The Manager's Path

A Guide for Tech Leaders Navigating Growth & Change

Camille Fournier

Managing people is difficult wherever you work. But in the tech industry, where management is also a technical discipline, the learning curve can be brutal—especially when there are few tools, texts, and frameworks to help you. In this practical guide, author Camille Fournier (tech lead turned CTO) takes you through each stage in the journey from engineer to technical manager.

From mentoring interns to working with senior staff, you'll get actionable advice for approaching various obstacles in your path. This book is ideal whether you're a new manager, a mentor, or a more experienced leader looking for fresh advice. Pick up this book and learn how to become a better manager and leader in your organization.

- Begin by exploring what you expect from a manager
- Understand what it takes to be a good mentor and a good tech lead
- Learn how to manage individual members while remaining focused on the entire team
- Understand how to manage yourself and avoid common pitfalls that challenge many leaders
- Discover how to manage multiple teams as well as other managers
- Learn how to build and bootstrap a unifying culture in teams

"...a fantastic help to both new and experienced managers, thinking through not just how to get the job done, but how to find the best approach for both the business and the people."

—Marc Hedlund
CEO, Skyliner

"I recommend this book for literally everyone who works in or around software engineering, at whatever level, whether or not you believe management is for you."

—Kellan Elliot-McCrea
SVP Engineering, Blink Health

Camille Fournier is an experienced leader with a unique combination of deep technical expertise, executive leadership, and engineering management.

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Praise for *The Manager's Path*

The Manager's Path gives the big picture perspective on what a career in engineering management looks like. Camille provides very tactical advice for each career stage. And because engineering managers have a great responsibility to their reports to learn how to manage well, you should read this book and learn how it is done.

This book is a practical guide to understanding and pursuing a career in Engineering Management.

—Liz Crawford, Entrepreneur in Residence, Genacast Ventures;
former CTO, Birchbox

As Camille says in Chapter 5, "This book is for engineering managers. It's not a generic management book." Without hesitation I recommend this book for literally everyone who works in or around software engineering, at whatever level, whether or not you believe management is for you.

In software engineering we often treat management as something between a fate to be avoided, an obstacle, and a reward for being the loudest person in the room. Is it a surprise that most of us have experienced poor management and we struggle, as an industry, to bring managers up to a level slight better than worse-than-useless? Camille's book teaches us how to clear this bar by a considerable margin. She starts from where we all start, as a human who is being managed, and works upward from that common ground. Camille is one of the great engineering leaders in our industry. Her advice is both practical and profound. While I wish I'd had this book earlier in my career, I'm grateful to have it now.

—Kellan Elliot-McCrea, SVP Engineering, Blink Health;
former CTO, Etsy

I've learned more from Camille about engineering leadership than almost anyone. Her writing is a fantastic help to both new and experienced managers, thinking through not just how to get the job done, but how to find the best approach for both the business and the people. This will be a book I recommend to all managers for years to come.

—Marc Hedlund, CEO, Skyliner;
former VP Engineering at Stripe and Etsy

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The Manager's Path

by Camille Fournier

To CK

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Introduction

In 2011, I joined a small startup called Rent the Runway. It was a radical departure for me to go from working on large distributed systems at a big company to working with a tiny engineering team with a focus on delivering a great customer experience. I did it because I thought the business was brilliant, and I wanted a chance to lead. I believed that with a little luck and some hard work, I could get that leadership experience that I was so eager to have.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I joined Rent the Runway as a manager without a team, a director of engineering in name and something closer to a tech lead in practice. As is often the case with startup life, I was hired to make big things happen, and had to figure out myself what that might look like.

Over the next four years, my role grew from managing a small team to running all of engineering as CTO. As the organization scaled, so did I. I had mentors, coaches, and friends who provided valuable advice, but no one was there to tell me specifically what to do. There was no safety net, and the learning curve was brutal.

When I left the company, I found myself bursting with advice. I also wanted a creative outlet, so I decided to participate in "National Novel Writing Month," which is a challenge to write 50,000 words in 30 days. I attempted to write down everything I had learned over the past four years, everything I had personally experienced and several observations I'd made watching others succeed and struggle. That project turned into the book you are reading now.

This book is structured to follow the stages of a typical career path for an engineer who ends up becoming a manager. From the first steps as a mentor to the challenges of senior leadership, I have tried to highlight the main themes and lessons that you typically learn at each step along the way. No book can cover every detail, but my goal is to help you focus on each level individually, instead of

overwhelming you with details about challenges that are irrelevant to your current situation.

In my experience, most of the challenge of engineering management is in the intersection of "engineering" and "management." The people side is hard, and I don't want to sell the challenges of those interpersonal relationships short. But those people-specific management skills also translate across industries and jobs. If you are interested in improving on purely the people management side of leadership, books like *First, Break All the Rules*[1] are excellent references.

