

Autonomy and Engagement

We've all heard about and likely talked about autonomy. But, what does it really mean? What are we actually talking about?

In a business context, autonomy typically describes the discretion that individuals or teams have to act and make decisions themselves. In a congruent, proportional, and rational system, that autonomy comes with ownership and the associated responsibility for the consequences of those actions and decisions. In business, autonomy is often thought of as connoting freedom and independence beyond just acting and making decisions, and extending into how time is allocated and spent, what resources are used, how work is done, and so on. It means discretion over many or most aspects of an individual's work and work life, based in the trust that they will behave professionally, honestly, and capably.

In a political sense, autonomy means self-governance, which I think is useful in the work context as well. Autonomous individuals and autonomous teams within a broader organization will manage themselves and their projects, at least to some extent. They will govern how they behave, how they interact, how they manage their time and resources, how they stay organized, how they communicate, and so on. We can see in practice that effective, autonomous individuals and teams are capable of managing the major social structures and responsibilities that arise in any group of people.

In a psychological sense, autonomy means both that a person is able to make decisions that align with their values and beliefs and that they are able to make decisions in a way that is free from coercion. I think that these two meanings have relevance in a professional context as well. For the first, I'm thinking of "values and beliefs" not in terms of moral and political beliefs, but in terms of what a person believes, based on their skill and experience, is correct and valuable. They not only have the discretion to act and decide, but to do so based at least in part on their particular evaluation and analysis of the situation. The second meaning is crucial for true autonomy. Decisions made under duress, without consent, or otherwise coerced, are not autonomous. In fact, they're not even really decisions.

In perhaps the broadest sense, autonomy indicates that a person has and feels a sense that they are in control of their lives. Realizing this requires fulfillment of all other meanings of autonomy; in order to have and experience control, individuals must have discretion free from coercion, they must be able to truly consent or dissent, they must have significant freedoms, they must take ownership and responsibility, they must enact control by self-governing, they must behave in accordance with their beliefs and values, and so on.

Autonomy is a basic human right and fundamental need that will invariably and inevitably find expression somehow, at some time, in some form. People and groups will do anything in order to retain or regain their autonomy, from outright opposition to subversion, from surreptitious disobedience to malicious compliance, from mutiny to self-destruction, from fighting to fleeing. At work, people will reclaim their autonomy through surrender. If their discretion is removed, then so too is their responsibility. "Just following orders" becomes a justifiable and necessary coping mechanism. Or, they'll endure the restrained conditions in pursuit of some larger goal: getting rich, getting experience that will benefit them later, or just getting through the work day so they can get home. Sooner or later, they'll vote with their feet and move on to something better, with those that are the most skilled, the most ambitious, and the most capable of effectively wielding autonomy making the move sooner rather than later. In all cases, depriving someone of their autonomy is ineffective, inhumane, and ultimately impossible.

Autonomy is fundamental and crucial, but it's not limitless. It doesn't provide a license to do whatever you want, to infringe on the rights and autonomy of others, or to act without consequences. Such an extreme interpretation of autonomy is just as bad - perhaps worse - as a complete deprivation of autonomy. In a professional context, autonomy's purpose is to provide the freedom and empowerment for individuals and teams to apply their experience and expertise in order to act in ways that they believe, *and can ultimately demonstrate*, are the most effective and beneficial for the constituents (which include themselves and their peers), while remaining within the established behavior and legal boundaries. If done properly and well, this also tends to increase job satisfaction and the quality of the working environment for everyone involved.

Autonomy also isn't a panacea or a magical salve. People aren't just "granted" autonomy and automatically become great. It's not pixy dust you can sprinkle on your organization to make everything better. Instead, autonomy is a resource to be used and a tool to be utilized. Like any other resource or tool, it can be directed toward benefit or toward detriment, it can be leveraged or it can be wasted. For autonomy to produce results, it must be employed by someone who can make good use of it, who is supported in doing so, and who is supported in developing their skills to do so.

Autonomy isn't a euphemism for neglect. A team (and the members of that team) acting autonomously should not be ignored by the team's leader and should also not expect just to be left alone by the leader to do what they want. As we'll discuss in more detail later, it's not just possible, but necessary, for a leader to both remain

involved and engaged while also allowing and expecting the team to work autonomously. I deeply dislike what feels like the persistent and prevalent notion that enabling a team to work autonomously requires the leader to disengage or disconnect, which is how the phrase "hire good people and give them room to do their jobs" is often incorrectly interpreted.

It's tempting to say that autonomy is a privilege that's earned. This implies the worldview that autonomy is not the default, that it can be achieved sometimes, but that it isn't exactly the natural order of things. I don't think that's right, but I do understand where it comes from. In fact, I think it results naturally from leadership itself. As leaders, and especially as owners, our job is to ensure certain things happen, to push toward success, to take charge, to guide, and so on. What more direct and obvious way to accomplish this than to simply be controlling, even when doing so reduces the autonomy of the team? Even in a high-autonomy environment, there's an awareness that not only can the leader take more control if needed, but that doing so is their responsibility if things are not going well without their intervention. It feels like there's an asymmetry built into autonomy; reducing it is quick and easy (at least in the short-term), while increasing it is slow and difficult. It feels that even if we want autonomy, natural forces and inclinations tend to push toward its reduction.

How can we reconcile the idea that autonomy is a fundamental right with the feeling that it's a privilege? How can I personally square the idea that autonomy is necessary but also unnatural in some ways? How can we hope to be successful if autonomy is supposedly so valuable, but forces are aligned against it? These are all real and valid tensions.

The first answer is that autonomy and responsibility are inexorably linked and derive their weight and meaning from each other. Responsibility is hollow without the autonomy necessary to truly own, influence, and fulfill it. Autonomy is wasted without the responsibility to which it can be applied. As a result, considering whether or not to "give" autonomy becomes irrelevant. If you want someone to take responsibility - which you absolutely must do in any functional, successful, and ideally thriving organization or project - then you have to grant the attendant autonomy. From this, we can see that the tensions described above are fundamental and inherent; you don't get the benefit of delegation and others taking responsibility without paying the cost of granting, enabling, and supporting autonomy. TODO: I think I wrote something similar about ownership and autonomy. That's actually good, but it's worth taking a look at what I wrote in ownership and see how it compares / overlaps / reconciles with what I have here.

The second answer is to flip the perspective by establishing autonomy as the default and realizing it's a necessity, not a privilege. In this context, the ability to successfully act autonomously at a level commensurate with a given person's experience, role, and scope becomes a requirement, and an inability to do so should be viewed as a performance issue. Similarly, an inability for a team to perform independently signals an issue with the team, its structure, its members, its incentives, etc that needs to be addressed. A habitual inability - especially after sufficient support has been provided - to employ and benefit from reasonable levels of independence can indicate that an individual is unsuited for a particular role, just as any lack of a necessary, core skill can indicate unsuitability. As a result of this change in expectations and assumptions, granting autonomy is no longer a temporary mistake that can be corrected by reasserting control over the team. Instead, taking control is the temporary and uncomfortable state that is hopefully never required, or is only rarely required as punctuation between long stretches of successful, autonomous operation. There should be no long struggle to increase autonomy and a quick descent back to control, because autonomy is the starting point and the steady state that's reverted to by default. The "happy" path should follow independence and the unnatural path should be control.

The final answer is that the difficulty releases the value. By striving for autonomous operation, rather than just regressing to the familiar, the easy, the crude tools of control, we unlock significant benefit and leverage not otherwise available or possible. Autonomy requires effort from everyone involved, but it's the only path by which to reach higher levels of scope, achievement, and productivity. Not all difficult things are valuable, but many valuable things are difficult. I certainly think that's the case with autonomy.

Because we're discussing leadership, it's natural to consider autonomy (and associated behaviors like ownership, responsibility, and delegation) primarily from the perspective of how you, the leader, manage it *within* your organization, among the team members. That is, the focus is on how you can help the people in your team to better understand and employ autonomy in *their* work. While that view makes sense and is appropriate, let's not forget about *your* autonomy, your relationship with your own professional autonomy, and the dynamics between you and your manager regarding autonomy. As we proceed, keep yourself, your team, and your manager in mind. See how the things we discuss can apply to you as well as to your team.

Here are some questions worth considering: TODO: This could be transformed into a questionnaire. How much autonomy do you have and how much would you like? Are you satisfied with your current level of autonomy? Or, do you yearn for more freedom and responsibility? How do you handle autonomy? Are you fundamentally uncomfortable when required to operate autonomously, or does it free you to perform more efficiently and effectively? What are your manager's views on autonomy vs control (if any) and how do those views manifest (or not) in their behavior, especially in terms of how they manage you? How does autonomy propagate through

your group, from you to the leaders in your team and from the leaders in your team to the people who report to them and so on, all the way down to the ICs? How does autonomy propagate throughout the broader company, from the CEO and other top-level executives down to your manager and from your manager to you?

Autonomy exists on a spectrum, with total, authoritarian control at one end and total libertarian lack of control at the other. While the deprivation of autonomy associated with the leader taking total control is deeply problematic, the passivity resulting from the leader taking no control is often just as bad. This is the "nod and smile" approach to leadership, in which the leader is vaguely positive about everything, stays hands off in order to "avoid stepping on any toes", and endlessly trusts or "has faith" in the people who report to them and in the team at large. Such leaders generally rely on some vague notion about setting the context and letting good things happen, but will often do very little to actually shape that context. Although it's clear that we want to avoid either extreme end of the autonomy spectrum, where exactly we land in between is far from clear and warrants further discussion, which we'll take on a bit later.

Along with the spectrum of autonomy, there is closely associated a second factor with its own spectrum: engagement.

Engagement is a state of mind and a set of actions. Do you give a shit or not? Are you interested, concerned, and available? Do you know about the project or team, its current status, its intentions and directions, and so on? This isn't about getting a status update once a week, but about staying up-to-speed as a natural result of *engaging* with the team regularly on important issues.

Engagement is about being genuinely involved with the team and their work in beneficial and supportive ways. Are you unobtrusively checking on the quality of the work being done, probing to ensure that the team is proceeding capably, and offering suggestions, guidance, support, and feedback as needed? Are you aware of the good, often thankless, sometimes valiant, frequently subtle, occasionally hidden work that the team is doing? Are you doing things that the team needs and which you are uniquely capable of providing, give your position, experience, scope, and so on? Think of it this way: does the team view you as a member or just an observer (or worse, an overseer)?

