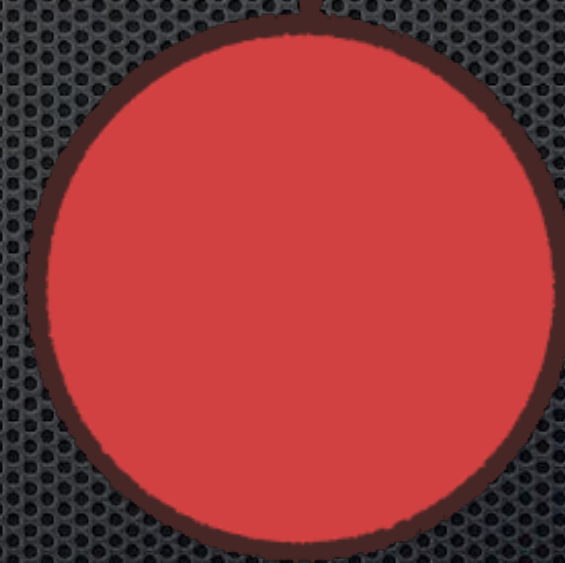




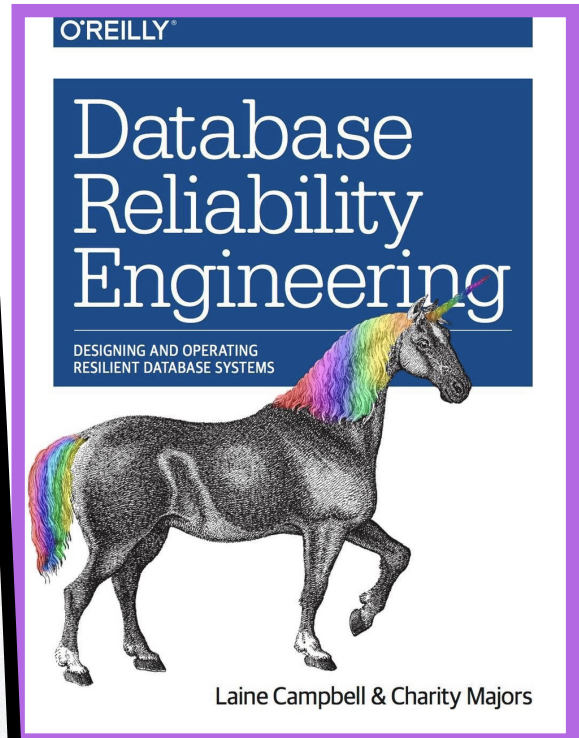
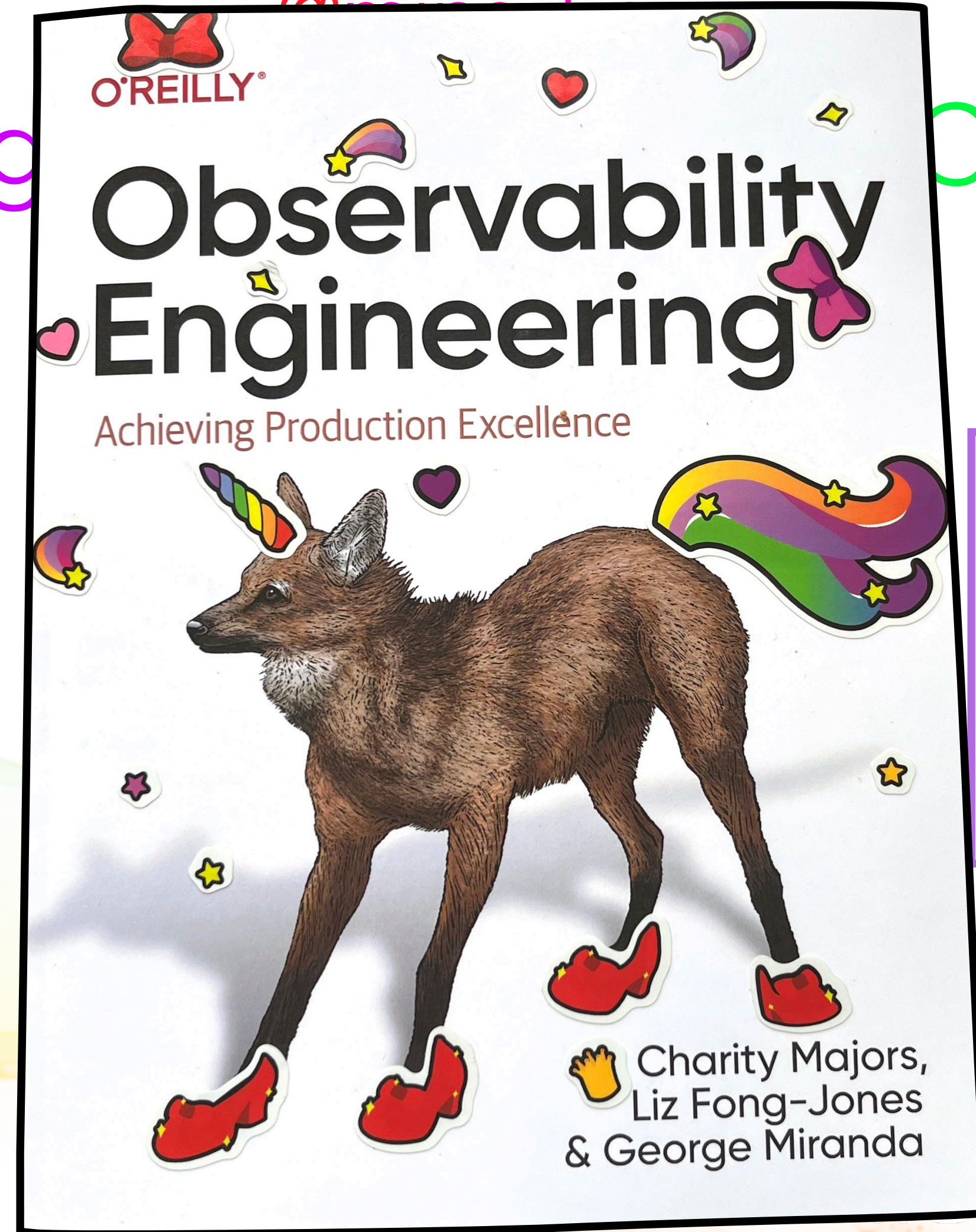
# The Engineer/Manager Pendulum Goes Mainstream





