



Keeping Roland Happy

June 2015 – August 2021

LECTOR SI MONUMENTUM REQUIRIS CIRCUMSPICE

Reader, if you seek his monument, look around you.

— Epitaph of Sir Christopher Wren, St Paul's Cathedral

Welcome to ROLI

To progress on the career ladder at ROLI, you must do two things:

1. Manage Roland well.
2. Look after the interests of yourself, your team, and the company.

The two priorities are usually not in conflict. When they are, this guide may help.

Your actual function here is to execute Roland's vision, and to provide him with personal validation. The ROLI team has seen and experienced enough to understand, and largely to forgive, the ulterior games that result.

Unlike you, Roland has never had an employer. Charles and Corey have worked nowhere but ROLI. Tahmima wrote a very good novel in her early twenties and this has framed her career (and, frankly, her competence) ever since. The four form an inner circle that drives the culture of ROLI. They have their own ways of doing things, and little respect for experience, however earned or proven, that runs counter to their instincts. This worked in the early years to build a strong, individual culture. You can see how well it has scaled beyond the first hundred employees by looking at any aspect of our recent data.

This is intended as a guide to thriving at ROLI. There is nowhere else quite like it. You may not ever need this manual, but it won't do you any harm to know that it exists.

Golden Rules

1. **Buy into Roland's self-image as a polymathic genius: designer, philosopher, engineer, musician, entrepreneur, visionary.** Roland is the most intelligent person in any room: he often tells us so. The excesses of the startup CEO culture play into this. Investors need Roland's genius to grow their fortunes; celebrities exchange some of their glamour for some of his; highly-talented people queue up to work at ROLI to subordinate themselves to him; a shelf of his products turns a retail store into a destination. Mirror his gestures and echo his vocabulary. When representing the company yourself, it must be clear that it is life's greatest privilege to work at ROLI. When you are successful, give Roland the first refusal to own you, and your success, in public.
2. **Risk is good, and never irresponsible.** Roland is an inveterate gambler. Talk only in terms of growth and opportunity. Avoid mentioning risk except as the most exciting ingredient of any venture. Don't discuss the probability, or even the prospect, of failure.

3. **Do not take a contrary position when an audience is present, even for rhetorical reasons.** Especially when there is an audience, there is no healthy argument with Roland. You are here to back him up. Do not challenge his behaviour towards you or anybody in your care. Do not counsel against the decisions he makes. Be especially wary of spaces where debate is explicitly invited in front of other people: he is expecting unity and consensus. Accept no invitation to conflict, and satisfy no desire for drama.
4. **Be the right person at the right time.** When a narcissist is covered in shit, look like a toilet roll. In tough times, manage by command and delegation: this is what Roland would do. He will expect you to amplify and mediate his edicts to other people.
5. **Set personal boundaries for your own protection.** You have to ration your own energy as a first priority. For most people, this is instinctive. If your boundaries are on the permeable side, or if you obtain gratification from helping others with their personal dramas, you are in danger. Boundaries will usually be respected if they're set early and maintained consistently through bargaining or stubbornness. Avoid writing cheques against your own personal life. Keep friends and activities outside the company and find nourishment there. Reciprocal relationships exist at ROLI, but cannot be depended upon.
6. **Decisions are made on the basis of your twenty-minute slide deck.** Roland thinks in Keynote. Keep your decks oiled.

Introducing narcissism

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

— George Bernard Shaw, 'Maxims for Revolutionists'

Roland is an archetype of narcissistic personality disorder, which is nothing to be ashamed of — in fact, shamelessness is one of its defining traits. There are authoritative books on the subject elsewhere. This document is largely a primer.

With very few exceptions, narcissistic personality disorder is not correctable. Part of the disorder is a lack of a suitably-developed 'self' to improve, which means we are stuck with our narcissist. Energy you spend fruitlessly trying to redeem (or make excuses for) one is better spent elsewhere. I will recommend [one](#) free article from Harvard Business Review, and the excellent [book](#) by Sandy Hotchkiss.

Narcissism versus psychopathy

Roland is a visionary, but Trump is a thug. You need to understand the difference. A visionary is cerebral; a thug is only interested in power.

— ROLI marketer in 2017

As a brief but important digression, two personality disorders are often conflated incorrectly. Narcissists and psychopaths are frequently confused. Both exhibit impaired empathy and conscience, are grandiose, and live a parasitic existence amid other people's misery and unpaid bills, but they are different. Comparing the two is important for two reasons:

1. Roland is not a psychopath, and it will not help to call him one;
2. A comparison of the two pathologies helps to illuminate ours.

