



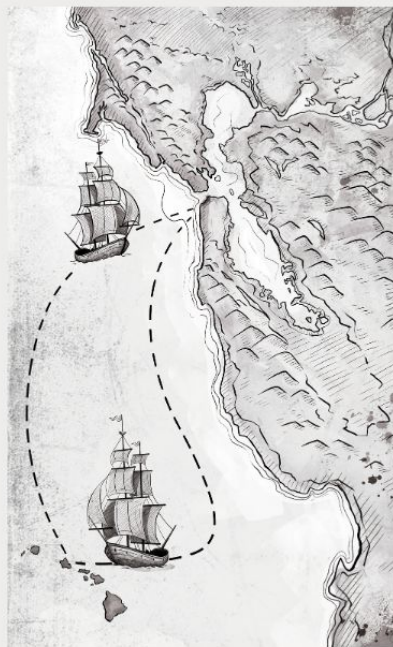
INSPIRE

Staff+ Engineers: Maximizing Impact

Marvin Zeising
Staff Engineer



Why?



Staff Engineer

Leadership beyond the management track

Will Larson

O'REILLY®

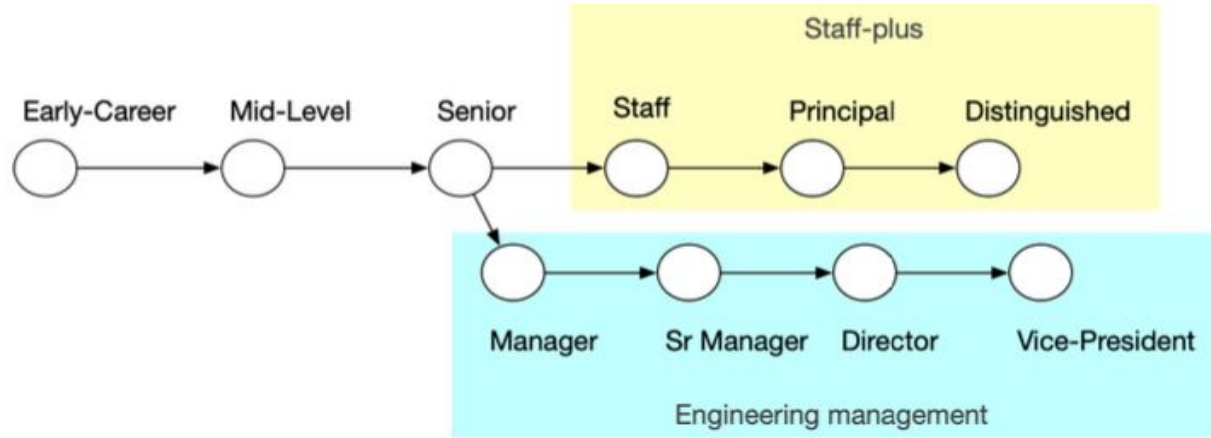
The Staff Engineer's Path

A GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS
NAVIGATING GROWTH AND CHANGE