eng

CTO



# Assumptions about management:

- It is a one-way trip
- It is always a promotion
- You make a lot more money
- They should stop writing code
- It's more prestigious than engineering
- It's your only real option for career progression
- It's the only way to have influence
- All managers want to be directors or VPs
- All managers would rather be writing code
- The best engineers make the best managers

**None of these  
are good things.**

# The team deserves:

- A manager who WANTS to be **managing people** and developing that skill set
- A manager who is (mostly 🙄) **not bitter** about going to meetings instead of writing code
- A manager who is genuinely interested in process, sociotechnical systems, and nurturing the careers of their teammates
- A manager whose **technical skills** are strong enough, fresh enough and modern enough to independently evaluate their work and resolve technical conflicts

# You deserve:

- Career advancement
- A role that is challenging, interesting, and **not a one-way street**
- To keep your **technical skills** relevant
- To **preserve optionality**—esp if you aren't sure what you want to do when you grow up
- A long and varied career, where you become **more and more employable** with time (not less and less).

## A better way...

Don't self-identify as a manager OR as an engineer. Look at your career as that of a:

**Technologist**

or **Technical Leader**

who needs **both skill sets** to reach your fullest potential

The greatest technical leaders I have ever known have ALL had both skill sets.

A few years ago, this was a radical idea.

