Getting Real About Managing Up.

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Thank you for coming!

Today:

• Who am I?
• Why “managing up” at a tech conference?
• The basics.
• Some advanced techniques
• What doesn’t work.
• Questions?
Who am I?
Managing up in tech

• Distinct from generic “managing up”

• 3 key contributors

  1. Modern Software Development is Deeply Entangled

  2. The Myth of the Apolitical Engineer

  3. The Growing Expectation <=> Eng Manager Skills Gap
The Myth of the Apolitical Engineer

I don’t want to engage in politics I just want to …

• be allowed to do my work

• let the work speak for itself

• let the data speak for itself

• explain why this technology is clearly superior

• build a prototype to prove the point
The Growing Expectation

\[ \iff \text{Eng Manager Skill Gap} \]

So now what?
Influence Based Leadership

- Staff Engineer - "You are entrusted with a significant amount of influence ... identify off-roadmap opportunities where we are under-serving business goals and can use their influence to get them on-roadmap ... They mentor other engineers and take on sponsorship responsibilities."

What does that mean?
It’s a trap!
👍 The Basics

Make your manager’s job easier.

• Get Curious

• Understanding your manager and their job

• Build a Positive Relationship

• Make Your Manager Look Good
👍 Get Curious

- “What did they say when you asked them that question?”
👍 Understanding Your Manager and Their Job

The most important thing to know:

Your manager spends about 85-90% of their time thinking about themselves (because they’re a human).
Understanding Your Manager’s Different Perception of Time

“No meeting Wednesday”

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👍 Questions regarding your manager

• What exactly is their job?

• What do they value?

• How are they being evaluated?

• What are they particularly good at?

Don’t be surprised if your manager can’t answer these questions. If this stuff was easy they’d already be doing it!
👍 Establish a Positive Relationship

• Get to know them.

• Keep it mostly constructive.

• In the beginning, keep it actionable.

• It’s okay to complement them. Make sure it’s genuine.
👍 Make Your Boss Look Good

- Align yourself with your team’s mission.
- Do great work.
- Equip them to speak fluently about your work.
- Translate into their frame.
- Help them see around blindspots.
Help Them See Around Blindspots

- Management breeds blindspots.

- Even the best managers need to be managed up to.

- “It’s my job to be pushing, I need you to tell me when it looks like I’m pushing us off a cliff.”

- Who is killing it? Where is distraction coming from?

- “I had lunch with some folks from marketing and did you know they have a totally different idea on how to drive conversion?”
Is it working?
Advanced Techniques

• Ask for advice, not feedback.

• Closed loop communication.

• Your boss is repeating themselves, listen.

• Dealing with an unreasonable desire for detail.

• Give them something to talk about.
Ask for advice

- “Do you have any feedback for me?”
Closed Loop?

- The Zeigarnik effect
- A contract to push your manager the information they need.
- Sitting on the [CEO] during an outage
Your boss is repeating themselves, listen.

• “You know, the best boss I ever had just left me alone to do my work.”

• “It seems like we aren’t hiring fast enough?”

• “I’m worried about our July deadline.”
Dealing with unreasonable requests for detail.

• “I just need to know what everyone is going to be working on every hour between now and launch so I can help people prioritize.”
Give them something to talk about.
Some things that don’t work.

- “I got this”.
- Drown them in details.
- Catastrophizing.
- They should appreciate me for me.
- That’s not my job.
“I got this”

- It’s good to talk about your challenges.
- When you don't talk about them your boss just assumes you are clueless and don't know about them.
Drown them in details

• “Why are they micro-managing me? If they really want to know what I’m up to let me subscribe them to all the Github notification emails!”

• Like, “I got this”, your boss just assumes you don’t know what’s important.
Catastrophizing

• “Oh my god, everything is broken, this sucks, it’s all awful!!”

/giphy jack nicholson “you can’t handle the truth”
Appreciate me for me.

- Being loved and appreciated for who we are is a basic human need. And not what work is for.

- Remember, I’m not thinking about you.
That’s not my job.

• “Sounds like you are asking me to manage the team, that’s not my job.”

• No. I’m asking you, as the subject matter expert who wants respect, to help out.

• A word of caution: bias and the perception of “non-technical” work.
Stressed boss vs Bad boss

- Your attempts to manage up won’t always be appreciated.
- It won’t always be a good idea to try to make things better.
Questions?

• Thank you for coming!

• And thank you to the many friends I’ve discussed this with over the years including: Julia Evans, Duretti Hirpa, Maggie Zhou, Silvia Botros, Allison Kaptur, Alice Goldfuss, Camille Fournier, Marco Rogers, Jason Wong, Juan Pablo Buritica, Harry Heymann, James Turnbull, Michael Gorsuch, Andrew Morrison, Dan McKinley, and Niccolò Machiavelli (obviously none of these people are responsible for the egregious mistakes in this talk)

• A couple of additional resources:

  • “Help! I have a manager” by Julia Evans - [https://wizardzines.com/zines/manager/](https://wizardzines.com/zines/manager/)