TANYA REILLY

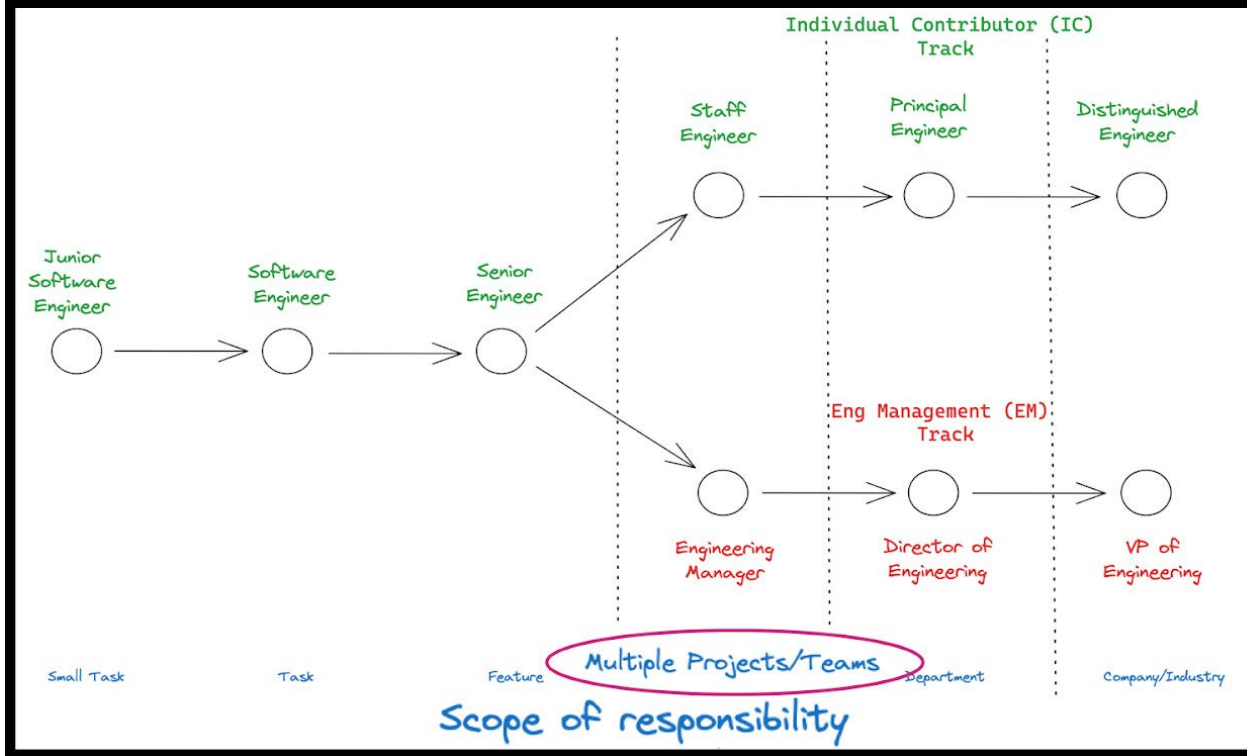
Foreword by Camille Fournier, author of *The Manager's Path*





Tanya Reilly: The Staff Engineer's Path

THE DUAL-TRACK CAREER LADDER MODEL



An interpretation

What's a Staff Eng?

- Senior individual contributors

- Role models for engineers

- Engineering Leadership

- No people management

- Strive for impact beyond team boundaries

- Work on what matters most to the company

- Proactive & self-organized

- Enable others (teams, streams, units) to be more effective

- Own and execute the organization's technical strategy



What they're not

Code monkeys

Meeting-free

Always in the zone

Working on “baby projects”



Not a 10x engineer

Changing the long-term trajectory

It's not about personal heroics

Have to create impact vectors, e.g. by

- Influencing
- Unblocking
- Coordinating
- Leading

Actively grow engineers around them



Shekhar Kirani @skirani · Jul 11

1. 10x engineers hate meetings. They think it is a waste of time and obvious things are being discussed. They attend meetings because the manager has called for a "Staff meeting" to discuss the features and status.

55 74 707



Shekhar Kirani @skirani · Jul 11

2. Timings in the office for 10x engineers is highly irregular. They tend to work when very few folks are around. If there is a crowd or all-hands meeting, they are not visible. Most of them are late-night coders and come late to the office.

37 53 645



Shekhar Kirani @skirani · Jul 11

3. 10x engineers laptop screen background color is typically black (they always change defaults). Their keyboard keys such as i, f, x are usually worn out than of a, s, and e (email senders).

143 59 535



Shekhar Kirani @skirani · Jul 11

4. 10x engineers know every line of the code that has gone into production. If a QA or support folks alert an issue, they know precisely where the fault (or bug) is and can fix the same in hours vs days

52 44 507



Shekhar Kirani @skirani · Jul 11

5. Most of the 10x engineers are full-stack engineers. For them code is code, they don't care whether it is front-end, back-end, API, database, serverless, etc. I have rarely seen them doing UI work.

117 97 837

Staffbase 2023

Why the change?

Org Chart Positioning is unclear

Teams have no direct Point-Of-Contact

Ambiguous Responsibilities

Are they responsible for something?
Maybe even accountable?

Area of Impact Definition

What are they working on?

Unclear to the outside

Tech Lead is usually used for the most experienced engineer in a team

Summary



Outline

— Preface

Purpose of this document

Staff Engineers

Impact

Three Big Pillars

Knowledge & Experience

Archetypes

Architect

Tech Lead

Solver

Right Hand

Pillar 1: Big Picture Thinking

Setting technical direction

Providing engineering persp...