Now it is not. 😊

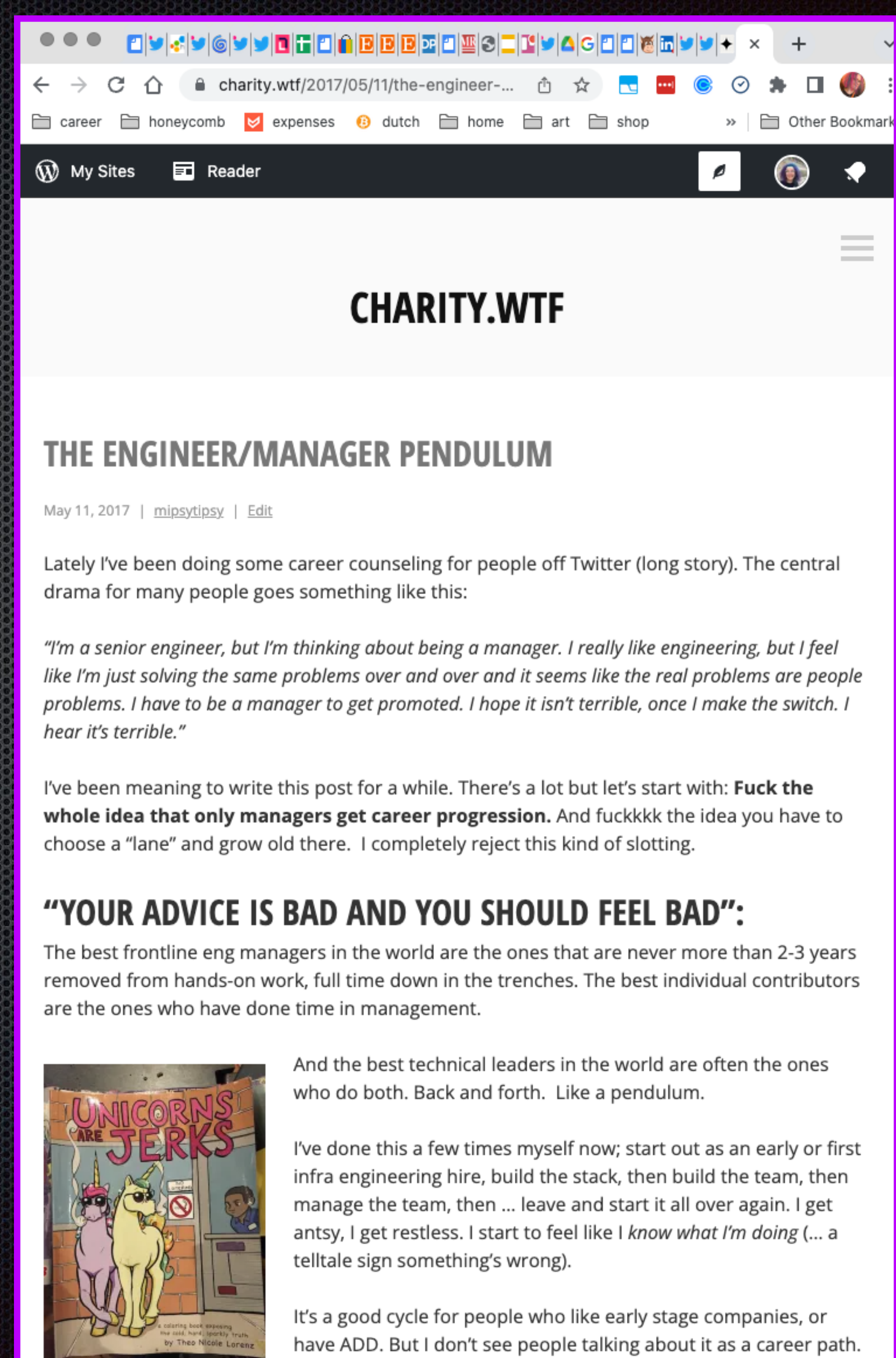
But it is still rarely supported by the systems around us.

<https://charity.wtf/2017/05/11/the-engineer-manager-pendulum/>

<https://charity.wtf/2019/01/04/engineering-management-the-pendulum-or-the-ladder/>

<https://charity.wtf/2020/09/06/if-management-isnt-a-promotion-then-engineering-isnt-a-demotion/>

<https://charity.wtf/2022/03/24/twin-anxieties-of-the-engineer-manager-pendulum/>



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL [charity.wtf/2017/05/11/the-engineer-...](https://charity.wtf/2017/05/11/the-engineer-...). The browser's address bar and tabs are visible at the top. The page content includes the site logo "CHARITY.WTF", the article title "THE ENGINEER/MANAGER PENDULUM", the date "May 11, 2017", and the author "mipsytipisy". The main text of the article discusses career counseling and the "engineer/manager pendulum" concept. A quote from a senior engineer is included: "I'm a senior engineer, but I'm thinking about being a manager. I really like engineering, but I feel like I'm just solving the same problems over and over and it seems like the real problems are people problems. I have to be a manager to get promoted. I hope it isn't terrible, once I make the switch. I hear it's terrible." The article also mentions the author's rejection of the idea that only managers get career progression. A section titled "YOUR ADVICE IS BAD AND YOU SHOULD FEEL BAD" discusses the best frontline engineering managers and individual contributors. An illustration of two unicorns, one purple and one yellow, is shown with the text "UNICORNS ARE JERKS" above them. The article concludes with a note about the cycle of early stage companies and ADD, and a mention of a career path.

