Growth
  - Typical progression is strategic -- junior manager starts caring about one product, then the company
  - Eager young managers who spend time looking for their advantage will screw the team (focused on themselves, not their team)
  - Preference: stock the team with holistic managers and inwards geared toward being holistic; you want people with enthusiasm where their next thing is "your job"

## The Wolf: The Single Most Productive Engineer You'll Ever Meet

- Characteristics
  - Exist outside well-defined process/rules and suffer no consequences of that
  - Everyone knows they're the wolf, but no one calls them that
  - Has a manager but no one knows who
  - Lots of meetings, none scheduled; they likely never come to yours
  - They understand "the system" and use it to their advantage, and they think it's a joke
  - They'll be okay being a manager but they'll likely quit when you least expect it
  - Generates disproportionate value for the company with their unparalleled ability to identify/work on projects essential to the future of the company
- Like a Volatile, combines no process with engineering ability
- The influence earned by the Wolf can never be granted by a manager; the Wolf doesn't need you

## Free Electrons: Care and Feeding of the Highly Productive

- They can do anything when it comes to code (complete app from scratch, learn a language in a weekend, dive into a mess and get it working)
- **Senior electrons** -- politically and socially aware
- **Junior electrons** -- have ability, but have little people experience
- Care and feeding
  - Keep them engaged -- have them work on the "R" of R&D otherwise they'll get bored; they define the bleeding edge
  - Misdirected intensity and yield odd results -- they may go off and rewrite systems that took months to build with no thought of the impact of that decision (despite it fixing the root problem)
  - Sometimes will not engage and they won't explain why -- high-functioning with strong opinions, but if you ask them to do something they don't believe in, they won't do it
  - It's a team -- don't give them special breaks; everyone knows who the free electrons are

## The Old Guard: The Cultural Bellwether of the Company

- Dunbar's number is important when considering organizational growth, but another emergent behavior is **The Old Guard**
- Origins -- a group of people took an idea people thought was stupid and ran with it; they struggled together and eventually started winning

- Once the idea is successful, the problem shifts from "will we survive" to "how do we scale." The Old Guard's experience and instincts that built the company are essential, but won't scale without help
- **"The New Guard**, armed with their new-hire spirit and their lack of historical organizational instincts, starts on important work that the Old Guard both desires and hates at the same time."
  - Writes things down (for themselves and those who will come after them)
  - Sits down with different teams and agrees to contracts on how they will get work done
  - Imports languages from prior companies to support and define their emerging causes
  - Schedules meetings
- You need to build infrastructure and process that connects the various parts of your company. This will feel heavy/unnecessary by the Old Guard
- The question to answer is "How does this process reflect our values" rather than whether it's good or bad process
- Old Guard needs to take the time to define the key values and pillars of the culture; when those values are no longer serving the company, the values must evolve

### Rules for the Reorg: Traversing Massive Change

- Reorg -- when teams and products are shifted around to account for a shift in company strategy
- **Rule #1: Figure out your role** -- sit back and watch or dive in? This could be an opportunity to fix something now that things are in flux (limber).
- **Rule #2: People are paranoid** -- there's a long period of time when most people know about the reorg and when it actually occurs. No one knows what's going to happen tomorrow; this creates a culture of paranoia, and you need to listen carefully.
- **Rule #3: The grapevine gone mad** -- when people don't have information, they assume or make things up. When jobs are on the line, the grapevine goes radical.
- **Rule #4: Reorgs take forever** -- if you're staying in with an agenda, stay engaged for the duration, don't trust when you're boss says things are "done"; if just observing, sit back and observe the scurrying
- **Rule #5: Most folks love reorgs but hate to admit it** -- stakeholders work the grapevine to steer the course of the reorg in their favor; the change gets people talking and excited
- **Only rule: Patience** -- large groups of people move slowly (bureaucracy)

### An Unexpected Connection: The Act of Obsessively Understanding to Find Connections

- Two buckets nerds sort things into to parse incoming information
  - **Irrelevant** -- ignored
  - **Relevant** -- pleasurable, the only course of action is understanding
- There's a difference between jokes and wit. Jokes are retold. Wit is relevant to the present quickly and in clever ways.

### Avoiding the Fez: Investments in Avoiding Irrelevance

- As a business grows, so shall its employees.
- To prune people that don't help with that, you find those that
  - Consistently demonstrate a lack of interest in helping with growth. They relish having a stable/irrelevant project.
  - **Fez:** grown complacent which has granted him power for a while.

- To solve the Fez issue, you need strategy, effort, inspiration, luck, and time.
- For annual reviews, if you don't draw a concrete line between understanding someone's performance and their reward/punishment, you're only adding fuel to the argument that managers sit around doing nothing all day.
- Sit down each month and document what your team did; capture your thoughts. (Otherwise, you'll have very little to work with when the annual review comes around.)
- Skill vs. will
  - **Skill** -- Qualified? Overqualified? How long has he been doing X? When did he last learn something new? How quickly can he complete tasks compared to peers?
  - **Will** -- Does she like her job? Has she told you that? Team describes her as energetic? Ideas from her that blew your mind? Talking or listening?
- You're looking for an epiphany from the graph of skill vs. will -- wow, he's bored; she has no clue how to architect software; is the skill level fading? Is there a skill/will feedback loop that's draining her?
- Failed review: Hi employee 123, here's what you did well, here's what you need to work on, here's your 2% raise, now back to work.
- If you focus on one (skill or will) it will affect the other.
- Do you as a manager ask or tell?
- The yearly review should be a discussion, not a speech.
- If you have bad news to share in a review, make it a two-part meeting. Once he hears "no increase this year", your first meeting is effectively over because he'll stop listening. Make the second meeting about objectives.
  - **High skill, low will** -- bored; change the scenery soon
  - **High will, low skill** -- needs training/mentoring/management; once skill is increased, they'll want your job (which is good)
  - **Low will, low skill** -- you as a manager failed, so get to work fixing it
  - **High skill, high will** -- great job, but it's downhill from here if you don't sustain this