What engineering managers do, though, is not pure people management. We are managing groups of technical people, and most of us come into the role from a position of hands-on expertise. I wouldn't recommend trying to do it any other way! Hands-on expertise is what gives you credibility and what helps you make decisions and lead your team effectively. There are many parts of this book dedicated to the particular challenges of management as a technical discipline.

Engineering management is hard, but there are strategies for approaching it that can help make it easier. I hope that in reading this you get some new ideas for how you might approach the role of engineering management, whether you're just starting out or have been doing it for years.

How to Read This Book

This book is separated into chapters that cover increasing levels of management complexity. The first chapter describes the basics of how to be managed, and what to expect from a manager. The next two chapters cover mentoring and being a tech lead, which are both critical steps on the management path. For the experienced manager, these chapters have some notes on how you might approach managing people in these roles. The following four chapters talk about people management, team management, management of multiple teams, and managing managers. The last chapter on the management path, Chapter 8, is all about senior leadership.

For the beginning manager, it may be enough to read the first three or four chapters for now and skim the rest, returning when you start to face those challenges. For the experienced manager, you may prefer to focus on the chapters around the level that you're currently struggling with.

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1 Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

Interspersed throughout are sections with three recurring themes:

Ask the CTO

> These are brief interludes to discuss a specific issue that tends to come up at each of the various levels.

Good Manager, Bad Manager

> These sections cover common dysfunctions of engineering managers, and provide some strategies for identifying these bad habits and overcoming them. Each section is placed in the chapter/level that is most likely to correspond to the dysfunction, but these dysfunctions are often seen at every level of experience.

Challenging Situations

> Starting in Chapter 4, I take some time to discuss challenging situations that might come up. Again, while these are roughly placed with the level that is most appropriate, you may find useful information in them regardless of your current level.

Chapter 9 is a bit of a wildcard, aimed at those trying to set up, change, or improve the culture of their team. While it was written from a perspective of a startup leader, I think that much of it will apply to those coming into new companies or running teams that need an uplift in their culture and processes.

More than an inspirational leadership book for a general-purpose audience, I wanted to write something worthy of the O'Reilly imprint, something you can refer back to over time in the same way you might refer to *Programming Perl*. Therefore, think of this book as a reference manual for engineering managers, a book focused on practical tips that I hope will be useful to you throughout your management career.

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Management 101

The secret of managing is keeping the people who hate you away from the ones who haven't made up their minds.

—CASEY STENGEL

You're reading this book because you want to be a good manager, but do you even know what one looks like? Have you ever had a good manager? If someone were to sit you down and ask you what you should expect from a good manager, could you answer that question?

What to Expect from a Manager

Everyone's very first experience of management is on the other side of the table, and the experience of being managed is the foundation on which you build your own management philosophy. Unfortunately, I've come to see that there are people who have never in their careers had a good manager. Friends of mine talk about their best managers as managing them with "benign neglect." The engineer just kind of knows what to work on, and the manager just leaves them alone entirely. In the most extreme case, one person reported meeting only twice with his manager in the span of six months, one of those times to receive a promotion.

Benign neglect isn't so bad when you consider some of the alternatives. There are the neglectful managers who ignore you when you need help and brush your concerns aside, who avoid meeting with you and who never give you feedback, only to tell you suddenly that you are not meeting expectations or not qualified to be promoted. And of course there are micromanagers who question every detail of everything you do and refuse to let you make any decisions on your own. Still worse are actively abusive managers who neglect you until they

want to yell at you for something. Sadly, all of these characters are walking around our companies, wreaking havoc on the mental health of their teams. When you believe that these are the only alternatives, a manager who leaves you alone most of the time unless you specifically ask for help doesn't seem so bad at all.

There are, however, other options. Managers who care about you as a person, and who actively work to help you grow in your career. Managers who teach you important skills and give you valuable feedback. Managers who help you navigate difficult situations, who help you figure out what you need to learn. Managers who want you to take their job someday. And most importantly, managers who help you understand what is important to focus on, and enable you to have that focus.

At a minimum, there are a few tasks that you should expect your manager to perform as needed, in order to keep you and your team on track. As you learn what to expect from your manager, you can start to ask for what you need.

ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS

One-on-one meetings (1-1s) with your direct manager are an essential feature of a good working relationship. However, many managers neglect these meetings, or make them feel like a waste of your time. What does it feel like to be on the receiving end of a good 1-1?

1-1s serve two purposes. First, they create human connection between you and your manager. That doesn't mean you spend the whole time talking about your hobbies or families or making small talk about the weekend. But letting your manager into your life a little bit is important, because when there are stressful things happening (a death in the family, a new child, a breakup, housing woes), it will be much easier to ask your manager for time off or tell him what you need if he has context on you as a person. Great managers notice when your normal energy level changes, and will hopefully care enough to ask you about it.