CHARITY.WTF

## THE ENGINEER/MANAGER PENDULUM

May 11, 2017 | [mipsytipisy](#) | [Edit](#)

Lately I've been doing some career counseling for people off Twitter (long story). The central drama for many people goes something like this:

*"I'm a senior engineer, but I'm thinking about being a manager. I really like engineering, but I feel like I'm just solving the same problems over and over and it seems like the real problems are people problems. I have to be a manager to get promoted. I hope it isn't terrible, once I make the switch. I hear it's terrible."*

I've been meaning to write this post for a while. There's a lot but let's start with: **Fuck the whole idea that only managers get career progression.** And fuckkkk the idea you have to choose a "lane" and grow old there. I completely reject this kind of slotting.


### "YOUR ADVICE IS BAD AND YOU SHOULD FEEL BAD":

The best frontline eng managers in the world are the ones that are never more than 2-3 years removed from hands-on work, full time down in the trenches. The best individual contributors are the ones who have done time in management.

And the best technical leaders in the world are often the ones who do both. Back and forth. Like a pendulum.

I've done this a few times myself now; start out as an early or first infra engineering hire, build the stack, then build the team, then manage the team, then ... leave and start it all over again. I get antsy, I get restless. I start to feel like I *know what I'm doing* (... a telltale sign something's wrong).

It's a good cycle for people who like early stage companies, or have ADD. But I don't see people talking about it as a career path.



The pendulum should not be the exception.

It should be the rule.

The pendulum is the key to a **long** and **rewarding** career in technology, where **burnout rates** are low and **creative fulfillment is high**.

Yet institutions are not set up this way.  
How can we change them?



You can't just “let it happen”.

This will take work. 😊

You need to **actively** make the case to your leadership, your engineers, your managers, and your HR teams.

Yes, there are policy changes to be made.  
But it really lives in the **hearts and minds** of the people you work with.

Is it about **retention**? Sure.

But it's really about the **caliber** of your  
**technical leadership.**

Every company is now a tech company,  
and **good engineering leaders** must be **good engineers.**

# The best line managers ...

Are never more than a few years removed from **writing code** and building system themselves, hands on. They are solidly senior engineers with **good judgment**, who can afford to step away for a few years without risking terminal decay, but they return to the well to refresh their skills from time to time.

This gives you **credibility** with engineers, the kind you cannot fake. It helps you **empathize** with your team. It enables you to evaluate their work, debug **sociotechnical systems**, and **resolve conflicts**.

It also preserves your optionality and keeps you **maximally employable** over the long run.

# The best staff+ engineers and tech leads...

Have done time as an engineering manager, doing **full time people management**. This helps you level up at skills like connecting **business problems** to **technical outcomes**, understanding **what motivates people**, planning, **running meetings** and owning the room, making hard choices and having hard conversations, etc.

You earn **credibility** in the eyes of other teams and senior leadership and learn to speak their language. It gives you way more empathy for other functions. Ironically, you also get much better at **wielding influence without authority**.

You don't have to choose one or the other  
but you do have to choose **one at a time**.

Being a good engineer involves **blocking out interruptions**, focusing on learning and solving hard problems.

Being a good manager involves being **available for your team and interruptible**... even interrupt-driven.

You can only excel at **one at a time**. You can only grow in **one role at a time**.

If you aren't already **solidly** an experienced senior engineer,  
**don't go and become a manager.**

You need a *minimum* of 7-8 years as an engineer first. 10 is better.

You don't need to be the **BEST** engineer.

But you need experience, confidence, and good judgment,  
and enough years on the job that your skills won't immediately atrophy.

If you decide to try management, commit to **two years...**

It takes that long to learn the ropes and develop instincts you can trust

...but **less than five years.**

After two or three years, your skills begin to decay — especially the first time.  
Swing back to the well, before you become unhirable as an engineer.

**Technical skills** are a lot like **speaking a language**.

You learn by immersion. If you stop speaking it every day, you will quickly lose fluency.

**Management skills** are **stickier**, but **localized**.

Once you've gotten the experience, management skills tend to **stick with you**.  
But wielding them requires an intimate knowledge of specific people, history and context.



You will hear a lot of well-intentioned but **bad advice** telling you to “stop writing code and doing technical work” once you become a manager. Instead,

**stop writing code in the critical path.**

But look for ways to contribute in small and supportive ways. This buys you credibility and gives you empathy with your team, and it is much better for your career in the long run.