Combining the autonomy spectrum and the engagement spectrum produces a 2D space. At any given time, the leader will occupy some point in this space for each team and project, determined by their attitude and actions.

```
Arbitrary
*-----* Absent
|      ||\ Abstracted
|      ||
|      ||/ Engaged: invested / interested / involved / informed
*-----* Annoying
Autocratic
<- Control / prescription - autonomy ->
```

Edges: * Disengaged / uninvolved / clueless at the top. * Overwhelmed / overbearing on the bottom. * Commanding / imperious on the left. * Passive / feckless on the right.

TODO * Draw the extreme zones along all of the edges and corners. Maybe they extend 10-20% into the space on either side. I'm thinking 15% is pretty good, but see how that coordinates with the other zones. I could use rounded interior corners to show that we really want to avoid the intersection of two extremes. * Draw the engaged autonomy zone. The zone will surround a center line. I'm not sure if I'll draw it. I'm leaning toward drawing it, even though I haven't discussed or referred to the line itself in the text. It will run from like (70% control, 70% engaged) to (20% control, 30% engaged)? How about (60% control, 70% engaged) to (30% control, 40% engaged)? I think there should be some kind of asymmetry in it, where you always have more engagement than control. Maybe there's some asymmetry where you can also get to much higher levels of autonomy than control? The zone should extend around the line by maybe 5-10% in either direction. You don't want the engaged autonomy zone to overlap with any of the extreme zones. When I actually draw it out, I can play with the shape a bit and see what it reveals about the associated behavior. The axes of the space should be oriented so that engaged autonomy goes "up and to the right" as you increase autonomy and decrease engagement, because we want to imply that that's the path toward improvement. * Shade everything outside the extremes and engaged autonomy zone as the "opinionated" zone. I actually need to figure out what this looks like. Previously, I had the engaged autonomy zone extending to the edges of the extreme zones. In that case, all that's left for opinionated is really just "imbalanced". I don't think that's right. Like, what's the point of identifying this special, ideal target zone with engaged autonomy, if it's going to cover a huge range of acceptable behavior? I think the opinionated zone should completely surround the engaged autonomy zone. * Review and ensure correctness for all references to the diagram made in the text (in terms of labels, locations, etc).

What's the best position to occupy within this space? Well, it depends. The key, the art, and the challenge is in finding the appropriate balance for different people, situations, and projects, and to alter that balance over time as needed.

As a start, let's say what we *don't* want: any of the extremes, each of which involves detrimentally-imbalanced behavior and each of which signals an underlying dysfunction in the leader, in the team, in the project, or in the environment. These extremes are represented visually in the diagram by the edges, corners, and closely adjacent regions.

In all cases, these extreme tactics indicate a problem that the leader needs to address. Regardless of whether the issue originates from some dysfunction with the team, environment, or the leader themselves, responsibility ultimately rests with the leader to oversee the development and implementation of a solution.

To understand why each extreme alludes to an underlying problem, let's look at the reasons that leaders employ these behaviors.

First, they may be responding to conditions, adverse or advantageous by either becoming overbearing or disengaged, autocratic or absent. *Shit is hitting the fan* and they become an insufferable hardass. Or, they flee and are suddenly nowhere to be found, just when they're needed most. Things are going great and they take it easy and ride the wave of success without doing any of the work. Or, they suddenly become excessively and uncharacteristically interested in the project, now that it's getting results and attention.

If the leader's extreme tactics are necessary and warranted, then the dysfunction is with the team, resulting from some structural or systemic deficiency in its capabilities or dynamics, which has caused it to be entirely incapable of managing the situation and reliant on a leadership intervention. If the extreme response from the leader *is not* necessary or warranted, then the dysfunction is with the leader, for perversely overreacting.

Second, some leaders go to extremes as a result of their temperamental attraction to such behavior, stemming from insecurity, ego, the delusion that it provides them an "edge", or whatever other reason. In this case, the dysfunction is within the leader, who chooses to inflict their extreme behavior on the team for their own selfish reasons. They don't consider themselves the smartest, so they compensate by being the hardest working, which they express through excessive involvement and habitual presence. They think they're the greatest and have had some luck in their lives, so they implicitly believe that good things come to them a priori, without the grinding work others engage in. They live in constant fear of losing their position, so they manage their anxiety by inflicting it recursively on their team, creating an environment of fear and anxiety. They don't really care about the project and don't feel a sense of ownership for it or the team working on it - despite it falling within their organization - so they ignore it.

To see why imbalanced behavior is problematic, let's look at each extreme in turn.

If you're disengaged, uninvolved, uninterested, and uninformed about a project or team, then you've ceased to be a leader and effectively ceased to even be part of the team. In that case, the team doesn't need you and in fact would probably be better off without you filling up the slot for a leader, taking credit, but not actually doing any leading. This extreme is represented by the "disengaged / uninvolved / clueless" border of the diagram.

If you're completely engaged, heavily involved, and in every detail of a particular project or team, then you've ceased to be a leader and instead become an individual contributor. While you may be deeply enthusiastic and passionate, the extent of your involvement will prove overwhelming and unsustainable for both you and the team. People in your organization will characterize you as overbearing, due to the pervasiveness of your involvement, *even* in cases where you grant high degrees of autonomy. This extreme is represented by the "overwhelmed / overbearing" border of the diagram.

If you're completely controlling a project, telling the team what to do and how to do it, then what are you gaining from them? Why do you need them? Just for their labor, for their ability to do "grunt work", divorced from the discretion and creative thought possibly only with some level of autonomy? If a given task is truly rote, then it shouldn't require your active management and leadership in the first place. Standardize it, automate it, and/or outsource it! If the task isn't rote, then the team needs autonomy to exercise their discretion and creativity. The more you limit that autonomy, the more detriment you are causing to everyone by preventing people from doing their jobs using their full range of skills and capabilities. This extreme is represented by the "commanding / imperious" border of the diagram.

If you're giving complete autonomy and exerting no control or influence on a project, then what is the team gaining from *you*? At best, you're an observer, a passenger along for the ride. At worst, you give the false impression of being a leader, of being "in charge" to some extent or in some capacity, while never actually taking that charge. Passive leaders of this sort fundamentally lack ownership because they are insufficiently active to influence the work and insufficiently confident to create a true environment of ownership, accountability, and achievement. In fact, I think it's incorrect to even characterize habitually passive leaders as leaders. You have to be offering something to all of your teams and team members, even those who operate with a high degree of autonomy. This doesn't mean that you need to involve yourself in your business just to look like you're useful and necessary, but instead to find some genuine way to help or support them, to facilitate their work from your level, to queue up opportunities for them, and so on. This extreme is represented by the "passive / feckless"

border of the diagram.

Each of the corners in the diagram represents an interesting, albeit frightening, intersection of *two* extremes. I've assigned an epithet to each, describing the kind of leader that manages to attain one of these doubly-problematic positions.

- Autocratic: They're completely, suffocatingly involved and completely, dominantly in charge. It's their world and if you happen to get trapped in it, you belong to them.
- Annoying: They're totally involved, totally locked in, and totally unable or unwilling to offer any concrete opinions, to make tough calls, to say anything controversial, or in any way do their actual job of leading.
- Arbitrary: They don't know what's going on, they can't be bothered to stay up-to-date, but they won't let that stop them from telling everyone exactly what to do, at least when they're paying attention. This is the "dive bomber boss", who you mostly don't see, except when they drop in just to boss you around for a bit.
- Absent: They're just not there. They don't know what's going on, they don't exert influence or control, they don't add anything, but they also thankfully don't detract. They're just not a concern. Each team member is left to fend for themselves, which can be positive or problematic, depending on the individual. Of all of the corners, this is probably the most preferred, especially for the competent and ambitious team members, who can use the full autonomy and full time to successfully run their own show.

We can also say that we *don't* want micromanagement.

Micromanagement involves being excessively involved in the details and prescribing specific, detailed actions and approaches, rather than describing purpose, goals, desired outcomes, motivations, and so on. It's about dictating how to do things, rather than suggesting what is to be done, or, even better, explaining why certain end goals and results are important. The most discussed problem with micromanagement is that it violates the autonomy and independence of individuals and teams. It tends to destroy any sense of ownership that was felt because it removes control entirely or sporadically. It's frustrating and disheartening. Less discussed is the reality that essentially all micromanagement is *selective micromanagement* and *incomplete micromanagement*. There's just too much going on, too much work, and too many decisions, for a top-level leader to be involved in all of it, in detail, all the time. As a result, the experience of any individual or team is that, most of the time, the leader "leaves them alone" and then sometimes the leader is totally, overwhelmingly involved. Often, being left alone by a micromanager means being ignored, rather than being given appropriate and supportive levels of freedom. It's all or nothing, either they care tremendously about what you're doing wrong or they don't care much at all. This too is frustrating and disheartening.

In addition to these "emotional" problems, micromanagement also has technical problems that reveal structural dysfunction within organizations that employ it widely. If we look at the motivations for micromanagement, we see that they're all unhealthy and indicative of some underlying problem that should itself be solved. Relying on the "bosses" to take charge when things get tough, or to motivate people by "force", or to regularly do work that the team should be able to handle on their own, is never a good strategy and it indicates a lack of efficacy, motivation, and/or capability within the ranks of that organization. What happens when the higher-level leaders are inevitably unable to consistently manage everything happening in every part of the organization? Then, the incapable teams will be left to flounder ineffectively until the next leadership intervention. If micromanagement *isn't* required for success, and leaders are therefore employing it unnecessarily, then that indicates an egotism among the leaders, a distrust for the team, or some other deeply problematic relationship between the top-level leaders and everyone who reports to them. In all cases, micromanagement within organizations indicates some incongruence or inconsistency, between what people think their job is and what it actually is, between what people want to do and what they're allowed to do, or between what the organization needs and what the leaders provide.

There is a way in which micromanagement can be made congruent and consistent: by developing a top-down, command-oriented organization, in which every decision is made at the top by autocratic leaders and all employees act helplessly and subserviently, either as a reflection of their inherent worldview or as a coping mechanism developed to survive within an organization that won't allow anything else. While this may be rational in some sense, and while it may be the kind of organization that certain obedient people seek out and thrive in, it will certainly be inefficient and runs a high risk of being ineffective. Such an organization is the anti-gestalt, runs counter to the Jobs quote above, and is subject to overbearing key-man risk. It can work, but rarely does, and can last, but rarely does. Ultimately, it embodies a dark vision of work and the world that should be avoided at all costs. Thankfully, it can be avoided with little cost, and pays out handsome dividends in return.

Where does micromanagement reside in the space? Surprisingly, it's all over! Specifically, it's in all of the extreme regions (the edges and corners) that we just discussed. To understand this, let's take the non-obvious approach of considering a leader's scope, which describes the breadth of their responsibilities, including the number of projects, components, people, teams, etc that are within their purview.