I am not a buddy-buddy person at work. I feel the need to say this because I think that sometimes we give ourselves a pass at caring about our colleagues because we're introverts, or we don't want to make friends at work. You might think that I am the sort who loves to make lots of work friends, and therefore I don't understand how this feels to you, but I assure you: I understand that you don't feel like that human side is all that interesting in the workplace. Being an introvert is not an excuse for making no effort to treat people like real human beings, however. The bedrock of strong teams is human connection, which leads

to trust. And trust, real trust, requires the ability and willingness to be vulnerable in front of each other. So, your manager will hopefully treat you like a human who has a life outside of work, and spend a few minutes talking about that life when you meet.

The second purpose of a 1-1 is a regular opportunity for you to speak privately with your manager about whatever needs discussing. You should expect your 1-1s to be scheduled with some predictability so that you can plan for them, because it is not your manager's job to completely control the 1-1 agenda. Sometimes he will, but it is good for you to put a little thought into what you might actually want to discuss before your 1-1 meetings. It is hard to do this if your manager does not regularly meet with you, or constantly cancels or changes your 1-1s. You may not want to do 1-1s regularly, or you may only need them every few weeks. That's OK, so long as you don't eliminate them completely. Use them as you need them, and if you find that you want to meet more frequently, ask your manager for that.

For most people, good 1-1s are not status meetings. If you are a manager reporting up to senior management, you may use your 1-1 to discuss the status of critical projects, or projects that are still in the nascent stage where there's not necessarily a lot written down yet. If you're an individual contributor, though, a 1-1 as a status meeting is repetitive and probably boring. If your 1-1 is a dreadful obligation for delivering a boring status report, try using email or chat for that purpose instead to free up the time, and bringing some topics of your own to the 1-1.

I encourage you to share the responsibility of having good 1-1s with your manager. Come with an agenda of things you would like to discuss. Prepare for the time yourself. If he cancels or reschedules on you regularly, push him to find a time that is more stable, and if this isn't possible, verify the day before (or that morning, for an afternoon meeting) that you will be meeting and share with him anything you are interested in discussing so he knows you want to meet.

FEEDBACK AND WORKPLACE GUIDANCE

The second thing to expect from your manager is feedback. I'm not just talking about performance reviews, although that is part of it. Inevitably, you will screw up in some fashion, and if your manager is any good she will let you know quickly that you did. This is going to be uncomfortable! In particular, for those new to the workforce who are not used to getting behavioral feedback from anyone but their parents, this can be a pretty disorienting thing to have happen.

You do want to get this feedback, though, because the only thing worse than getting behavioral feedback is not getting it at all, or getting it only during your performance review. The sooner you know about your bad habits, the easier they are to correct. This also goes for getting praise. A great manager will notice some of the little things you're doing well in your day-to-day, and recognize you for them. Keep track of this feedback, good and bad, and use it when you write your self-review for the year.

Ideally, the feedback you get from your manager will be somewhat public if it's praise, and private if it's criticism. If your manager grabs you immediately after a meeting to provide critical feedback, that is not necessarily a sign that your behavior was terrible. Good managers know that delivering feedback quickly is more valuable than waiting for a convenient time to say something. Praising in public is considered to be a best practice because it helps the manager let everyone know that someone has done something laudable, and reinforces what positive behavior looks like. If you don't like public praise, tell your manager! It would be great if she asked, but if she doesn't, you shouldn't suffer in silence.

There are other types of feedback that you may want to ask for from your manager. If you are giving a presentation, you can ask her to review the content and suggest changes. If you've written a design doc, she should be able to provide ideas of areas for improvement. As engineers, we get code feedback mostly from our peers, but you will do things other than code, and your manager should act as a resource to help you improve those things. Asking your manager for advice is also a good way to show that you respect her. People like to feel helpful, and managers are not immune to this sort of flattery.

When it comes to your role at the company, your manager needs to be your number one ally. If you're at a company with a career ladder, sitting down with your manager and asking her what areas you need to focus on to get promoted is usually a good idea if you are actively seeking a promotion. If you're struggling with a teammate or a person on another team, your manager should be there to help you navigate that situation, and she can work with the other person or team as necessary to help you get to resolution. This usually requires you to say something, though. If you don't ask your manager about a promotion, do not expect her to just give you one magically. If you're unhappy with a teammate, your manager may not do anything unless you bring the issue to her attention.

It's great when managers can identify and assign stretch projects that will help us grow and learn new things. Beyond assigning stretch projects, though, good managers will also help you understand the value of the work you're doing