Psychopaths are compulsive actors, and do not care if their lies are revealed. If a mask falls to reveal their deception, they shift to another mask. Eventually, a practised veneer of charm and sincerity may cause you to like what you see, and that's how they'll get you. Their lies are glib, fast-moving, and intended to dazzle for their own amusement or personal gain.

A narcissist has only one mask, and nothing underneath. They are completely invested in it, so it's very important that you like it. A narcissist may lie continually and methodically, but their deception is a blunt instrument. It serves a deliberate and obvious end:

- To flatter those with greater money or influence;
- To neutralise anybody who poses a threat;
- To sell you an impression of their intellectual, cultural, and moral superiority *that they utterly believe to be authentic.*

This is the make-up of the classic cult leader. They exploit your desire for excitement, for a hero, or for a deeper purpose to existence. If you point out deceit or inconsistency, you hurt them twice. Firstly, by uncovering a flaw in their reasoning that they have overlooked; secondly, by striking at their delusion. They cannot bear this: to expose them even slightly is to invite revenge.

The narcissist's emotional world is painfully real to them, but their model of themselves and other people is underdeveloped. Hence a narcissist misses most of the psychological complexity around them, and their tactics for controlling others are crude and limited. A successful psychopath, on the other hand, is psychologically adept, and will constantly experiment with you and read your response.

The narcissist's thin skin and need for constant validation are why they are especially dangerous. The day that you outlive your usefulness to a psychopath, they will discard you and quickly move on to another mark. But a narcissist will continue to burn with rage, and will pursue you even after you leave their orbit.

Do not accept the argument that the world needs narcissists. This bears repeating, because if you're here you have probably, to some extent, had your virtues and vulnerabilities exploited. Do not waste excuses on those who should be making their own. Do not waste energy on those who would not return the favour.

I'll write the full book about this one day, but it's probably the best reason to stick around. It is worth studying Roland because you will encounter his kind again and again.

Specifically Roland

Roland is a charismatic and grandiose visionary, and a natural salesman, especially when the product is himself. He possesses genius as a corporate champion and fundraiser. He's charming; wildly ambitious; adept at convincing people of his perspective and driving them to work all hours to deliver it. Our team is largely loyal and one of the most capable you are likely to find.

On the other hand, Roland is a poor team worker and unsympathetic by default. He cannot listen or internalise the experience of others. He has — and will always have — a childish level of self-awareness. He cannot abide being interrupted mid-speech, and his speeches vastly outlast his material. He is interested in other people only as tools. He will appoint you a domain to look after; hours later, he will walk into your meeting unannounced, take over the agenda, and sabotage you.

ROLI's company handbook once cited the word *destabilisation* as a positive part of our creative process. The idea was that executives should intentionally disrupt a team's workflow to stop them from falling into banality: this would facilitate innovation. 'A stable team,' the credo ran, 'is a stale team.' [Wikipedia](#) has a healthier perspective on destabilisation as a psychological weapon. In practice, an unabated flow of chaos from above leads to labour without direction or end, and rapidly to disenfranchisement and burnout. Chaos needs the countermanding force of order. You should provide this for your team, as an umbrella and a filter, but it will eventually wear you out. Some have been excellent at this, and a few have done so with a stamina at which I can only wonder. Still, it is bearable only for so long.

There are warning signs of Roland being upset, which you can identify and soothe before he reaches the shouting-and-swearing stage. (Don't reach this stage. In some relationships, thunderstorms clear the air; in Roland's case, they clear your desk.) Particularly when under pressure, he will display breathtaking petulance or callousness. His demand that you attend an HR-mediated listening exercise or take a walk with him will usually prefigure a bout of mild temper, and can head off a more serious one.

Let's put Steve Jobs away

When people of a certain age think of narcissism in the tech sector, they think of Steve Jobs. Walter Isaacson's authorised biography of him describes a man who was callous, petulant, and cruel to his family and many others around him. On the other hand, it illustrates some emotional sophistication.

Jobs had an ability to lose arguments in good humour and accept and improve on his mistakes, as he notably did between his two stints at Apple. He even tolerated some subterfuge if it turned out that his opponent had a superior idea.

In an attempt, in part, to explain such complexities, psychologists divide narcissism in several ways: vulnerable versus grandiose in behaviour; psychodynamic (the incorrigible kind) versus learned (the improvable kind), and so on. The truth is that a narcissistic personality can emerge as a complex amalgam of deeply ingrained behaviour and a patchwork of techniques learned later in life, and will manifest itself differently according to the power relationships between the narcissist and others.