A micromanager who maintains consistent, autocratic control must constrain their scope to only those areas they have the time and energy to control directly. This necessarily limits their influence and impact within the

broader organization and to some extent limits the damage they can do.

If the micromanager's scope ever exceeds the threshold of what they can fully and directly monitor and control, their micromanagement will unavoidably move out of the "autocratic" corner and become both selective and incomplete. At times, they won't be able to keep up with all the details, but will still want to make all the decisions, in which case they will move along the high-control edge, sliding toward the "arbitrary" corner. At other times, they'll have to completely disengage from a particular team, project, issue, or aspect in order to focus their excessive attention on something else, in which case they'll jump to the "absent" corner. Finally, there will be times at which they are confronted with a large-scale project of sufficiently broad scope that, in spite of their high level of engagement, they realize they will never be able to fully understand and control it. The fear of having to make decisions without total information - and the potential, attendant consequences - will outweigh their desire to be in control. In response, they'll avoid making decisions at all, thereby sliding along the high-engagement edge toward the "annoying" corner.

Not every micromanager will exhibit every extreme behavior, and not every leader who behaves in these extreme ways is a micromanager, but every micromanager *may* go to any of these extremes, and when they do so, it will be a result of the same underlying motivations and characteristics that induce them to micromanage in the first place.

Micromanagement and so many of the other malignant or neglectful management styles are fundamentally dysfunctional because they lack an appropriate mix, or really any mix at all, of autonomy and engagement. They are fundamentally mispositioned because they involve the leader operating at a level of abstraction that is not commensurate with their role, either by being overwhelmingly involved (and thereby rejecting abstraction) or by being neglectful (and thereby embracing abstraction to the point of ignorance).

Striking approximately the right balance of autonomy and engagement, finding approximately the right level of abstraction, and making tradeoffs to do so is a way of life for leaders. Their success is determined in large part by how capably they are able to achieve those goals. But, going to one extreme or another is a rejection of balance and abstraction, and a rejection of everything that doesn't align with the extreme behavior. There are costs and consequences to doing too much or too little as a leader, and to operating too far outside of your level. You have an important, impactful, and difficult job to do as a leader. Do it, rather than trying to do some other job or someone else's job.

While avoiding the worst is good, striving for the best is better. Now that we know what we *don't* want, we can look at what we *do* want.

Eliminating the extremes leaves us with a variety of more mixed and versatile approaches. In the diagram, this is represented as the central region composed of two parts: the "opinionated" zone and the "engaged autonomy" zone. Once again, we can ask the question: what's the best position to occupy within *this* space? And, once again, we'll get the same answer: it depends - based on the people, situation, and project - and will vary over time.

Opinionated leadership can be beneficial and even necessary. In fact, intentionally employing a willful approach can be highly effective at times, while muddled, thesisless approaches can get stuck in the "mediocre middle". However, I don't believe it is ever desirable to reside permanently in an opinionated approach. You may visit or vacation in the "opinionated" zone, you may even be detained there for a time, but you should never plan to get residency or citizenship. Even in heavily hierarchical or top-down companies, you want the members of your team, whether individual contributors, leaders, and/or managers themselves, to autonomously carry out the tasks they've been assigned. Even in high-autonomy environments, you need to be engaged and informed as a leader. And so on.

In my view, the *ideal*, what you ultimately want, whenever possible, is to be deep in the engaged autonomy zone by providing high levels of autonomy while remaining engaged. For me, that's a fundamental goal, invariant, and definitional quality of good leadership. Having said that, neither targeting engaged autonomy nor avoiding extremes precludes you from having an opinionated leadership style (residing in the "opinionated" zone), at least at times, in which you heavily (but not exclusively) emphasize some facet(s) of leadership. In all cases, the key is to choose and develop your style purposefully and adjust it in response to real-world conditions and real feedback about its efficacy and effect on the team and on individuals.

Employing high levels of autonomy within an organization is not easy or simple for anyone involved. Leading a team in which you allow and in fact require that the team members typically act autonomously is not easy. Being expected as an IC to typically act autonomously is not easy. Many people find it easier to simply do what they're told. There's doubt and uncertainty built into having to make one's own decisions. There's risk built into having to make any decision, and more risk the higher the value of the decision and the less certain the outcome.

So, why value autonomy? Wouldn't it be simpler not to? We fight that fight because we have to. We have to because autonomy is a basic human right that will inexorably seek, and invariably find, expression. We have to

because there's not enough time to control and know everything. We have to because it's the only true path to growth - both personal and professional, and in terms of size, scope, and impact - for ourselves and our teams. We have to because it's the right thing to do, for work and for the world. Our only option is how that autonomy is directed, either in a controlled way toward beneficial purposes or in a repressed, explosive way toward detrimental ends. TODO: I think I like this paragraph. But, is it too heavy handed? Some of the claims I make (especially toward the end) are unsupported.

You want *engaged autonomy* simply because it's the best for you, for the team, and for the constituents. My thesis is that striking a mix of engagement and autonomy that lands you in the engaged autonomy zone is the most effective, most beneficial, and most sustainable way to lead something. Staying within this zone ensures a harmonious and sustainable balance between the extent of the control you exert and the depth of your engagement. If it is necessary to increase your control, so too should your engagement. As the team operates more autonomously, your involvement can and should reduce.

Engaged autonomy allows you as a leader to add value to the teams and projects, stay informed and invested, keep things on track, have professional and supportive relationships with the team members, attract more capable and independent employees, and still have time to focus on growth and development of the group at your level, including teeing up the next round of projects, opportunities, and growth. Engaged autonomy allows the team the freedom and time to do what they're skilled at in a respectful and enjoyable environment, to be supported but not suffocated, and to grow and advance themselves and the project.

Consistently sliding toward higher degrees of autonomy creates an environment of ownership and leadership for the entire team. If the fundamental character of the place, the natural force field underlying everything, is directed toward autonomy, then leadership and ownership opportunities will arise naturally and unavoidably. Think of every move, every minor shift, toward autonomy as creating a small power vacuum or gap in ownership that opens up for someone on the team to fill. By explicitly relinquishing control (whether you were actually in control or just assumed, by default, to be) you not just leave room, but establish the requirement, for someone else to take that control and the associated responsibility. In doing so, they are fundamentally opting into and buying into leadership, even if they accept the role subconsciously or grudgingly (within reason).

Every time someone, whether a leader or an IC, accepts responsibility and operates autonomously, they create a "little laboratory", a little startup, a little world in which they and their team can experiment, learn, and accomplish. In this environment, setbacks, uncertainty, and moderate levels of inefficiency are not only acceptable, but inevitable factors on the journey of growth, creativity, and success. Taking the kid gloves off, allowing people to make mistakes, putting away the shit umbrella, and exposing them to both the realities and potential of the broader environment are necessary for growth and deep satisfaction. As the scope of their work, the breadth of their leadership, and the depth of their impact grows, so too do the members of the team and the world in which they operate. TODO: A drawing of a little laboratory or even a little world like the little prince? TODO: For the prior paragraph and the next: it's a little heavy on the rule-of-three lists. I think it's pretty good, but take a look back and see if I can revise the form a bit.

If the leader tells everyone what to do and how to do it, then at best, they'll get exactly what they asked for, and at worst, they'll get far less. In this way, the potential of the team is bounded by the leader's skill and creativity. Often, the reality falls far short, because the leader's not as clever as they imagine, because the directions are not as clear as intended, and because the team is understandably not as motivated as desired. If, on the other hand, the leader allows people and teams reasonable levels of freedom, along with support and backstops, the potential results are essentially boundless, limited only by the collective skills, creativity, and enthusiasm of the team. Yes, the path may be rockier, but the potential is far greater, both in terms of the results and the growth of the team members.

At any given time, a leader has a simple - but not easy - two-part job: appropriately manage the current state of things while simultaneously guiding the team toward the desired position. This is true in general and certainly true for autonomy and engagement. Use your best judgement to strike the right mix in order to tactically manage the current situation, whether that's an emergency, business as usual, or somewhere in between. This may cause you to move or even jump from position-to-position within the space. This may require that you take an opinionated approach in the opinionated zone. Not only is doing so OK, but it's necessary and beneficial, as long as the mix you employ is approximately correct and as long as that mix evolves based on feedback from the team and your evaluation of changing conditions. Simultaneously, you need to be constantly moving strategically toward your desired position, toward a more stable equilibrium of engaged autonomy. Beyond just managing the situation at hand, and beyond just preventing a particular situation from arising again, you want to fix the system that created the situation and was unable to effectively manage it without your intervention. You want to be intentionally and consistently helping the team to develop and mature, to guide it toward greater capability and skill.

What does this look like in practice? Of course, manage the current reality. Keep the wheels of the team and the projects turning in the face of whatever challenges and opportunities are present. Beyond that, keep moving incrementally toward engaged autonomy. Let the team know that you are doing this, help them understand the

associated responsibilities that will fall on them, and ensure there is a sufficient level of understanding and buy-in. At each step, evaluate how the team has performed with the new mix. If they have done well, keep going, and if not, step back, determine what they need in order to move forward, and then provide that support. Operate on a sliding scale of engagement, support, oversight, control, and whatever else is needed, based on the feedback and results, in order to make progress. Periodically and pragmatically evaluate the actual situation within a team or project in order to determine what needs to be done next and if the overall program is working. Stay engaged and informed through regular informational updates from the team, probing for information and evidence in selected areas, cross-referencing information from various team members and external sources, and applying your own analysis in area where you have sufficient expertise to do so. Expect the team to increasingly handle things they can and should be able to handle, and to come to you when they truly need help, including raising potential issues early. At all times, provide what you can uniquely contribute to the advancement of the team from your position and based in your experience and skill. Seek at all times to have others handle things they are better suited or positioned to handle. Seek to delegate as much as you reasonably can, and to grow the extent of that delegation over time.

Delegation and Participation

Leadership requires delegation. This is the case whether or not you admit it, support it, influence it, or benefit from it. The reason is simple and fundamental: in any effort or activity that is large or complex enough to require a team of people and someone to lead that team, there will necessarily be too much work, too many details, and too many decisions for a single individual (the leader). As a result, the team members will necessarily have to take on work themselves, make decisions (big or small) on their own, take on leadership roles (big or small), and recursively delegate to their team's members. As a leader, you don't have a choice about this. What you can choose is how you manage and benefit from it.

It's common to think of delegation as simply concerning task assignment. There are a bunch of things to do, so let's divvy them up and deal them out like playing cards. Leaders (and especially leaders who are overworked) are often told to delegate more - rather than take the work on themselves - which further cements the notion that delegation is just about pushing out work to others. There's some truth to this, but I think it misses a lot. I view delegation as opportunity creation and as autonomy, ownership, and responsibility creation. It's amazing that something as deceptively simple as "giving out work" can carry with it so many profound things.