**My favorite: make yourself the on call backup of first resort.**

DON'T put yourself in the rotation. But if oncall had a hard night, you pick up the next night. If they want to go watch a movie, or need to go on a long car drive, whatever ... you pick up the pager, 1-3x/week. This is valuable labor, and your team will respect you and love you for it.

# You **cannot** just be an engineering line manager forever...

Not a GOOD one, anyway. 🙄 You get worse at it as your tech skills deteriorate.

And you cannot, should not try to occupy the twin roles  
of **tech lead** AND **manager** longterm.

You'll become **less effective** as a tech lead the longer you manage.  
And occupying **both** leadership slots **starves your people** of **growth opportunities**.

Every engineering manager reaches a fork in the road:

**Climb the Ladder**

— **OR** —

**Swing Back**

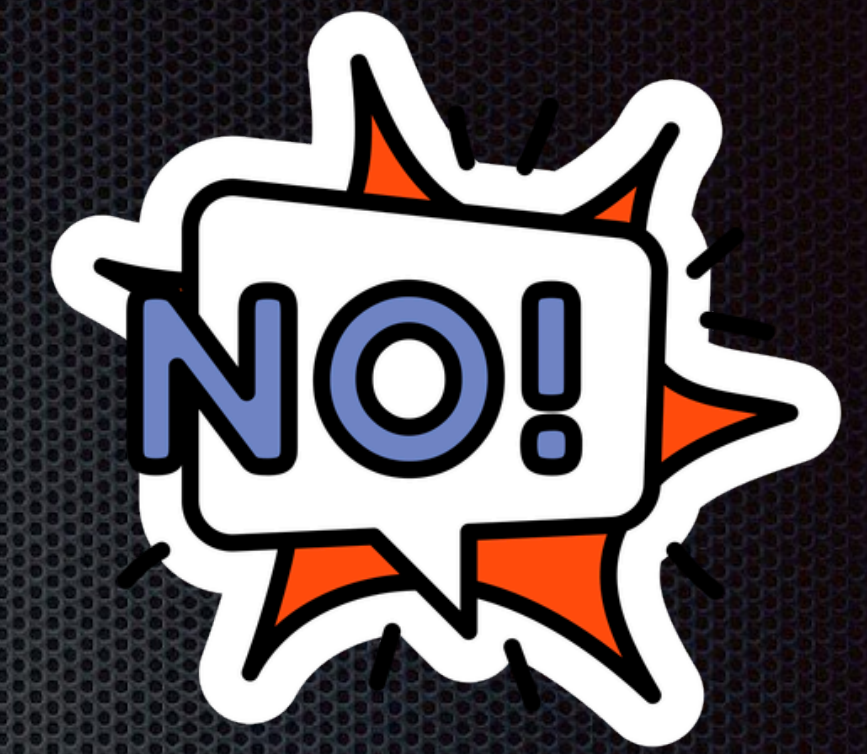
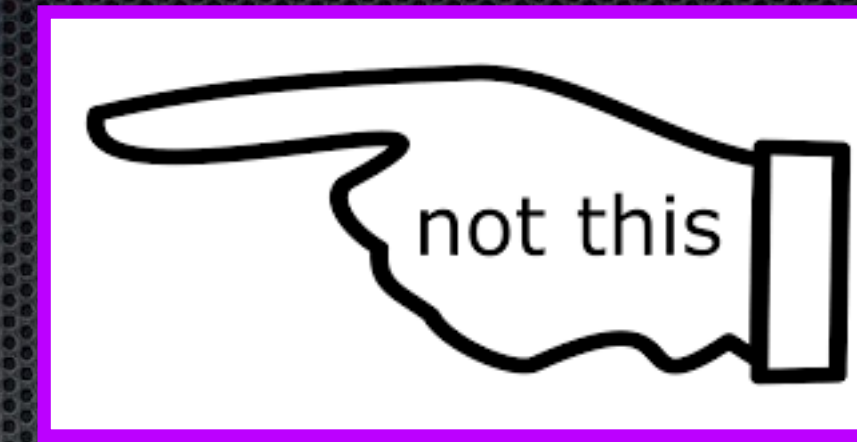
become a senior manager,  
director, or VP

go back to the well and refresh  
your technical skills

A fork. In the road 🙌



Management == Leadership?



Management

Organizational Leadership

Engineering

Technical Leadership

Choose the **technical leadership** track, and go back to building stuff for a while.  
Or choose the **organizational leadership** track, and try climbing the ladder  
(if this opportunity is available to you).

But make your decision with **eyes wide open**.