Staying aligned with authority

Pillar 2: Project Execution

Leading Projects

Being Glue

Drive Meetings

Pillar 3: Leveling up

Mentorship

Sponsorship

Leading and following

Addendum 1: Senior to Staff



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Preface

Purpose of this document

The goal of this document is to bring clarity to the Engineering career track, especially for the IC5 level, aka Tech Lead. The current role description, as it can be viewed in Lattice, is too vague.

When the Tech Leads were removed from the streams, teams lost their Point-Of-Contact and some Tech Leads feel less effective since then.

The current organizational setup lacks flexibility and efficiency, leaving critical questions unanswered:

- **Org Chart Positioning:** The specific location of a Tech Lead within the organizational chart is unclear.
- **Responsibilities Ambiguity:** The responsibilities associated with the Tech Lead role lack specificity, causing confusion among team members.
- **Area of Impact Definition:** The delineation of the area of impact for a Tech Lead remains ambiguous, hindering effective collaboration, decision-making and execution.

The overarching goal is to empower the role, enhancing its efficiency and effectiveness. This approach not only benefits existing Tech Leads but also serves the broader objective of providing guidance for engineers aspiring to develop into this role. Additionally, aligning the role definition with industry standards contributes to a more consistent understanding of what is expected from a Staff Engineer.

Archetypes

Archetypes

Soft categorization

- Can be switched
- Can be mixed

Based on their preference and compatibility

4 Types:

- Architect
- Tech Lead
- Solver
- Right Hand

6 ARCHETYPES



LIGHT HERO



HERO



DARK HERO



LIGHT VILLAIN



VILLAIN



DARK VILLAIN

Archetypes

Architect

In a product stream with multiple teams

Within the stream responsible for

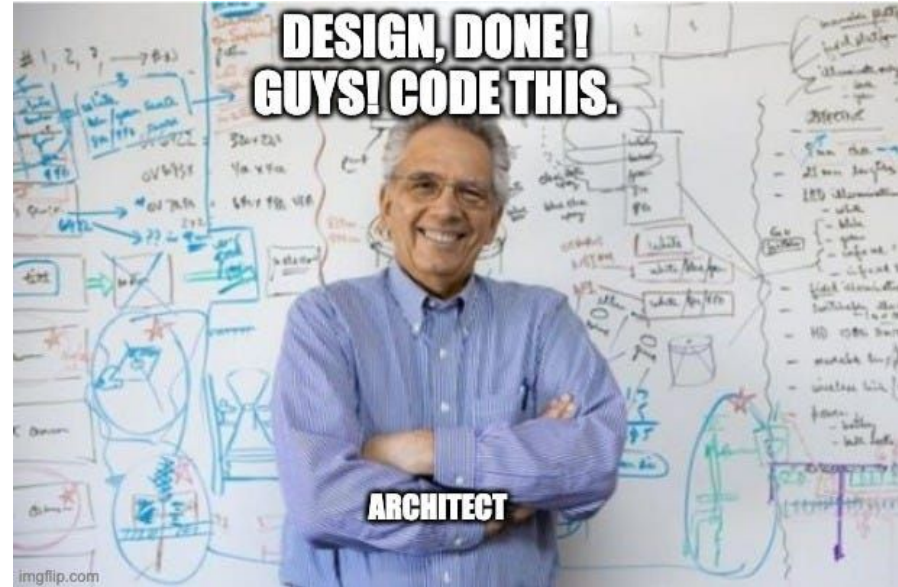
- Technical direction
- Technical quality
- Technical approach