The main thing we do at work is of course work. Work is the raw material of our professional lives. Therefore, it's the primary substance through which all of the higher-level structures and concepts are conveyed, constructed, and realized. As a result, when you're delegating, you're creating the contexts, the situations, and the opportunities in which people and teams will build, explore, grow, serve the constituents, develop their careers, employ their autonomy, fulfill their responsibilities, exercise their ownership, and carry out all of the other aspects of their professional lives. I think that's important enough that it deserves more thought and more intention than just casually lobbing out tasks to the crowd.

Delegation is every leader's most fundamental tool for growth and leverage. It's not the only way, but it is the most foundational way, to expand the scope and volume of what you and your teams can accomplish. If there's too much to do, just get more people and get them to do it, right? If you want to take on more, just get more people and get them to do it, right? If only it were that easy! Putting aside real-world complexities for a minute, this simple characterization does reveal a couple of important things about delegation.

The first is that delegation involves a transfer. While it's always the case that work is being transferred, there's actually something more profound happening as well, even in the simplest and crudest forms of delegation. Along with that work, no matter how simple or rote, comes responsibility. So, responsibility is being transferred. In delegating the work, the manager is relinquishing some of their control. This is true in a reduced way even in command-oriented or micromanaged environments. So, control is being transferred. In taking on that work, the employee is necessarily accepting it and taking ownership for it in some way, at some level. So, ownership is being transferred.

In more sophisticated and substantial forms of delegation, the person to which the work is being transferred is also being asked to, granted the right to, and agreeing to act as an delegate, as a representative, as an agent with agency and autonomy. They're not just taking on a particular workload, but also taking ownership and responsibility for the cognitive load, the decision making, the appropriate application of wisdom, creativity, and pragmatism, and many other things. At the same time, others are proportionally ceding those rights and responsibilities within that specific area of work, in order to transfer them to the delegate. They benefit by having less work, but they have to give up and let go of control in exchange. The delegate makes a reciprocal trade: they have to do more work, but they gain autonomy and stature in the process. Participating in this exchange requires courage on the part of everyone involved.

The second is the association between delegation, team size, and hiring. At the most basic and obvious level, delegation requires people to delegate to, so it's necessary to have a team of some minimum size. While it may be possible to delegate more and more effectively to the existing team, there's a limit to this. Quickly the

... possible to delegate more, and more effectively, to the existing team, there is a limit to what capacity, and team's members will become genuinely, fully loaded (if they weren't already) and attempting to assign them more work would be unfair, inhumane, and counterproductive. At that point, it becomes necessary to grow the team, through internal reassignment, external recruiting, etc. As we said above, just get more people and give them work, right?

From this progression, we can see the various ways in which delegation promotes, enacts, and is necessary for growth, in its various senses. Delegation allows for growth in the team's capacity by ensuring each team member has the full volume of work, ownership, and other responsibilities that they can handle. Delegation can remove leaders as bottlenecks by moving work, decision making, and other efforts out to team members. It requires growth in the team's size, as discussed. Finally, delegation enables growth in the careers and capabilities of all team members.

Highly functional organizations are structured around delegation. Some organizations, including the ones where the leader deals out tasks, simply *use* delegation. But what happens if we take it as a first-class priority and defining principle for how we build and operate our organization? What if the policy is "delegation-first" or "delegation by default"?

As with any policy or approach, this can go wrong if implemented in an incorrect or imbalanced way. If leaders take "delegation-first" to mean "delegation-only" and believe as a result that they don't need to do any real work themselves, then that's clearly problematic. If they assign blame and fault to others as readily as they delegate, then the result will be a toxic and fearful environment that lacks true accountability and introspection. If they think delegating means being hands off or handling the team with kid gloves, rather than staying appropriately and responsively engaged, then the team will be unsupported and the risk of failure uncontained. The idea that leaders need simply to "educate and delegate" - by setting the context and then kicking the team members out of the nest to see if they can fly - doesn't work on its own. You need to *participate* as well.

On the other hand, a delegation-first policy has a lot of benefits if implemented well. Pursuing this single principle has the potential to strategically and tactically guide the leader's planning, motivate their work, inform decisions, and focus their efforts. By continuously seeking to increase delegation within the team, the leader will unavoidably employ delegation as a tool for leverage and growth, as a machine for the creation of autonomy and opportunity, and as a vehicle for imparting ownership, and so on.

In concrete terms, a leader might pursue a delegation-first strategy by asking themselves the following questions (or similar) and implementing the best answers they can develop for their particular situation and circumstances. Does the team currently have enough work, along with the attendant opportunity, autonomy, and responsibility? If not, then the leader needs not just to secure more work, but to secure more areas of responsibility and impact, which serve as contexts in which the team and team members can grow. Does the team have too much work, with each member genuinely loaded to the maximum reasonable, sustainable level? Then the leader needs to lead growth in the headcount of the team. Is the leader currently acting as a bottleneck or "ownership hog" in any areas? If so, the ownership of those areas needs to be supportively delegated to team members. Are there processes, procedures, and/or practices anywhere within the team that could be automated or standardized? If there are any - and there almost always are - then a team member should be tasked with developing the standardization and automation so that eventually no one has to expend significant effort on this recurring task. Currently, what things is the leader uniquely capable of, or positioned to handle, that are inappropriate or impossible to delegate? The leader should continue to own those key tasks while working toward a future in which the entire team is elevated and it is possible to hand those tasks off to upcoming leaders.

What if we go even further with this approach? What if we move away altogether from the idea of assigning work and into a world where people take on things naturally because it's in their area of ownership, it's in their wheelhouse, they're eager to take on new opportunities, they're an engaged part of the team doing their part, and/or because it's important work that's not otherwise being handled? What if delegation is simply woven into the fabric of the organization, an unquestionable property taken for granted? What we discover is that taking delegation to this extreme largely eliminates delegation as a distinct notion or activity. Once the benefits and effects of delegation - including ownership, autonomy, responsibility, etc - take hold, the distribution of work flows naturally out of them, rather than from the leader.

In its final form, delegation gives way to *participation*. Just as leaders need to participate (and educate and delegate), so too every team member needs to participate in the full world of the team. This doesn't mean that everyone needs to be involved in everything all the time, which would of course be overwhelming and inefficient. Instead, it means that essentially everything is *available* to everyone and that there's an expectation that each team member will do their part by choosing the areas in which they want to be involved. Ideally, this involvement comes from self-interest and self-motivation, but a healthy dose of social pressure and expectations can play an important role as well.

Rather than being passive receivers of work or accumulators of burden, team members should actively seek out the best and highest potential work they can do. They should accept their agency and autonomy and employ it for their benefit and the benefit of the team. This can, and ideally should, extend to the creation of opportunity

and the growth of the team. Every team member should be on the lookout for new ideas and projects. They should be taking advantage of their unique position working in the details of specific efforts to creatively devise new solutions, new projects, and even new products. And they should feel empowered and responsible to suggest these ideas to the team, promote them, and even pursue them as appropriate. Similarly, every team member should identify when there's too much work to do and should advocate for growth in the team and assist in recruiting efforts.

An environment in which there are high levels of participation produces yet another benefit: it serves as a leadership training academy and proving ground. Rather than ICs acting only as task rabbits or worker bees, each has the opportunity to learn about, see, and participate in the various kinds of leadership necessary to run teams, build products, make money, and get things done. Those who have (or develop) interest and skills in the work of leadership will self-select and self-identify themselves as leaders. Those who do not can continue to focus on developing their skills and efficacy in their core area of expertise, while still gaining exposure to the broader context in which they and their work reside.

Introduction

Writers are frequently advised to be honest, to seek truth, and to convey that truth to their readers. Hearing this guidance many times in the early stages of writing this book, I thought, "Yes, yes, of course I'll be honest. I'm not going to *lie*." It seemed so obvious. And not just that, but also, "Yes, I do intend and hope to expose some deeper truth, something meaningful, significant, and ideally novel." Isn't that what we all want?

Then, I started thinking about my audience. Who are they? Potential future employers and employees? My peers? Former colleagues? Past acquaintances and schoolmates? My family? The general public? What would they like to hear? What will they think of me based on the things I write? If I express my true optimism and aspirations, will anyone believe I'm being genuine, or dismiss what I say as toxic positivity? Even though I'm not saying anything crazy, could someone take offense? Am I sufficiently aligned with the current trends in business, politics, and society, as they sway whimsically this way and that? How can I present myself in the best light, as seasoned but not cynical, as versatile yet deep, as fun and serious? Will my writing style be viewed as pretentious or convoluted? If I keep it casual and conversational, will it be viewed as simplistic? Are my approaches and explanations too technical to be generally accessible? What can I say that will be broadly appealing but also worthwhile? And on and on. Every thought I had, everything I wanted to express, and everything I wrote was haunted by these questions and by the uncertainty and insecurity that underlay them.

At first, I unwittingly relied on my internal manager to cope, allowing him to run free and do his worst. Any imagined objection was addressed through hedging, softening, positioning, and euphemism. By not saying anything directly or definitely, I was able to avoid saying anything that others might not agree with, that my future self might not agree with, that could provoke a reaction, that could be misinterpreted. Bit by bit, I ground and sanded and polished the diamond until it was indistinguishable from a common glass marble. The imperfections, the roughness, and the sharp points had been dealt with, but had taken with them the verve, the character, and any potential brilliance. The result was bland corporate mediocrity, not overtly dishonest, but also not expressing any meaningful, actionable, or insightful truth.

When the manager wasn't around, the engineer in me took over, considering, studying, abstracting, generalizing, and building grand, thorough frameworks. Every potential objection was encoded as another branch in the decision tree or another dimension of the space. By offering every possibility while endorsing none of them, I was able to avoid saying anything that others might not agree with, that my future self might not agree with, that could provoke a reaction, that could be misinterpreted. Diamonds were no longer diamonds, but instead just crystalline carbon, in the same family as graphite. They were gemstones just like rubies and emeralds. They were clear like glass and air. The result was bland technical mediocrity, so factual and complete, so simultaneously specific and general, that it offered nothing meaningful, actionable, or insightful.

After hundreds of hours and tens of thousands of words, I realized that individually, both the manager and engineer had led me astray. In trying to please the audience - some indistinct, varied collection of people, a cheerleader effect amalgum, a blurry composite, a demanding chimera, a different face in each flash of the strobe light - I had lost my way and I had lost myself. In trying to be everything to everyone, I had become nothing, losing all clarity and humanity, just like that blurry composite.