Managers in particular have a tendency to look up ten years later and realize that their choices have made them a) **less employable** and b) **deeply unhappy**.

~**Everybody** starts out thinking  
they want to climb the ladder

~**Everybody** starts out thinking they want to be a manager

The best (the only??) way for many (most??) people to realize they don't actually want to be a manager, is for them to actually **do the job**. 🙄

This is one reason why it matters so much that

**Management is not a promotion, it's a change of career**

because

**if management is not a promotion  
then engineering is not a demotion.**

You want people doing the job that makes them feel the most excited and fulfilled,  
not the job that gives them the most money and prestige; because  
that is when they'll do their best work.

# Unsettling Truths

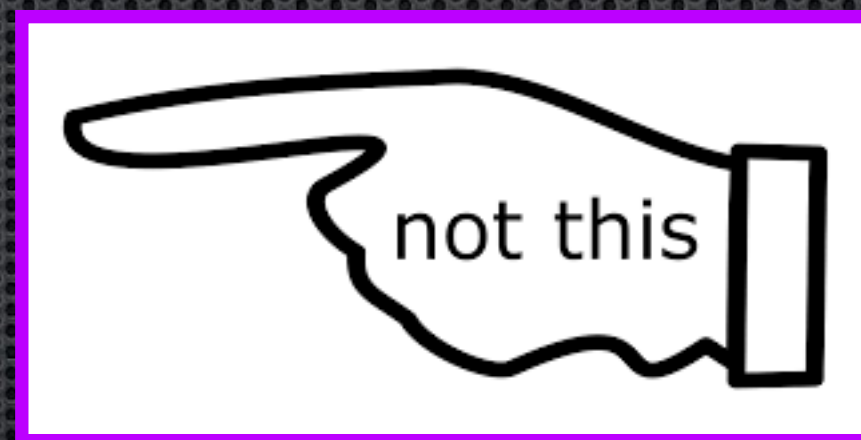
Much of your career path will ultimately come down to **luck** and **opportunism**. The best thing you can do is **be prepared** to exploit or lean into opportunities that cross your path, rather than **getting your heart set** on a particular outcome.

If you aren't sure what to do, act to **maximize optionality**.

# You can't **force** opportunities to happen.

The more you get your heart set on achieving any **one** particular outcome, the more you wall yourself off from other opportunities.

But this industry is fast-moving and chaotic.  
**Opportunities** abound.



“I will be a VP by age 30”



# Acting to preserve optionality looks like:

- Keeping your **technical skills** fresh.
- Making friends. Developing a network of **professional contacts outside work**.
- Writing and speaking about your work. **Becoming known** (or at least googleable) for “your name” + “technology you care about”.
- **Changing your role**, if not your job, every 2-3 years.
- “Become a **T-shaped engineer**” is still good advice!



Developing a public profile can be **especially** valuable for women and underrepresented groups

Social proof can counterbalance people's tendency to discount your technical expertise. 🤖

# Downsides of climbing the ladder:

- There are an order of magnitude **fewer job openings** at every rung you climb
- Your skill set becomes much more specific and customized. It is **harder** to find a place you fit.
- It becomes harder and **harder to go back** to engineering
- You become farther removed from the work that brings most of us **meaning & satisfaction** (creating things, direct impact on users)
- Your job tenure lengthens; you **can't leave as easily**, and each choice becomes riskier
- More and more of your ability to succeed is actually **out of your hands**. Your reputation is defined by the company's success.

**The landscape looks very different today than in 2017.**

LOTS of people go back and forth between engineering and management.

✨Yay!✨

**But there is rarely ✨institutional✨ support for the pendulum**

so it remains something done primarily by contrarians and burnouts

# Institutionalizing the pendulum

Execs tend to see it as a “wasted investment” or a loss of leadership when managers go back to engineering. 😞💔 You have to reframe this in a way that helps them understand:

- This is how to **cultivate** great engineering leadership
- This is how you retain **top talent** — otherwise they will get restless and leave
- This is how you preserve **institutional memory**
- Management is NOT synonymous with leadership — the technical leadership matters just as much! It is **not a loss!**
- The pendulum contributes **both** to more excellent management and better technical execution.

# On Leveling, and High-Level Transitions...

- Align your levels between management and engineering tracks, to facilitate moving between them. Align compensation, too.
- **Yes**, it gets harder to transfer between tracks at the highest levels, like director or VP.
- **Yes**, every case is to some extent sui generis. It's still worth doing. It carries immense signaling power — AND they can often show immense value.
- This is a reason to encourage everyone to swing back and forth earlier and more often, **not** to not do it.