Combine knowledge of

- Business Domain
- User needs
- Technical constraints
- Org-level leadership

Align teams with the org's technical strategy

- And help them to execute upon it



Archetypes

Tech Lead

Focus on a specific area of technology

Continuously unblock teams

Create visibility for technical debt

Coordinate work on technical debt

Focused on the execution of building blocks of the technical strategy

- Guide and lead teams in their approach and execution



Archetypes Solver

Bounce from hotspot to hotspot

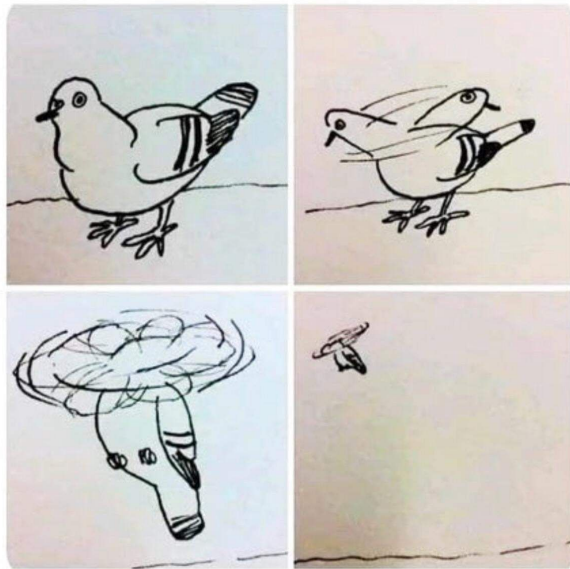
Go deep into arbitrarily complex problems

Work until it's fixed or an appropriate path forward is found

These problems often

- Are organizational priorities
- Lack a clear approach
- Have a high degree of execution risk

When your program
is a complete mess,
but it does its job



Archetypes

Right Hand

Work closely with members of the wider leadership team

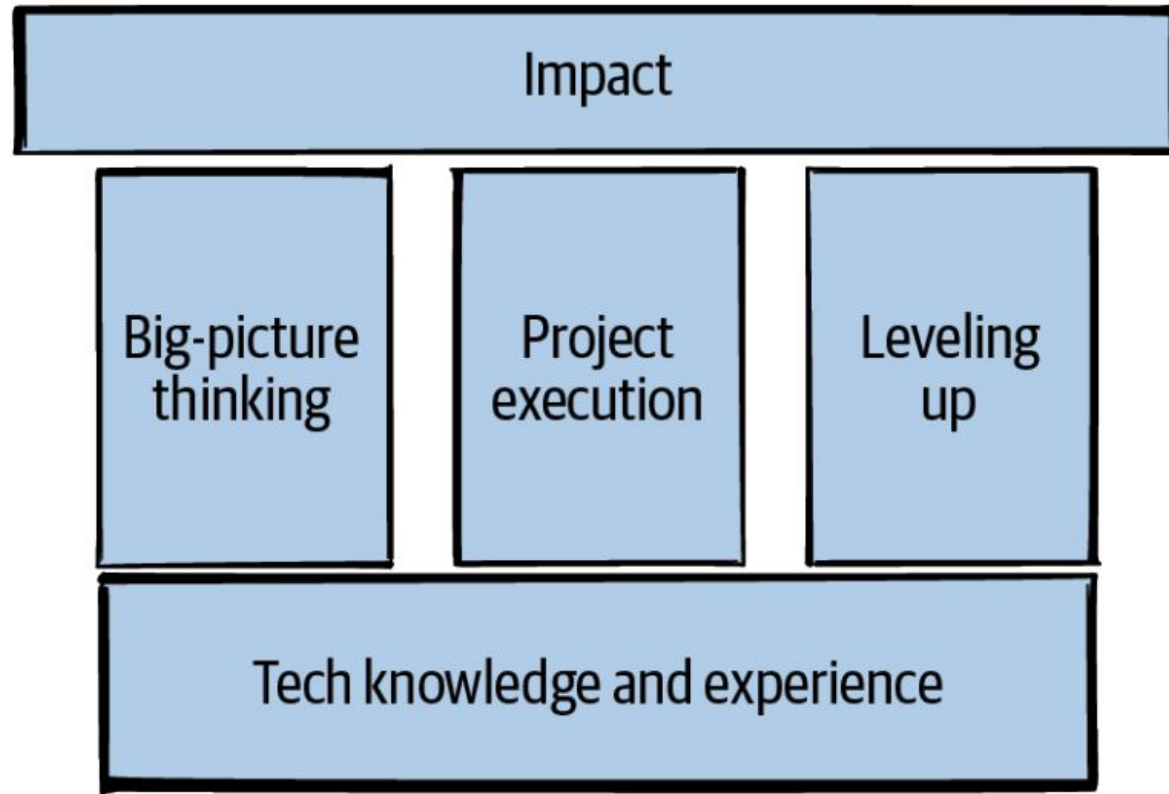
- Remove important problems from their plate