The truth is that I was afraid. I was afraid of striking out on my own, of what others might think, and of the possibility of failing. I had the experience, the ideas, the desire, and the considered confidence that I could do it, but I was hesitant. There wasn't really a manager and engineer, just techniques for protecting and obscuring myself. They hadn't lead me "astray"; I had hidden behind them. There wasn't really an audience, just my own doubts and fears. They weren't judging me; I was judging myself. Ironically, staying on the "safe" and familiar track, thinking too much about what others might think, and fearing failure had led me down a path of failure.

Not only had I written a bunch of shit, but it had been difficult and unpleasant to write as well. The food was awful and there was so little of it! For me, writing is hard, leading is hard, life is hard, everything is hard when I'm

...and there was so much of it for me, writing is hard, reading is hard, life is hard, everything is hard when I'm being untrue to myself or others, caught in an internally inconsistent system, racked with dissonance. I cared about what I was writing, but I didn't believe what I was saying.

The solution was obvious - but certainly not easy - and it had been there the whole time: I had to be honest, seek truth, and convey that truth. I had to break free of my fear and doubt in order to be true to myself, to be bold enough to say directly what I believed, and to shed the internal discord and disagreement that had burdened me.

Leadership is sometimes (perhaps often) viewed as a thing we just do at work, as a role we take on or even a role we play, as a contained and limited activity that's separate and different from the rest of our lives, as requiring peculiar ways of behaving, interacting, and speaking - an office argot, a corporate code switch, a professional patter of sly shibboleths, a commercial cant to counter the engineers' functional jargon - or as a costume and mask we put on not only to play the role, but to hide and protect our true selves.

While I don't advocate for bringing every aspect of ourselves to work, or for work to invade every aspect of our personal lives, a notion of leadership and professionalism rooted in this level of separation and disconnection is neutered, dishonest, and dehumanizing. These perverse enactments of leadership prevent us from realizing what leadership can be at its best, and what we can be as leaders at our best. These stilted, uncomfortable rituals separate us from our own humanity and from reality. These myopic visions obscure the fact that our personal variant of leadership is inextricably interconnected with our personal selves.

So much of leadership is based in our ideas, in our experiences, in our motivations, and ultimately in our worldview. As much as we may try to compartmentalize and categorize, who we are and what we believe unavoidably influences what we think, say, and do as leaders. In fact, it goes the other way as well: what we think, say, and do as leaders influences who we are and what we believe. Enacting the narrow, distorted vision of leadership described above has the potential to degrade us as people, while embodying a broad and benevolent conception of leadership has the potential to elevate and expand our abilities, our influence, our position, and ourselves.

Leadership is sometimes (perhaps often) viewed as useless or unnecessary overhead disconnected from real work and the real world, as a pretentious synonym for "management" (or even worse, "middle management"), as a necessary evil to be tolerated and endured by everyone involved, as a burden borne by the leader and those being led, or as inept, incompetent, or stupid. It's also sometimes (perhaps often) viewed as a system of structured indignity - of trickle-down abuse, recursive oppression, and hierarchical control - as a malevolent machine, as a vehicle for the vain, self-aggrandizing enrichment of those in charge, or as political, scheming, or even corrupt.

These cynical, hopeless, and dismissive views exist and persist because they're accurate assessments of the diminished and deviant forms of leadership that are common enough to be familiar. People in leadership roles, in positions of power, can be feckless, selfish, malevolent, or some kaleidoscopic, shifting permutation of any number of undesirable behaviors. Far more often, I think, people in leadership roles - including you and me - are generally well-intentioned, mildly self-interested, and moderately altruistic, but simply constrained. We're neither as effective nor as benevolent as we would like to be or could be. We're inhibited by the practical limitations of life - a lack of sufficient time, energy, patience, control, and even capability - by those around us, by exogenous factors and events, and by the organization at large. All of us are subject to the complexities and oddities that emerge from human organizations and human psychology, including our own.

While we should acknowledge this reality, we can't let the presence and even prevalence of these failings, shortcomings, and impediments dilute the true meaning of leadership, distract us from the true power and potential of leadership, or excuse us from the hard work and cognitive load of demonstrating true leadership.

Leadership is sometimes (perhaps often) viewed as a rarified privilege, as the realm of overambitious strivers or egotistical glad-handers, as unappealing (for all the negative reasons mentioned above), as a betrayal of the true art and craft of the profession, as reserved for a different type or class of people, as the snuffing, crushing black hole into which people inevitably fall when they give up or sell out, or as arcane and inaccessible.

These conceptions of leadership as exclusive and uninviting are not only alienating and divisive, but fundamentally false. They arise not from innate characteristics of leadership, but from bias, from bad experiences, from insecurity and ignorance, from unnecessary territorialism, and from contrived organizational and social structures. They do exist, but they aren't required or guaranteed.

I'm here to tell you that leadership is for everyone. It's available to everyone, it's beneficial for everyone, and it can be employed by everyone in personalized and manageable ways, whether big or small, loud or quiet, prosaic or poetic. In fact, I think leadership is inevitable. Anyone engaging earnestly and successfully with their work and team will unavoidably perform the actions of leadership and exhibit the characteristics of leadership, and will thereby be a leader or become a leader, perhaps even inadvertently. The reserved engineer who leads by example and is able to effectively work with peers, guide an effort, and achieve a goal or complete a project is as much a leader - at their own scale and within their own scope - as the charismatic executive who operates at a

high level, deftly navigating the socio-organizational rapids, coordinating parties, and making big, impactful decisions.

At its core, leadership is the willingness to accept ownership and responsibility, the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively guide the effort, and the perseverance and grit to see a task through. In its best form, it flows naturally from a genuine desire to create something, achieve a goal, and make a change. It is accessible to anyone - regardless of title or seniority - but achievable only by those willing to set an ambitious target and work continuously and intelligently toward that goal. The need for leadership and the impact it has are universal and profound. It is the connective tissue that binds people, products, engineering, business, and all the other pieces into the gestalt of everything we have, use, and do.

Logical leadership is an aspirational, expansive, and pragmatic approach to leadership. Influenced by an engineering mindset, logical leadership benefits from rational analysis, structured conceptual models, intentional evaluation of options and tradeoffs, and technically-minded frameworks. But, far from being cold and mechanical, logical leadership applies the full range of tools, techniques, and perspectives - humanistic, psychological, social, organizational, financial, technical, etc - in logical and thoughtful ways to the work and challenges of leadership, themselves ranging from the the humanistic to the technical. Ultimately, logical leadership describes and promotes a worldview rooted in reality that seeks useful information and genuine understanding, allows for flexible and realistic applications, and serves real purposes in real situations in pursuit of real benefits.

In many ways, this is my story. Leadership and ownership have been the basis of my career and played an unexpectedly profound role in my life. Despite their ultimate importance for me, I initially came to them almost accidentally, stumbling over them on my way to other goals. I wanted to work with good people to make cool things, I wanted to pursue ambitious and impactful projects, I wanted to fix and improve things, and I wanted to achieve and succeed. I hesitantly, even grudgingly, came to see that not only the most effective path, but really the only viable path, was for me to accept responsibility and take the lead in pursuit of those things. Wanting and wishing is nice, but someone has to get things started, keep them going, and see them through to completion. If no one else is stepping up - and there rarely is - then that "someone" is you. In doing so in my work and life, I've come to see leadership as a necessity, difficult and strenuous, but full of vitality and possibility.

Just as leadership is for everyone, so too is this book. I can't guarantee that you'll like the style, that every idea will resonate with you, or that reading it will make you into a great leader. What I can say is that it's *available* to you and likely to be beneficial to you, just as leadership is available and beneficial, no matter if you're a reserved engineer, a charismatic executive, or any other type of person at any point in their career or life. Even if you aren't a leader, even if you think you never want to be a leader, it's worth understanding what leadership is and the challenges and opportunities leaders encounter. Whoever you are, wherever you're at, you're welcome here!

Ownership

Ownership is by far the most effective way to exert influence on the outcome of an effort, on the wellbeing of an organization, and on the quality of a project. In my book (and this is my book!), it's the only viable option, the only game in town. Leadership *is* ownership. It doesn't guarantee success, and success is possible without it, but in terms of what can actively be done to steer the course of an activity, ownership is at the top of the list.

What is ownership? It's taking complete responsibility for all aspects and elements of the project you're pursuing. You have to care about the purpose and motivation, the people, the technology, the business, the users, the big picture, the details, the outcome, and all the rest. It's overseeing, guiding, influencing, delegating, communicating, and doing anything and everything (within legal and moral bounds) that's important for producing a good outcome and for serving the various constituents as you do it.

Ownership does not necessarily require that you do all the work yourself. It does not necessarily require that you be a micromanager. It does not necessarily require that you be stressed and overwhelmed. In fact, the quality of your leadership will tend to suffer if you interpret ownership in that way and try to do those things. Ownership doesn't require or prescribe any particular approach because it's a policy and not a mechanism. Ownership is about your attitude, about your view of your own role and responsibilities, and about the intensity of your commitment to the project. It's, like, a mindset, man.

Ownership and responsibility are intimately interlinked. They're two sides of the same coin. Being an owner *means* taking responsibility for the project and its outcomes. Being responsible for a project is only viable and reasonable with the empowerment that comes from ownership. Further, the presence of one in the absence of the other produces dishonest and dissonant conditions. Ownership without responsibility introduces moral hazard while responsibility without ownership leads to misattribution of success and misassignment of credit. TODO: Is this last sentence too much?

Because ownership requires responsibility, it also requires (by transitivity) all of the things responsibility implies and requires, including accountability, capability, and all the rest.

TODO: In the box-and-arrow relationship diagram, this will be a two-sided arrow pointing between ownership and responsibility, with accountability grouped in with responsibility.

I don't think owners should say that anything related to their project is "not their job" or "above their paygrade". Certainly, ownership can - and typically will - cut across teams, functions, and seniority. Beyond that, owners should be willing in some cases to take on requirements that are outside of their scope or area, if doing so is necessary for their project. For example, if you're blocked waiting on work from another team, consider volunteering to do their work for them. That's not always a good idea or viable approach, but it should be an option. Showing that willingness, that level of motivation, and that aversion to stalling is a great way to indicate your seriousness about moving forward. If you're truly, relentlessly, hungrily pursuing your project, then roadblocks should present as an interesting challenge to be navigated, rather than an excuse to throw your hands up, blame someone else, and chill. Don't be a jerk, don't violate the autonomy and consent of others under the guise of being an owner or "getting shit done", but also don't fall apart at the first task that falls outside of your well-defined plan, path, or playground.