## A Glimpse and a Hook: Design Your Resume to be a Consumable Glimpse

- There's more people submitting resumes than reviewing them, so you have about 30 seconds to make an impression
- The first pass
  - Name -- if I don't know you, I'll Google you
  - Company names -- do I know what your company does?
  - Job description/history -- looking for trajectory (time, growth, red flags)
  - Other interests -- why are you different than everyone else?
  - Professional objective -- skip this; it tells me nothing I don't already know, otherwise I wouldn't even be looking at your resume
  - Skills -- also skip; people lie here anyway
  - Summary of qualifications -- mostly fluff, but could be fodder for follow up interview ("delivered measurable results under tight schedules" leads to giving examples in a phone interview)
- The second pass (unsure whether to proceed to phone screen after first pass)
  - In-depth job history -- last 3 jobs, responsibilities match titles?, did you grow?, why did you leave? Do I see where you're headed?
  - School/education -- don't get biased by big-name schools, don't discard non-CS degrees
- Differentiate, Don't Annoy

- Make sure your resume looks good in plain text
- Skip the cover letter
- Realize that some buzzwords are needed to get through the recruiter screen (these typically go in the "skills" section); don't include a keyword you're not comfortable talking about though
- Make it visually interesting enough, but don't go crazy
- Avoid resume speak like "planned, design, and coordinated engineers' efforts for the development of a mission critical system". What was that system? Why is it critical? Teach me something.
- Include seemingly irrelevant information -- what did you learn from other position? Explain how work is hard no matter what the job is
- Purpose of the resume is not to cover every facet of your career. Give a glimpse of your professional career and a hook about why I should call you in.
- "A resume is not a statement of facts. It's a declaration of intent."

## Nailing the Phone Screen: How to Prepare for an Important 30 Minutes

- Purpose
  - Job reqs are intentionally vague so you can cast a wide net
  - Don't sweat the "recommended" skills; those are nice-to-haves
  - You wouldn't be getting a phone call if you weren't in the ball park for "required" skills
- Prepare
  - Google the company and interviewer; this levels the playing field
  - How is the company/product doing?
  - This is where you start looking for questions to ask the company
- Purpose (cont'd)
  - Can we communicate -- lead off with something simple/disarming (e.g., if surfing is on your resume, ask "where do you surf?")
  - Clarification soft balls -- what questions did the resume leave me with
  - Explain your story -- a complex idea over the phone to someone you can't see and don't know. "If we can't have an intelligent discussion about that, I'm going to start wondering about the other ways we aren't going to be able to communicate."
  - "Do you have any questions for me?" If not, I think that you don't want the job.
- The close
  - **Long, awkward pause?** Struggling to communicate; not a deal killer, but definitely negative
  - **Adversarial interactions?** What else are you going to fight me about when you come onboard?
  - **How'd it feel?** Did we click? Did we learn something?
  - **Specific next steps?** An immediate next step of bringing them in is a sign of success.

## Your Resignation Checklist: A Checklist for the Final Days

- **Rule #1: Don't Promise What You Can't Do** -- your guilt is convincing you to overcommit; you will become useless in your last days; you damage your reputation by not completing what you said you would
- **Rule #2: Respect Your Network** -- find 3 people that you need to make sure are aware that you want to stay in touch with them; make sure they know you care
- **Rule #3: Update "The Crew"** -- a list of people you'd work with again

- **Rule #4: Don't Take Cheap Shots** -- you are leaving and the people you consider to be the problem are staying. It's not your problem anymore, don't waste your energy. Don't burn bridges either by blasting everyone.
- **Rule #5: Do Right by Those Who Work for You and with You** -- if you are a manager, you are still a leader until you walk out the door for the last time. Write up a written review to all your direct reports.
- **Rule #6: Don't Volunteer to Do Work After You Leave (or if you do, make sure you get a lot of money for it)** -- don't spend your evenings on work from a prior life when what you should be doing is digesting lessons of the new job
- **Rule #7: Don't Give Too Much Notice** -- You've chosen to leave and are going to leave, so just move on. The longer you stay, the harder it is for your team to start moving on.

## Shields Down: A Glimpse of a Potential Different Future

- When you lower your shields (to think about a job change), you think about
  - Am I happy?
  - Do I like my manager and team?
  - Is this project fulfilling?
  - Am I learning?
  - Am I respected?
  - Am I growing?
  - Do I feel fairly compensated?
  - Is this company going anywhere?
  - Do I believe in the vision?
  - Do I trust the leaders?
- Important question before you consider lowering your shields: What has happened recently or in the past that either supports or detracts from what I value?
- When someone leaves...
  - Why are they leaving?
  - When did their shields go down?
- Everyone has a rehearsed answer for #1, but #2 helps refine it. Happy people don't leave jobs they love. As a manager, you really want to understand where the failure happened so you can learn from it (assuming you still want this person on your team).
- "Every moment as a leader is an opportunity to strengthen or weaken shields. Every single moment."

## Chaotic, Beautiful Snowflakes: On the Necessity of Leadership

- "Humans (engineers especially) significantly underestimate the cost of getting things done in groups of people. We focus on the obvious and measurable work that needs to be done -- iterate on a design, write the code, test, iterate, deploy -- and we put a huge discount on the work required to share that process with others."
- Engineers are really shitty at estimating the non-linear chaotic work that exists in keeping a group of humans pointed in the right direction.
- There are plenty of reasons to hate crap leadership, but you need someone to deal with unexpected non-linear side effects of people working together