Never purely technical problems

Often involve the intersection of

- Business
- Technology
- People
- Culture
- Process





Pillar 1

Big Picture Thinking

Big Picture Thinking

Setting technical direction

Advocate & advance the company's technical strategy

Focused on long-term trends of progress

- Topics often span multiple quarters

Work towards a vision

- Build support for that
- Align everything and everyone
- Support until the goal is reached

Detect ambiguous, important problems

- Test different approaches
- Facilitate the decision process
- Pave the way for the teams
 - Documentation, Tooling, Meets



Big Picture Thinking

Providing eng. prospective

Sparring partners for management

- Often time-sensitive, unexpected, and/or important decisions
- Challenging to pull in the right people

Inject engineering context and perspective

- To change critical decisions

Highly impactful, great responsibility



Big Picture Thinking

Staying aligned with authority

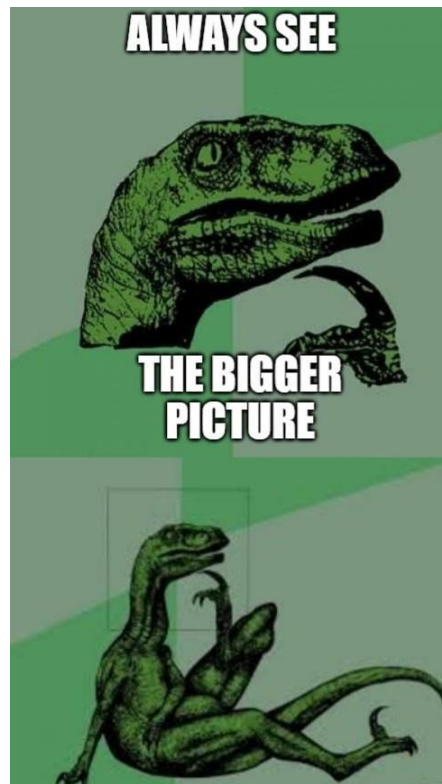
Organizational authority is loaned

Need to stay aligned with the organization and the business strategy to remain effective

Impact vectors all point in the same direction

Define the technical strategy together with

- CPO
- CTO
- VP of Engineering
- Directors of Engineering



Pillar 2

Project Execution

Project Execution

Leading Projects

Help coordinate and lead projects

- Find sponsors
- Motivate people
- Plan them in together with their PM

Plan, organize, facilitate a project

- Be its go-to-person

Partner with a Technical Program Manager

- They can help with the managerial side of things
- If part of a program, TPM will regularly check in to check the alignment



Excursion: Leading formats

Communities

Static groups, also called communities, are a bunch of engineers who are passionate about a part of our technical and/or engineering business.

General basic guidelines for communities are:

- Leadership duo
- **min. one Staff Engineer**
- other role could be an Engineering Lead or another Engineering role
- Clear and defined purpose via a charter
- Communities meet at least once during the sprint
- Focused on
- Mastery of the craft (guidance, advise, knowledge sharing, etc.)
- improve technical and engineering aspects at Staffbase

Project Groups

Temporary groups, also called Project groups, are a group of people working on a technical topic for a certain period of time to achieve a pre-defined goal.

General basic guidelines project groups are:

- Clear responsible leadership (single or duo)
- **A sponsoring Staff Eng** (who can ensure that the project work aligns with overall technical architecture/direction and can keep Staff Eng community apprised of work)
- Clearly defined goal/outcome for the next 3-6 months
- Group uses JIRA to structure and manage work packages
- Group members commit to a certain amount of capacity to support the reliable project achievement
- The group is focused on delivering specific tangible outcomes.

Project Execution

Being Glue

Strive to make teams as successful as possible

Do the needed -often invisible- tasks to keep the teams moving forward and shipping work

Work behind the scenes

- Expedite the most important work
- Ensure it gets finished
- Highly impactful



Project Execution

Drive Meetings

Listen through questions

- Ask with the desire to learn
- Specific. Sharpen the conversation
- Don't make others have to defend themselves

Define the purpose of the meeting

Read the room

Not just let everyone agree on own approach

- But helping the team decide on its own



Pillar 3

Leveling Up

Leveling Up Mentorship

Share experience and advice

Build ongoing relationships

Mentor & Mentee work together on problems

- Pairing directly in code
- Talking through and conceptualizing different solutions and approaches

Routinely consulted for growth talks

- Their feedback for the engineer
- Help Engineering Lead understand the engineer's work
- Provide resources & ideas to the engineer to grow further professionally