ROLI from a macroeconomic perspective

It is hard in life to tell a genuine visionary from a charlatan. Because business runs closer to the principle of *caveat emptor* than the wider world, the difficulty is even greater, and a charlatan is more likely to reap a reward without consequences. Investors care mostly about who else has invested and how much, so short-term success is often just a self-sustaining pile-on.

The early 2010s will be remembered as a peculiar time. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, equity companies enriched by quantitative easing sought more places to invest their money. The time was ripe for thousands of smooth-tongued college graduates and their sophomoric philosophy. They tapped friends and relatives for seed capital and, in the certainty that they could run a multinational business straight after college having read a couple of books on the subject, went in search of more.

A bull market agrees with such people. ROLI has raised more than \$50m since 2012 to lubricate a vehicle that is part thought experiment, part vanity project, and which all the evidence suggests is not working. Part of its appeal to investors may be that it is cheap, culturally interesting, and attracts celebrities. In London, most tech startups are high-cost and prosaic. A music business is a rare and shiny stone in an undistinguished landscape of fintech and medtech companies. It is a pleasing adjunct for a financier, demographically vulnerable to a mid-life crisis and a brush with glamour.

Venture capitalists play the spread. Because nothing is certain, and relatively little is even controllable, a VC might be better spending their attention and money placing the next bet than fiddling with an existing one. So Roland gets left alone, and this is fine for both parties. Founders can usually structure the deal so that, even if the business fails, they leave as multimillionaires after a few years. Investors get plenty of tax relief, and can make a sizable gain if even a fraction of their portfolio performs well.

The damage, as always, is at the bottom. As an employee, you are compensated in share options that are likely to prove worthless if the company fails, and may tie you to a fairly unattractive proposition should the company succeed. You are sold a story

of growth and potential to cajole you into a job that is often compensated below the market rate. You accept your place in a precarious organisation run by a green boss, and must fight to preserve your rank every time an executive is brought in or a company acquired.

As a taxpayer, you provide grants, credits, and relief to investors and to startups. Most of these are entirely misspent. Whenever a company fails, it leaves unpaid bills that we subsidise through inflation and taxation. Aside from the regressive effect on society, it is very poor use of talent.

Every company has culture and politics, of course: daily frustrations and bureaucracy that don't exist in another place with identical pressures but a different set of rules, or a different social contract. ROLI started with a strong identity. Although the culture has been diluted by acquisitions, rapid expansion, and the realpolitik of serving customers and investors, it is the same company.

ROLI is Roland's vision. The company's name is his childhood nickname, and our idiosyncrasies are reflections of his own. He's disarmingly happy to admit this. Nevertheless, Roland's is an imposing and persuasive personality, and that's why he's the CEO.

Transmit and Receive

"What do you talk about in board meetings?"

"We don't say anything. Roland does all the talking."

— Q&A exchange during Team Time, between a ROLI team member and a Series B investor.

Roland has two modes. Particularly when he feels under pressure, he will resort to Transmit Mode. If he calls a meeting, or chooses to attend one he doesn't usually attend, he is in Transmit Mode. It is now his meeting, following his agenda, and he will do all the talking. When he is bored of talking, he will leave the room. Transmit Mode Roland believes that facilitating means pushing other people into action. The chance of winning a concession (or even an audience) from Transmit Mode Roland is nil.

The price of pushing to win a concession or favour from Transmit Mode Roland is a level of daily scrutiny and interference that will leave you powerless. Much of the tension at ROLI is down to the fact that this is necessary by design. Roland does not deny the value of self-sufficiency: he genuinely wonders why teams do not seem to be making steady progress towards autonomy. It takes experience and humility to consider that you may be the problem.

To kick off an initiative or change something, and to avoid being dispatched to attend twice-daily meetings and write endless self-justifying reports, you need to speak to Receive Mode Roland. This means managing him well.

If Roland is not specifically attending, book a meeting with him for the following day, take a walk with him between buildings if you have to, focus on his wants if he looks like he's getting angry, and you will find him more malleable.

Team leadership

Whatever your method, keep your job by understanding what Roland really wants from you and your team, and by delivering that fast. (Or don't keep your job: that's quite a popular option.) Focus on the next working day. Expect work executed on Friday to bear little resemblance to the plan made on Monday. People who need to fix their sights on a distant target, or who need longer-term metrics to do their jobs, do not last long in a company that regards your joy as a quantifiable variable.

The need for some amount of order builds a peculiar kind of morale that is already endemic in most teams. They may be united in contempt for Roland, but they will also appreciate how dangerous it is to engage with or act upon these feelings. Care must be taken that they do not betray themselves, which can be hard in practice. A careless snigger or involuntary eye-roll in a meeting is not legally actionable, but will leave you defending yourself or a colleague against a laborious, opaque and arbitrary disciplinary process.