Some of the greatest killers of productivity, motivation, drive, and success within organizations are practices that prevent owners from doing what they need in order to make progress and absolve owners of responsibility across the full scope of concerns relevant to their project. These include siloing, strict chain-of-command, excessive and slow processes, and various other things you see especially at old, slow-moving bureaucracies. Productive, ownership-oriented organizations should be designed to minimize these and maximize the ease and efficacy with which owners can proceed.

While I take an expansive view of ownership, I don't believe it's limitless. It involves "anything and everything" related to the project, but it does not mean "anything and everything" you might want it to mean. Yes, owners should be willing to oversee, push on, and do a wide range of things, but of course they can't be expected to do the truly impossible, to work magic, to have endless resources and capabilities, or to do everything in the world.

Ownership isn't a cudgel that leaders abuse their teams with, by demanding flippantly or aggressively that they "take some ownership" or "just fucking handle it!", when there are extenuating or complex circumstances that realistically prevent that in practice.

Ownership cannot be thrust upon someone or assigned unilaterally; it requires the potential owner to consent freely to the role. How could they possibly embody genuine ownership if they don't really want it or don't believe in it?

Ownership must also be agreed upon and recognized by others. Perhaps it's possible to exercise some form of ownership (and leadership) unilaterally, by command, but doing so will be less effective, antagonistic, and not worth aspiring to. What we want is high-credibility ownership. This may come from the selection of a leader whose involvement sparks excitement and confidence among the team members based on the leader's reputation for ability and integrity. Or, it may be developed over time by a less-experienced leader who builds upon their existing competencies, rapport, and reputation by being in the work, persisting through challenges, mentoring and guiding, and truly embodying ownership.

There's a tension inherent to ownership. Owners feel a connection or even an emotional attachment to their area of ownership. They have some interest in it, in the sense of being invested in it and in the sense of finding it intellectually stimulating. They certainly need to feel a sense of responsibility for it. Simply by being identified, and more importantly identifying themselves, as the owner, they'll feel important and in control. On one hand, these feelings are valid and necessary for effective ownership. How can you really be engaged and enthusiastic about something without feeling connected to it and interested in it? How can you take charge and do the hard things necessary if you don't feel powerful and responsible? On the other hand, these same feelings can produce negative side effects and behavior in the leader, which will echo detrimentally through the team and project. A feeling of importance and power can turn into arrogance. Attachment can transform into possessiveness and territorialism. Responsibility can become an overbearing burden.

In my view, the antidote to all these ills is to elevate and rely on the team [LINK: the-team]. In my view, prioritizing the team is also the best way to derive the greatest benefit from ownership. Retain and apply your position, pride, and power as the owner in order to support, prioritize, enable, promote, lead, and genuinely value the team. Right here, we can see two of the constituents [LINK: constituents] - you and the team - and how they work together.

This same tension inherent to ownership applies to individual contributors as well. It's possible for individuals, focusing on their area of expertise, to feel overwhelmingly burdened, to feel solely responsible, to feel arrogant and individualistic, to feel possessive, and so on (trust me, I've been in this position at various points in my career). In fact, it may even be more of a risk for ICs because they can operate individually, while the leader is clearly only a leader because of the team. The solution for ICs is the same as for leaders: rely on and prioritize the team [LINK: the-team]. Yes, it's "your" work and it does reflect on you, but in a functional and effective organization, you're a member of a team. Your job is to help the team accomplish its goals as effectively as

organization, you're a member of a team. Your job is to help the team accomplish its goals as effectively as possible and to find your position and role within that team, not to carve out your own little walled garden or to be unproductively overwhelmed.

Ultimately, ownership must be viable, sustainable, cooperative, and beneficial for the team and the owner, no matter if they're an IC in charge of a specific technical area or a top-level executive in charge of an entire company.

Within your area of ownership will be sub-sections and sub-parts that themselves can be delegated and owned by others within the team, so that each team member has ownership within some bounds of their own. Defining these bounds is a crucial art of ownership and leadership. We want every area covered by an owner, we want a single primary owner per area, and we want to define areas in a way that maximizes autonomy, motivation, and efficacy. Despite this desire, it's entirely possible - and often quite easy - to partition the work in a way that not only fails to achieve these goals, but also destroys the conditions for true ownership. Getting this right is not easy, but it's what we should have in mind and aim for.

TODO: Consider making this a standalone paragraph about how leadership is for everyone. The last sentence ("Ownership is for everyone...") could be the topic sentence. I could move it earlier in order to introduce the idea of ownership for everyone / for ICs earlier. This view of ownership certainly applies to leaders, but it also extends in a form to individual contributors as well. While the scope of their ownership may not be as broad or diverse, I believe that everyone should own *something*, should have the mindset of owning something, should make a firm commitment to something, should have the attendant empowerment and responsibility, and should enjoy the associated sense of purpose, motivation, and accomplishment. The thing they own might involve creating or building something specific, ensuring quality, maintaining and growing a component over time, being a subject-matter expert and advisor, and so on. The thing they own might be large or small. The key is that they get to put their name on it and that it is in fact a necessary and valuable piece of a larger whole. Ownership is for everyone, not just leaders.

Ownership comes with prerequisites. It requires something ownable, a coherent project that can be guided and pursued by an owner and team. It requires a viable opportunity that has the possibility to be successful and is sufficiently supported and resourced that success is possible. It requires an owner with enough skill (including the ability to learn new skills as needed), enough power, enough empowerment, and enough control. It requires a sufficiently broad scope of ownership and oversight that all relevant and important considerations can be influenced by the owner and team. It requires a context that understands, respects, and ideally values ownership. If the project doesn't come with all of these prerequisites in place (and what real-world project could possibly come that neatly packaged?), then it falls on the project's owner to establish them. Doing so is the first test of an owner, with failure calling into serious question both that leader's ability and the viability of the overall project.

TODO: Develop a full list (like a checklist) of prerequisites and develop them into a visual or framework?

Ownership is obscured by its more visible and ostentatious associates, which causes it to be both under-recognized and under-appreciated. It's natural to confuse the causes and effects of ownership with ownership itself, to mistake the visible symptoms and side effects for the invisible, underlying condition. Further, so many of the things people identify as being important to *success* are actually those symptoms and side effects of ownership. So many of the motivations that are correlated with success actually derive from and reinforce ownership.

As a result, people often analyze, emulate, and impute success to the coterie of ownership, rather than recognizing ownership itself as the king. Interest, passion, and even obsession are viewed as important to success, to the extent that the industry fixates on them. They can all provoke or lead someone into taking ownership, and they can all result naturally from ownership, but none of them *are* ownership. None of them on their own will produce the wide variety of controllable factors needed for success. The same applies to being in the details, micromanagement, and even being a demanding jerk. People love to discuss the role these characteristics and behaviors play in success. I think that all of those conversations are distractions from what really matters. Someone who is highly conscientious, details-oriented, controlling, an asshole, or any combination therefore, may be driven to take ownership by those traits. And, once again, prompted by ownership, those traits may intensify and be expressed through a person's behavior. But, none of those traits *are* ownership and none of them are centrally connected to the other characteristics and factors of success in nearly the same way as ownership.

The truest, most intense, and most durable form of ownership comes when you actually care about something, when you know it is important, when it matters to people you respect or care about, and/or when it's a meaningful part of something bigger. Think about a time in your life when you *knew* and felt in your body that something was important and that you were the one to do it, especially in situations where you knew no one else would. That's what ownership feels like.

How did you respond to that feeling? Hope things would work out? Expect someone else to come along and

...and you respond with feeling responsible, responsible, responsible, and... make it happen? Shy away, deny, and procrastinate? Or, did you take action?

In my life and work, getting engaged and taking ownership has been the primary path to satisfaction and success. Sometimes I took this on immediately and eagerly, sometimes haltingly and hesitantly, sometimes happily, sometimes grudgingly. In some surprising and gratifying cases, I discovered or realized that someone else really did already own the area and was managing it capably and reliably, often with impressive levels of skill and care. What a pleasure. But, in general, this hasn't been the case for me and won't be the case in the world or at work. No one else cares about, feels as accountable for, or is as suited to handling the things you care about as you are. Everyone is rightfully too busy with their own responsibilities, interests, lives, and work. It's not as if we live in a world with an overabundance of time, energy, ownership, leadership, and willingness to see projects through from end-to-end, and to do so capably and reliably, especially when they are complicated, difficult, unglamorous, and so on. Therefore, we need people to step up for the important and valuable things that they care about, that fall into their area of responsibility and expertise, and that no one else is taking on.

That's the level and intensity of ownership we would like to achieve at work, both for ourselves and for our teams. Achieving this is not trivial and not even possible in every case, but it's the right thing to target and strive for. But how? Although it's important to clearly establish responsibilities, assigning or granting ownership is not enough because it's not possible to *make* someone genuinely feel ownership, just as it's not possible to *make* anyone feel any specific thing. Not only do they need to consent to and accept, but they need to believe in the thing they're taking charge of. The right way, and I think the only way to achieve this, and to gain the various benefits that come along with it, is to structure organizations, incentives, and the work itself to allow for, encourage, and reward ownership. In fact, the ideal is to create an environment in which ownership seems like a native and obvious concept, and in which there are an abundance of high-quality opportunities for people to take on the responsibility and benefit from its rewards.

TODO: More on how to create an environment of ownership.

Ownership both requires and supports leadership, autonomy, purpose, accountability, motivation, growth, and many other profoundly-important characteristics you want in a high-quality organization and high-quality environment. I therefore believe that organizations that embody a high degree of aggregate ownership are more likely to be healthy, effective, and successful. If I could pick just one thing to prioritize or target, I think I would choose ownership, because a genuinely-felt and genuinely-experienced sense of ownership can only thrive in a forest filled with many of the other properties we want in our teams, projects, and workplaces.

One key thing I've learned, one thing I now bring to every area of my life, and one key piece of advice I'll give, is to thoughtfully identify areas that you could beneficially and capably accept ownership of, and then proactively and even quickly take steps to get involved, solve problems, take on more responsibility, and in that way establish and grow your ownership. This isn't about seizing control, "claiming territory", exclusion, or competition, it's about finding an area in need and acting as a leader in that area. By continually searching for and pursuing ownership, you can ensure that you won't stagnate, won't be useless, won't become irrelevant, and will be directed toward growth, improvement, and commitment, both for yourself and for the team.