Leveling Up Sponsorship

Get to know the person

- Listen to their experiences
- Learn about their skills
- Understand their growth ambitions

Raise up their name to help them

- get to do visible, valuable work
- demonstrate their skills to a new audience

Vouch for them and their work

Feel on the hook to help them get promoted



<https://larahogan.me/blog/what-sponsorship-looks-like>

Leveling Up

Leading and following

Move in and out of leader/follower roles

Being open for feedback

Incorporate one's own worldview into the worldviews of those around

Following others means creating leaders



Time-boxed missions

Time-boxed Missions

Every Staff Engineer has one:

- Title
- Duration
- Overview
- Objective
- Scope of Work
- Reporting Line
- Success Criteria
- Challenges and Risks (potentially secret)

Alignment to technical strategy or other business priorities

Allows management to influence impact area

Shared with the organization for transparency

Helps tracking progress, success, impact



Dana Schwartz 
@DanaSchwartzzz



Tom Cruise has succeeded like 6 times in a row why do they still think these missions are impossible

Time-boxed missions

Quarterly check-ins

Looking back: Last Check-in

- Open actions, open aspects

Wins

- ADRs, PRs, OKRs
- Growth of individuals or teams

Decisions

- ADRs, who owned them, thoughts about it

Technical Debt

- What hinders us from moving
- Potential upcoming blockers

Mentoring & Sponsoring

- Who do you mentor (formal or informal)
- Any sponsoring running

Fearlessly Forward

- What do you want to share, take about, rant about

3

Wins 🏆

What are the biggest wins in the past weeks? It could be **ADRs**, **PRs**, could be **team achievements**, could be smashed **OKRs**, could be the growth of **individuals**, could be **everything**. **Let's celebrate!**

Win	Category	Description
Becoming a better interviewer	Growth -	Lots of interviews. The interview-tasks are a good to
It's becoming more political	Growth -	Political decisions everywhere. Nasty but interesting
Stream Leadership stuff working	Goal -	I can actually pinpoint my work in this regard now. Re Providing feedback about engineers. Reviewing/inter AI Cafe technical leadership part. All round being mo
"Pugin Studio Migration" Project Group	Goal -	Did some good progress even though only limited tim for Q3, stepping more into the leadership role myself.
Clients ADRs	Simplify to Accelerate -	Structure, Naming, bleeds into the rest of the org
Code Structure TED-Talk	Goal -	Held a talk about frontend code structure, feedback Have a date planned for a backend version of this.
Frontend Guidelines goin' round	Decision -	Frontend Guidelines are having an effect. My planned
Advisory Forum working good	Decision -	Generally working well, I got some valuable feedback also now go and split it up. I need to look for someone
Have my first real talk!	Growth -	At JUG Saxony

Decisions 🗳️

Taken decision? Upcoming decision? Who owned them? How and who have you helped to make a decision? What are your thoughts about it? Would you have decided the same?

We will fill out action items together if needed.

Please add links to ADRs and documents, ...

Change management

Change Management

The Art of the Tick Tock Doc

Draft the most important and straightforward version of what you need to share with your team.

For example:

- (The what) I need my team to know _____.
- (The why) This is happening right now because _____.
- (The who and how) This will impact _____.
- (The when) The timeline for this change is _____.

Craft your talking points per audience

Choose order, delivery medium and communicator

Ask for feedback

Take feedback, share with other communicators



CTO (get buy-in)

We'll migrate to Tailwind

- Flexibility: Easier to integrate (no React Context needed for theming)
- Performance: better for less powerful devices, dead code ignore
- Ease-of-use: Faster onboarding
- Faster migration of e.g. feature X
 - Engineers need to learn it
 - DS must support both for some time

Soft migration: DS by Team A in Q4, others only new features, scout rule

About the

Career ladder

Career ladder

Not just a promotion, diff. job

Senior is our career level

- Perfectly fine to stay here
- And continuously increase productivity, capability and output