# Demystify Management

- Ask **everyone** about their career goals. Demystify the process of becoming a manager.
- Decompose management into its constituent skills (planning, running meetings, etc) and encourage **everyone** to learn and develop those skills.
- **Practice real transparency** — access to information about the business is not a privilege, **it's a right**.
- Don't let anyone use information as leverage.

**Don't** build a system where people have to be a manager if they want to be in the loop or have a seat at the table.

Drain authoritarianism out of your hierarchy. Command-and-control management is **toxic** to any kind of creative flourishing.

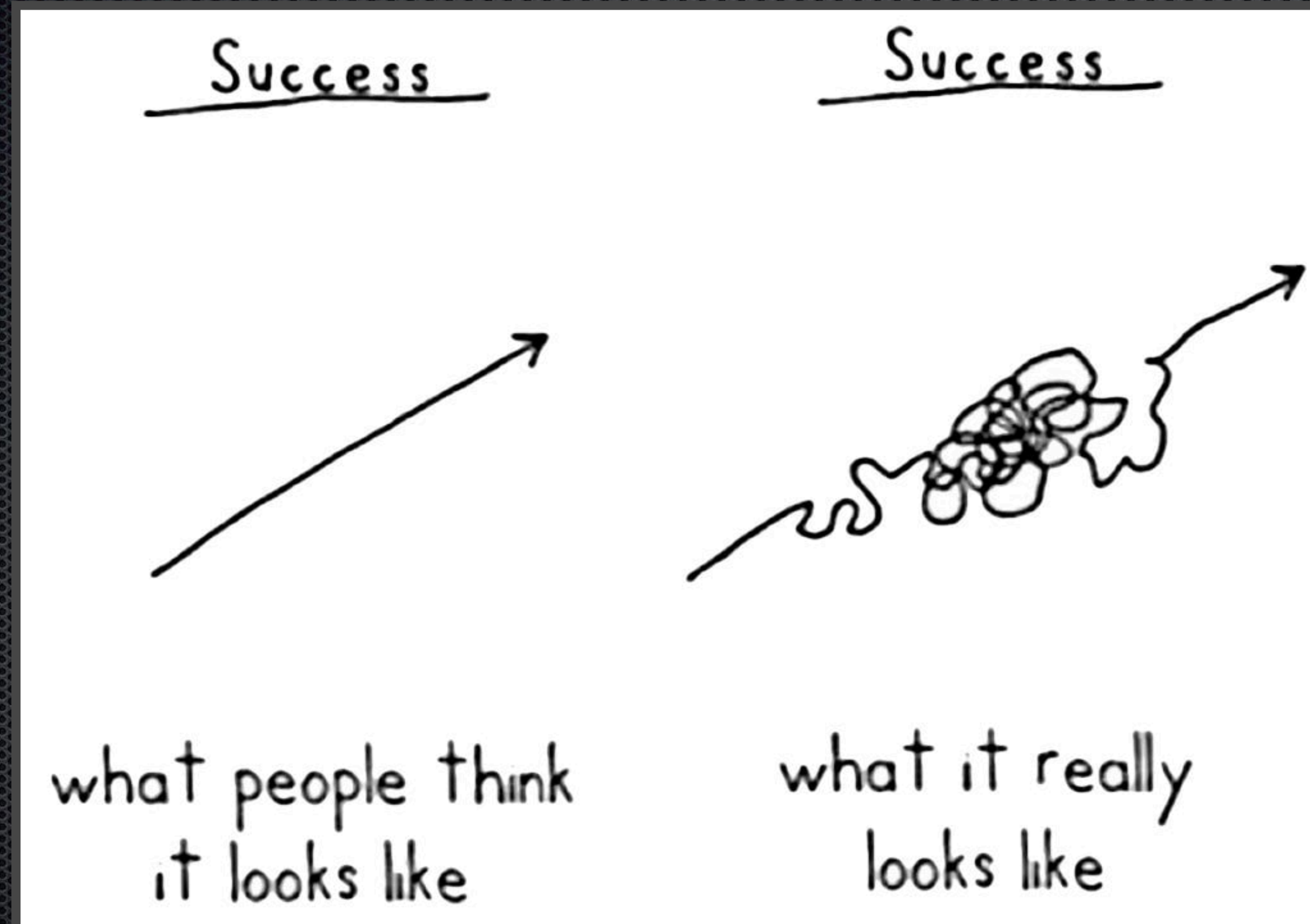
Management is overhead; management is a support function. **Visualize your hierarchy upside down**; support system, not dominance.