Persuading Roland

All this suggests that Roland is entirely blind to reason, but it is more subtle than that. In the aftermath of an episode of destabilisation, give yourself and your team some room to decompress. Take a tea break, debrief, perfunctorily do whatever is asked of you for the day, and book a short meeting with Roland at the earliest opportunity to present feedback. Remember to focus on a single most important reason to pursue another plan. When he's receiving, Roland will listen patiently to suggestions and, while his initiatives are often provocative, they are seldom presented as a *true fait accompli*. Established teams have different practices, rituals, and methods for working with and around Roland.

Roland will not divest responsibility for anything he considers to be a commercial decision. 'You're not commercial' is an easy tool of abuse against anybody who presumes upon his power. If that line is aimed at you, don't push any further: Roland is pulling CEO rank, has armed his torpedoes, and you'll need to come back later.

Patrick Lencioni's book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* is part of the executive team's required reading material. Contrary to its teachings, artificial harmony is the true aim of ROLI's senior meetings. In debating games, the most successful players at senior level (when I was in the room) would filibuster with points that were unrelated to any conversation we'd had that day. This gave Roland the opportunity to discourse on the company line without danger of being contradicted or misinterpreted.

If you want to pursue an initiative, a private audience is a good way of sounding out Roland's perspective. It will allow him to prepare, and to imprint it with his ownership. It also avoids wasted effort in written communication, researching details that he doesn't want to hear. He needs first refusal. A good gambit is to start with a recollection that allows him to own the idea: 'Remember a few days ago, we had that conversation? I've thought about what you said. It's brilliant, and we could deliver it by taking these steps [insert your idea].'

The design team's strategy of persuasion involves an element of insubordination and a lot of additional work (they seldom leave the office), but it is effective. If Roland insists on taking *Route A* and the designers know that it isn't going to work, they will

pursue it with the appearance of full intent and good faith whilst also following *Route B*. At the next meeting, they'll show both directions. A combination comprising mostly *Route B* wins most of the time, with just enough of *Route A* to persuade Roland that he saw the future all along.

It's best to have a conversation about misgivings face-to-face with Roland as soon as you can. Stick with a single narrative based around one counter-argument that is most likely to convince, even if you can think of many. Not only does consistency make your position appear more considered, it will allow him a gentler way out. It's forgivable for him to make a poor decision because he missed a single detail, but if you present him with a fusillade of reasons why his plan cannot work, you will trigger his shame response, and this will end your turn.

If the discussion is going against you, steer it towards dispassionate facts, ask his view, and concede in the name of compromise. If this is beyond your resources, practise the script in which you express your gratitude for the lesson and hope to bask in his wisdom for years to come. Obtain your own validation in less harmful ways.

Roland sees risk as a gambler would, so it is not helpful to broach risk limitation as a subject. State the advantages of your proposal at the highest conceptual level, from a customer/creator's point of view, putting Roland in the frame as the end user. Talk only about growth and opportunity. Framing a conversation in terms of avoiding danger or controlling risk will see you labelled critical, alarmist, or negative. It's hard to remove these labels once you are wearing them.

It never pays to tour members of the executive team to poll them individually on the merits of an idea or viewpoint before an agenda item is aired, even for rhetorical reasons. If you must do this for your own health, it is acceptable. Such support may help to preserve your strength and orientation. But have such conversations on the understanding that anyone can deny that they ever took place. Roland hates to be worked around, and anything that looks like plotting will attract his displeasure.

There is one example of a senior team member successfully deploying reverse psychology. His relationship with Roland had deteriorated to the point where he could get a decision that his team needed by requesting the opposite. Roland would make the intended decision out of spite. If you've been sent to Coventry, you have nothing to lose in attempting to turn Roland's vindictive streak to your advantage.

Daily reporting duty

Being ordered to write daily reports about your team's progress is dispiriting, and may be the first step Roland takes towards cauterising you entirely. Play it carefully.

You can rightly expect to be reprimanded for hiding important news in the noise of daily communication. That's a poor game. And don't halt reports unilaterally in the hope that they'll be forgotten. An infraction of this kind may be ignored at the time, but later used as evidence.

Remember the Grey Rock method for dealing with a narcissist. Settle in for a three-week stretch, producing your fifteen (or twenty-one) daily reports to order. Keep them mundane to the point of unreadability and, after that, ask if he wants them to continue.

An address to a large audience is Roland's favourite way to consider an idea. It is a condition of working for ROLI that team members sometimes weather his grandstanding and listen at length to his internal monologue.