Levels up to Seniors mostly visualize their growth in autonomy

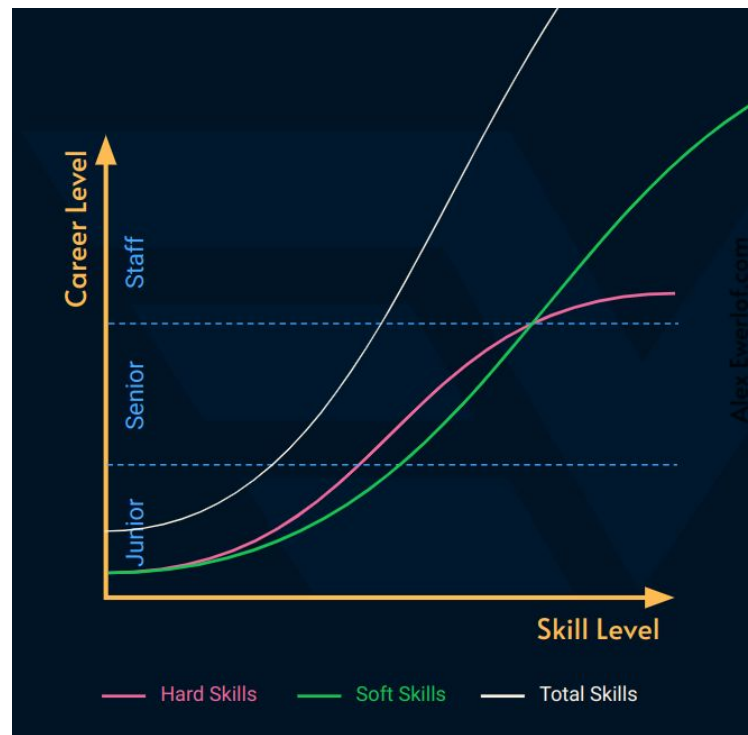
Levels above increase impact and responsibility beyond team boundaries

Very different work

- More coordination, communication, planning
- Less writing of code

Reduced team feeling

Requires more effort to stay connected



© Axel Ewerlöf

Career ladder

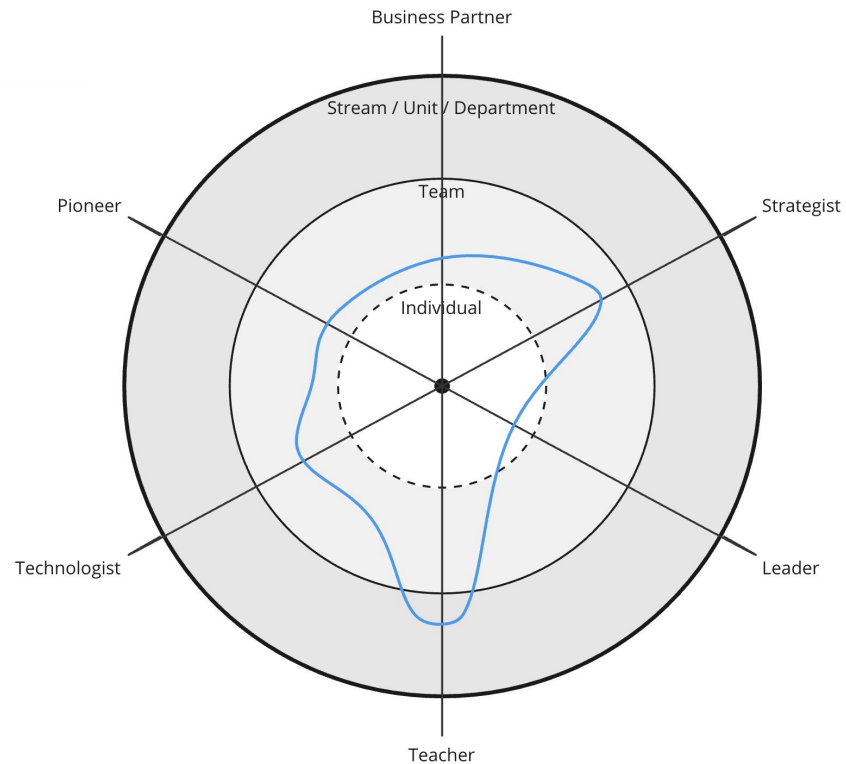
Impact radius

Associates are moved by the team

Regulars move with the team

Seniors move the team

Staffs move teams



Outcome

Consequences

Staff Engineers are present in management circles and have more impact now

Our largest frontend artifact is being rewritten now using the Strangler Fig pattern

Quite a few migrations are finished, giving customers a better product

Staff Engineers are consistently consulted

> The organization is more aligned

Thank You!



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