This strategy is also imperfect. Things may not work out as you had planned. You may discover that the area you considered owning is impossibly broken, that you're actually not suited or capable to take it on, or that it's not as vital as you thought it was. But, that's OK. Life and work are a bit messy. If you handle each situation professionally and fairly, then it's possible to navigate through these challenges. You may determine that there's a sub-part or piece you can own, you may discover a related area along the way in which there is more opportunity, or you may simply learn a lot.

Ownership is good and, not coincidentally, the opposite of ownership is bad. What is the opposite of ownership? It's the insidious, creeping toxicity of always complaining, blaming, "identifying issues", criticizing, and being cynical. It's never being an agent of change, never allowing yourself to be empowered, as intimidating and even scary as it may be, to fix, build, accomplish, and own. Therefore, within an organization, driving toward increased levels of ownership has the benefit not only of promoting ownership, but of decreasing the volume of "not ownership" as well.

TODO: Technical framework with visualization: Prerequisites for ownership (i.e. things you have to have), tailwinds of ownership (i.e. things that support ownership and support positive outcomes), consequences of ownership (results, mostly positive), cousins of ownership (the other things that coincide with ownership, are necessary for and supported by ownership, including autonomy, etc). Maybe draw a graph linking all of these ideas. I expect that ownership will end up being central and highly connected. Maybe I could size things (the nodes, the edges) differently in order to indicate their relative importance / weight?

Recruiting

Recruiting (including hiring) is among the most universal, consistently important, and enduring activities leaders engage in. It's also a notably *peculiar* pursuit.

Universal

Every leader recruits. In fact, every leader *must* recruit. From the high-level executive to the product manager to the tech lead, each is responsible for recruiting for their team, project, and to some extent for the company as a whole. This is the case across the breadth of functions and the depth of the management hierarchy. It's true within all industries and it extends outside of business as well, into any human organization or association, and really any effort involving multiple people. The guy who knows you have a truck and asks you to help him move, he's a leader and you've been recruited (perhaps grudgingly).

Managers at all levels, from the CEO on down, clearly recruit and must do so as a core responsibility of their role and really as a way of life. Unlike individual contributors who can "just do it themselves", it's manifestly apparent that managers depend on recruiting others who can do the work, have the expertise and skills, and will recursively recruit teams of others. Managers are both entirely reliant on and deeply empowered and strengthened by the teams they lead.

Non-manager leaders must recruit as well. Recruiting supports growth in the scope and capabilities of the team. In shirking their role in recruiting, any leader diminishes their ability to expand, delegate, and achieve leverage, thereby dramatically reducing the impact and potential of both the team and themselves. Happily, non-manager leaders are often in unique and uniquely valuable positions from which to recruit, as a result of their individual network, their relatable role outside of management, and their technical or product expertise and skill.

Individual contributors should recruit as well. Just as the team's work is distributed across the team's members, successful and sustainable recruiting is distributed as well, in order to share the burden and take advantage of the idiosyncratic abilities and contributions of each team member. Excluding anyone from recruiting, or allowing them to avoid it, unacceptably deprives them of the opportunity to influence the growth and composition of the team. Here, we see that not only do leaders recruit, but in fact everyone recruits. Recruiting affects everyone in the team, so everyone should take an interest and be involved. Thankfully, recruiting takes many forms, so there should be something for everyone.

As expected, many recruiting activities are related to hiring, including reviewing resumes, conducting interviews, providing referrals and references for former classmates and colleagues, and encouraging skilled contacts already within the company who are looking for something new to interview with the team. Perhaps less obvious are the elements of recruiting that are not at all related to hiring. Persuading higher levels of management to assign a certain number and even specific group of existing employees to a team or project is a form of recruiting. Soliciting advice and consultation from contacts inside and outside the organization is a form of recruiting. I would even argue that retaining is recruiting. Retaining an existing, skilled employee eliminates the need to recruit their replacement. Therefore, the manager doing their job well, the tech lead who helps the team develop technically-competent and successful projects, and the individual contributor who keeps things fun and interesting (yes, the "personality hire") are all engaging in a form of recruiting via retention.

There's a subtle, less-discussed, but deeply important way in which all leaders recruit. Recruiting isn't just about getting butts in seats or growing the ranks, although it is necessary to bring people on board. It's not just about getting the right people and finding the right "fit", although that is important. It's also crucially about getting the willing participation, and ideally the enthusiasm and genuine engagement, of the people being recruited. Unlike conducting interviews or providing referrals, attaining this is not something the leader can "do" directly. What they can do, and must do to be successful, is create an environment that's sufficiently attractive - with credible leadership, compelling incentives and motivation, meaningful purpose and potential, appropriate levels of support and cooperation, etc - that people are eager to join the team and work on the projects, or at the very least are willing to go along and lend their efforts and expertise. The leader can try to persuade the candidate, they can promote their team, they can inform and encourage, but they can never consent for the new team member, can never make them feel excited, can never instill a sense of belonging, and so on.

Recruiting is a bilateral activity; the candidate has to accept you, your team, and the broader organization as much as you have to accept them. It can be easy to forget this when considering a pool of candidates from which it seems you get to pick and choose. The number of applicants, that the job is yours to offer, and really the whole structure of hiring obscures the fact that there are generally only a small number of actually-suitable candidates and an even smaller number of exceptional candidates. Yes, you can probably hire somebody, you can very likely fill the req, but you don't just want "somebody", you want to get someone highly appropriate for the role. Whether or not you can get that person depends on whether or not you see them in the first place (pipeline) and then on whether or not you can attract them. How could you hope to attract them if the job and the context in which it exists aren't attractive? If you want great people, shouldn't you be great and offering a great job as part of something great?

Important

We've discussed recruiting as universal in terms of being common to all leaders, but there's another sense in which it's universal as well: its ubiquity and universal importance within a specific organization. Every business

which it's universal as well, its ubiquity and universal importance within a specific organization. Every business unit, every function, every group, and every team recruits, and it's crucially important to all of them and the leaders of each.

For each individual leader, their team is their world (professionally) and the character, dynamics, environment, and fate of that world depends on its inhabitants. The ICs hired by a front-line manager are not less important to that manager than the C-suite is to the CEO. We can talk about the company as a whole and say that hiring a front-line team of underperforming engineers is recoverable, while hiring a team of underperforming executives is not. However, that outside, holistic perspective doesn't really matter in the day-to-day lives of leaders. The front-line manager can only hire members into his team, he depends on them for his and the team's success, so he better make good hires. The CEO will primarily hire her direct reports, she depends on them for her and the company's success, so she better make good hires. They're operating at different levels with different scope and impact, but they're both recruiting and depend on the success of that recruiting.

In aggregate, the people within a company - all of whom were recruited at some point and in some way - determine not just the trajectory of the company, but in fact the *range* of potential trajectories. As new people join through recruiting (and others leave for various reasons), the range of possibilities expands or contracts proportionally to their true but as-yet-unproven capabilities and the scope of their impact. We can see this clearly with executives, who have the opportunity to influence the direction of the company for better or worse. In doing so, they can change the entire landscape of available trajectories and outcomes in a way that either makes full use of or wastes the abilities of the rest of the company. Similarly, a skilled engineer will not just do good work, but may also have the potential to help recruit many other good engineers or invent new technologies or products, thereby expanding the upper bound of available trajectories the team or company as a whole may follow.

Enduring

Peculiar

Recruiting is a peculiar activity that occupies a foundational but odd space in the psyche and work of individuals, teams, and organizations. We could imagine an organized system that algorithmically determines the best candidate for every available role by maximizing both compatibility in each match as well as overall utility. Recruiting isn't like that. Instead, it's a turbulent, sometimes messy, and very human system, rooted in arbitrary timing, idiosyncratic approaches, luck and randomness, and imprecise evaluations. It's not completely flawed or unworkable, it doesn't even produce particularly bad results, but it also certainly isn't the pinnacle of thoughtful organization and structured resource allocation.

Let's start by discussing what makes recruiting so strange in order to understand it better and to codify and clarify the feelings we have about it. Then, we can use that understanding to help devise ways to make it as tolerable and successful as possible.

Recruiting is peculiar in the sense that it's an unusual activity, but also in the sense of being idiosyncratic to each team and organization. Yes, there's a common, very high-level outline that's often followed, but the specifics vary wildly and the quality of hiring is therefore highly variable. The variety of skills, interests, and experience among candidates and the variability of team, project, company, and industry requirements cause recruiting to be fundamentally ad hoc. In almost all cases, the roles aren't Taylor-style precise, so the recruiting can't be done with Taylor-style standardization.

For a given position and a given candidate, the employer needs to decide if they want to extend an offer and the candidate needs to decide if they want to accept that offer. Unfortunately, both parties have to make their respective decisions quickly and based on little information. In fact, in every case, each side has to make the decision with the awareness that they lack crucial information about the counterparty that would in other areas and activities be deemed necessary to complete due diligence and make an informed decision. Both sides are motivated to present themselves in the best light. While this is sometimes achieved through embellishment or even outright lying, I think it is far more often achieved through simple omission, which is easy to take advantage of because so little information is exchanged.

Even if both parties are operating in good faith, even if they're forthcoming about themselves, even if they work to identify potential areas of incompatibility, it's still impossible to tell with certainty if things will work out well for everyone. A good recruiting process increases the chances of a good outcome, but cannot by any means guarantee it, simply because there's too much to know, too much complexity, too many areas of interaction between the employee and the rest of the company as they perform their job. There's generally no trial period, no extended period of discovery or fact finding, just a day of interviews and a yes or no. One date and then straight to the marriage.

During recruiting, every interaction holds a dual, dichotomous nature: we could work together and do great things, or we could never see each other again. There's no in-between, no spectrum of interaction. Each side typically aims toward genuine cooperation and compatibility - because they're both incentivized out of personal

interest to do so - while remaining cautious and managing the adversarial undertone inherent to recruiting. The candidate can be interviewing elsewhere in order to increase their options and bargaining power, while the employer is very likely interviewing multiple candidates to find the best fit at the best price. The candidate can look at the employer with both optimism and caution, trying to find and secure the best opportunity available while avoiding getting stuck with a bad manager, being misled (or just not sufficiently informed) about what the job actually entails, entering into a toxic environment, and so on. To the employer, each candidate could be a superstar, a dud, or a destructive force. The pool of candidates can collectively look like a mob of underqualified people clamoring to get a foot in the door, to get a seat on this train or rocketship.

Recruiting is strange and often uncomfortable because it's rife with incongruities and asymmetries. The tight timelines, low information, and high stakes involved are all characteristic of markets like the stock market, real estate market, etc. It's not a coincidence or misnomer that it's called the "job market". There's certainly a financial element to recruiting, both in terms of the compensation being offered with the role and the financial consequences - beyond just that easily-quantified compensation - for the team and company of a good or bad hire. However, unlike other markets that deal in assets, recruiting transacts in people, their skills, their abilities, their time, their labor, and their potential.