If you're not happy as a manager, **don't do it**. Your "sacrifice" will only hurt yourself and those around you.

Build a long, healthy, flourishing career by leaning in to **curiosity**, love of **learning**, and surrounding yourself with **amazing people**. :)

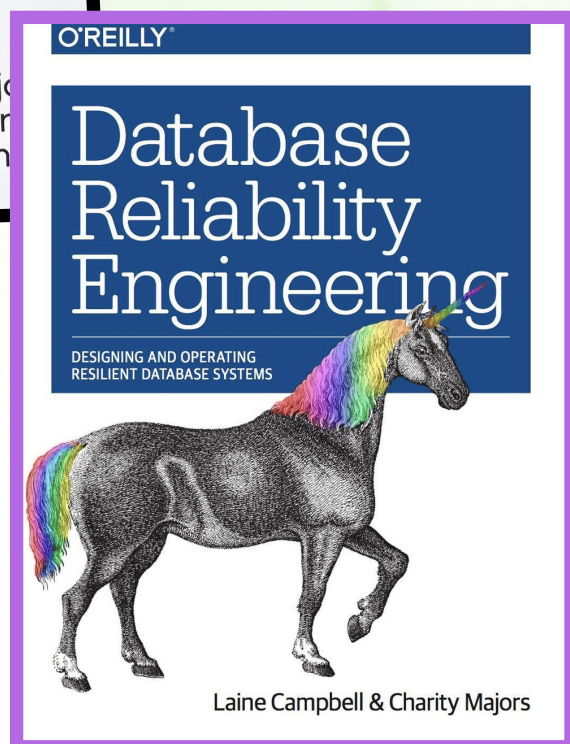
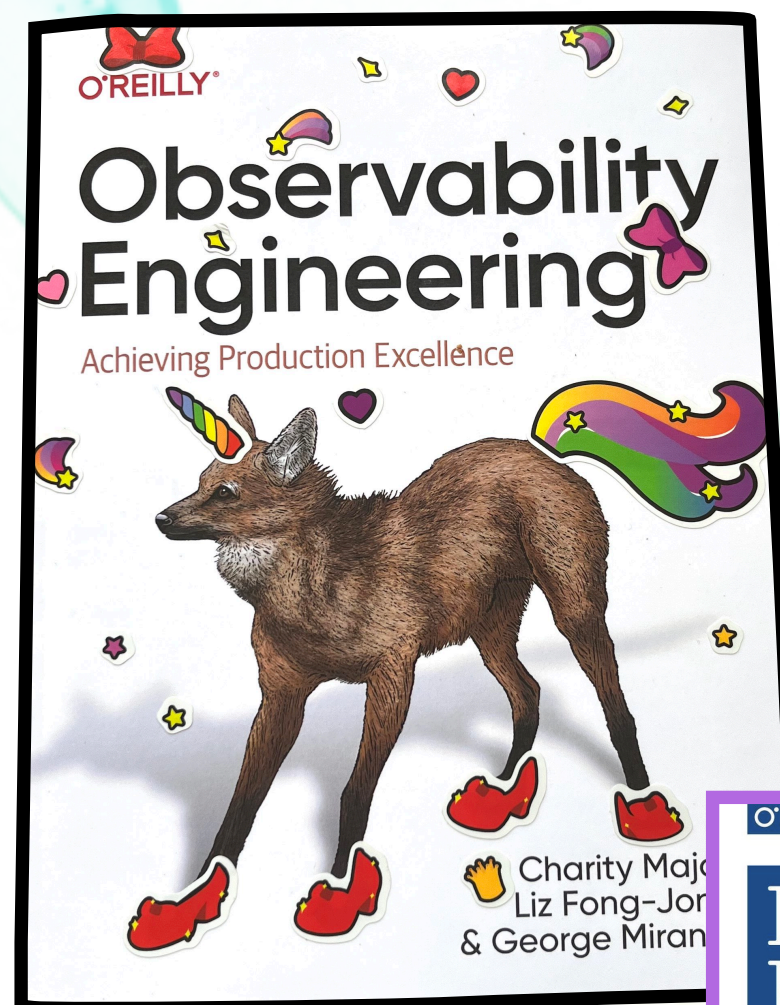


Only you get to say what success looks like for you.



source: Dmitri Martin, "this is a book"





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engineer/cofounder/CTO

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