In addition to the candidate having little information about the employer and vice versa, we see another way in which recruiting is a data-poor environment: it lacks the transparency and discoverability of many other markets. There's no way to fully determine the market's participants (candidates and employers with reqs) or prices (compensation).

There's no centralized exchange, no registry or official market.

TODO: Something about discoverability from the employer side. Maybe focus on valuing the candidate. Huge variability in the value of a candidate. Crude methods? Yes. Also no standards or best practices or generally-accepted approaches.

In some industries, compensation includes a significant variable component such as bonus or stock-based compensation. As a result, even the full extent of the candidate's compensation (beyond the base salary) is unknown at the time an offer is extended, thereby increasing uncertainty for the candidate and further clouding prices in the market.

The fundamental issue is that recruiting is as much a social enterprise as a market. Networks matter, interactions matter, and impressions and perceptions matter.

Further, methods used to determine a candidate's "value" such as interviewing and referrals attempt to evaluate and quantify distinctly qualitative elements like personality, interpersonal abilities, psychological characteristics such as determination and motivation, and so on.

Evaluating the candidate typically involves trying to characterize or quantify in some way their personal and interpersonal abilities.

Trying to determine personality and stuff within the interview process. Is that dynamics?

Conflates markets with social and organizational dynamics.

A Players and B Player

Steve Jobs famously said "A players hire A players, but B players hire C players". Guy Kawasaki offered a fuller version: "Steve Jobs has a saying that A players hire A players. But B players hire C players, and C players hire D players. It doesn't take long to get to F players. This trickle-down effect causes bozo explosions in companies."

As with most statements of this sort, it's been variously quoted, interpreted, paraphrased, and applied (and misquoted, misinterpreted, and misapplied) in ways that suit the purposes of the person doing the quoting. Is the message to only hire the best? To keep up your standards? Is it that top players are secure enough and interested enough in their craft that they are eager to work with top players while the slightly-less-skilled and much-less-skilled are insecure and therefore only want to hire people who are not as capable as them? I personally find the idea of a "bozo explosion" a bit mean, but also funny and relatable, having worked in a couple of rapidly-expanding startups as they grew into big companies.

Listening to Jobs actually speak on the topic, he suggests that A players want to work with A players, actively avoid working with B and C players, and will "self police" in a way that attracts more A players and keeps out Bs and Cs. Rather than regarding this as some sacred aphorism to be memorized and internalized, or as some old-school boomer perspective to be torn down, let's see what we can take from it. It's a compliment to the original Mac team, which Jobs said was populated with "A players" and provided as an example of his claim. It's a reminder that a small team of skilled people can do great things. It alludes to the classic Mac, which was an amazing product that played an important role in the early years of both my life and personal computers more

amazing product that played an important role in the early years of both my life and personal computers more broadly. It's fun to be nostalgic about the better parts of our past that built the present, as Jobs was doing and as we can do now. There's certainly an undertone of arrogance within these statements (and many made by Jobs), but also the sense that they are motivated by aspiration, aversion to the mundane, and high expectations.

It's certainly the case that there are differences in skills, interests, aptitudes, general intelligence, and other characteristics between individuals that make them more or less suitable for certain roles and more or less successful at those roles. It's hard to define in any objective or even definite way what constitutes an "A player" or a "B player", but it is possible to talk in concrete terms about suitability and compatibility between a person and a role, about a person's expertise and ability in specific areas, and about a person's observed performance and realized results. That's what we'll do here in order to think about people and roles in a more consistent, structured, and hopefully general way.

Compatibility

Just as there are differences between people, there are differences between roles, teams, and companies in terms of what they require and what they offer. We can acknowledge this without being arrogant and without making value judgements. Jobs that need to be done are worthwhile and important, while also being very different from each other.

Because of the wide variation in roles, it only makes sense to discuss the *compatibility* between a particular candidate and a particular role. Although there do exist intelligent, hard-working, highly-skilled, socially-enjoyable people in the world, none are universally "good". That all-around great person you know may be missing specific, key abilities needed to succeed in a particular team or company. They may be great as they are, but not particularly adaptable or keen on learning new things. On the flip side, the role might not be enough for them. They might be too qualified, readily able to find more challenge, more growth, and more compensation elsewhere. This is another kind of incompatibility that's no less problematic (because it means they'll probably leave soon and you'll be back to recruiting).

Jobs change, teams churn, people transfer within an organization, projects and products evolve, and companies mature. Knowing this, it's risky and ill-advised to define a role *too* specifically. Doing so can make finding compatibility more difficult - or even impossible - because the numerous, precise requirements of the role are too restrictive. Even if you successfully hire someone, they'll be finely-tuned for a job that might change or not even exist in the same form in three months or a year.

At the same time, defining a role too generally is problematic because it reduces the usefulness of the requirements for finding well-suited candidates, for discerning between candidates, and for informing candidates of what's actually needed for the role. It's possible to be over-general by requiring too much, by requiring too little, and by being vague in your requirements or unsure yourself of what you want and need. No one can be good at everything, so if you ask for too many things, you'll either end up with no candidates or only candidates who are good at arbitrary subsets of your requirements that may not correspond to what's actually needed. If you ask for just a few easily-satisfied things, then you'll end up with too many candidates who will, once again, possess some arbitrary set of skills that are not necessarily aligned with the role. Not knowing or not being able to state what you want and need in a role means you have a problem much bigger than just hiring for that single position.

In designing and defining a role, we should act like Goldilocks: not too much, not too little, not too specific, not too vague. Perfection isn't required, but some moderate, reasonable middle-ground is achievable. A poorly-designed role will almost certainly lead to a poor recruiting process and an incompatible or unsatisfactory hire, while a well-designed role can serve as the basis of a successful hiring process.

On the other side, people can adapt, can grow and learn (and are often eager to do so), and can find a way to fit into the team. Not only can the candidate change to fit the role, but they can change and customize the role itself, as long as it still provides complementary value to the other team members and the team's overall purpose. In fact, we expect this; we generally want team members to grow into their role, to take on more responsibility, help the team in general, and perhaps even exceed their role and step into another higher-level role with broader scope. Therefore, typecasting a candidate or being too strict and literal about their current abilities (inferred imprecisely during the recruiting process) is risky as well.

The complexity of the work, the variability in human personalities and skills, and the flexibility of both the role and candidate necessitate a sophisticated notion of compatibility that extends beyond meeting basic requirements, beyond a vibe check, and even beyond most standard interviewing processes.

Although "compatibility" is perhaps most often discussed in a personal context (for romantic or platonic relationships), it's appropriate to use in a professional context as well because recruiting creates relationships. Bringing a new person into the team initiates human relationships between the new team member and each of the existing members, as well as between the new employee and their manager, tech lead, and anyone else in an oversight role. Further, important and fundamentally asymmetric relationships are formed between the new

employee and the team, group, and company which they've joined. While some companies might treat a new hire as "just another", that job is central to the new hire's life, livelihood, sense of self, ambition, and so on. Given the number and weight of these relationships, I think it's valid and valuable to consider them in terms of compatibility in its fullness, in terms of many (but not all) of the aspects we consider in serious human relationships.

Referrals and References

Hiring decisions have to be made based on the information available to you about the candidate, which is often limited in breadth, depth, and verifiability. As a basis, you have only their resume and the feedback from the interviews you conducted with them. Given the importance and weight of the hire / no hire decision, there's a valid and wise desire to know as much about the candidate as possible.

Referrals and references provide an additional source of information about a candidate. Depending on a few factors, the information they provide may be some of the most valuable you have access to, or it may be completely useless. The key factors are:

1. To what extent do you know the reference, their work, their standards, etc?
2. To what extent does the reference know the candidate, their work, their standards, etc?
3. To what extent is the reference able and willing to provide you with high-quality, useful information and opinions about the candidate?

These factors combine to affect how much you can trust and take into account that reference's feedback:

- 1 is used to establish the trustworthiness, abilities, and attitudes of the reference. The less you know them, the less you can say for sure about them. How well does their views of things align with your own? How high are their standards? What skills and experience do they actually have?
- 2 is simply about how much the reference knows about the candidate. The less they know, the less useful information they will be able to provide you.
- 3 is not about what the reference knows (that's covered by #2), but about how they filter, analyze, and present that information. Are they willing and incentivized to tell you everything they know, including giving negative feedback? Are they able to provide you with a fair, accurate, and opinionated assessment of the candidate? Does their disposition and/or relationship with the candidate make it unlikely that they'll provide negative feedback, or distinctive feedback of any kind? Do their goals in providing the reference align with your goals in checking the reference?

You overall goal in consulting a reference is to get some insight from someone who knows the candidate and their work better than you do. In particular, you're looking for distinctive information, either positive or negative, that will help clarify the hiring decision; getting a bunch of generally-positive feedback is worth something, but not much.

Suppose you're hiring for a role and you know someone (the candidate) that you previously worked with who you think would be great for that role. We might imagine this happening at an early-stage startup, where network-based hiring of former colleagues and classmates is particularly important, although it could apply anywhere. In this situation, you know and trust the reference very well (#1), because you're the one providing the referral and acting as the reference. You also know exactly how much the reference knows about the candidate (#2), because, once again, you're the reference! That leaves factor #3. While you're clearly willing to "share" information with yourself, it's still necessary to consider how well you are suited and able to assess the candidate's qualities. Supposing you feel confident in your ability to do so, then it seems like you'll be able to offer a high-quality referral and act as a high-quality reference for the candidate. Of course, they'll still need to go through the hiring and interview process, but your referral will serve as a strong impetus to start talking to them and a strong basis of supporting for hiring them into the company.

Now, let's look at a different scenario. Once again, you're hiring for a role, but not directly out of your network. Instead, you've found a candidate - who you didn't previously know, or didn't know well - through the normal recruiting process and channels. As part of the hiring process, you ask the candidate to provide a reference or two, which they do. The references they provide are people who they hand-picked, but are unknown to you. Already, we have an issue with #1, because you don't know the references. We also likely have a problem with #3 because the references are likely to be positive toward the candidate and disincentivized from providing you with complete, and especially negative, information. Then, when you get on a (short) call with the reference, you not only have to do the usual work of trying to gain information about the candidate (#3) and trying to figure out how much the reference knows about the candidate (#2), but you also have to try to get to know the reference well enough to judge their judgement (#1) and have to try to fight through their disinclination to providing you with complete information (#3). At best, it's an essentially impossible task that will provide no new info, and at worst, you'll come away with some incorrect or unfair impression of the candidate.

Info

Word count: 18998