Email practice

Even without the inevitable mistakes in email etiquette, Cc-shaming is a zero-sum game that still forms part of the dynamic in certain teams. It typically takes two forms:

1. A rebuke or a chase-up for overdue work is Cc-ed to a senior audience, with the intention of increasing the pressure on a peer or subordinate.
2. A sensitive or backhanded remark is broadcast by 'accidentally' Cc-ing a third party into a response to damage a rival.

It's safest to assume that anything you write to an email group will be broadcast to the whole company, and that the sender might plausibly claim to have acted in good faith. Genuine accidents can happen. For this reason, keep emails dispassionate.

Be defensive. Choose your confidants carefully. Keep tricky conversations off the record and, if you can, off the premises. Share nothing by work email that you wouldn't be happy to read aloud at Team Time. If you need to bounce ideas around or let off some steam, a deniable chat off-site is the prudent way to do it. ROLI keeps the local cafes in business.

Roland will not always respond in time. Use this to your advantage: it can grant you extra autonomy. Deliberately stating your default course of action in an email is a respected and frequently imitated pattern. 'Here is what I propose, and I shall execute this if I don't hear from you by Wednesday: ...'

Slide decks

Roland thinks in Keynote. In cases where an urgent decision must be made, you will be criticised for over-polishing a presentation, but this is the exception. In all other cases, polish.

Ask a designer to redraw your sketches to avoid working in freehand. Always use the Contax Pro font, and get everything proofread. Roland's input is, if anything, more likely to address cosmetic shortcomings than problems of content. Your deck must look great. Where Roland is concerned, style *is* substance.

Show, don't tell. Sketches, renders and demos are more arresting than any number of words, and will get your point across directly. Polish with great care, as the polish itself can steal the show.

The obsession with visual details applies to project planning. Preparing a Gantt chart and a budgeted plan, mocking up a crew of team members with the right skills (regardless of whether they have capacity), and putting forward a projected completion date (no matter how fantastical) will make an initiative seem far more concrete and compelling. These anticipate Roland's next requests. No matter how neglectful of the larger programme plan this material is, it will reveal some business insight, and will transform the reception of your concept.

Four diagrams are favourites of Roland's, to the extent that they have become tropes:

1. **A sectioned pyramid.** Shows the something-for-everybody verticality of a set of product offerings;
2. **Systems or priorities as concentric circles.** To be interpreted like an archery target, with the middle coming first and ancillary wins radiating outwards.
3. **An exponentially-increasing graph.** For disrupting a market: a graph of sales or market cap against time, superimposed on the product roadmap.
4. **One-two-three.** Three deliberate and complementary goals: three markets to reach, three platforms to pursue, three-piece software suites, and so on.

Keep your team's deck polished even if you're not expecting to deliver it, as Roland can spring surprises.

When starting a new presentation, try to find out if anybody else has been given a similar brief, and call a meeting with them to discuss how work should be partitioned. Roles are poorly defined and communicated here, so you must take ownership of the division of labour and establish consistency. It's embarrassing to present a plan only for a colleague to present an incompatible one, whereupon you discover that you have not accounted for a critical piece of information that you were not told and could not have discovered. This happens a lot: either somebody is being groomed to take over your team, or they are being Machiavellian and doing it anyway.

In case it is not yet clear, a leadership role is principally a performance piece, so you will be playing a movie caricature of your job. Your slide deck should be an exercise in self-promotion and a chance to sell your team's work, even though your colleagues know what they've achieved and don't require adulation. Keep answers to all questions down to two-sentence elevator pitches.

Roland as a designer

Roland often states that he designed, programmed, and built the first Seaboard prototype himself. (The truth of this statement depends on whom you ask.) Roland understands the proof-of-concept stages of engineering and design, but the rest he treats as farming.

Competent company leaders live according to multipliers that tell them whether they'll be in business next year: manufacturing yields; cost of goods shipped; engagement and retention figures. These numbers suffer from the way we do business: they are far lower than usual at ROLI, in spite of the competence of the team.

Design for manufacture, the craft of making software, data science, and anything that happens inside a factory, are not considered creative pursuits and are afforded little concern. There are advantages and disadvantages if this is your area of operation: such fields of endeavour receive inadequate attention, but suffer little interference.

Roland's aesthetic eye is better than his 'hard' skills: design, craft, and sketching. These, in turn, are stronger than his portfolio management skills: his ability to distil the essence of a product, or to execute a plan to deliver it. He will be distracted by materials, finishes, and corners at design meetings, but will clarify nothing about who the product is designed for, why it is necessary, or which features it needs. The result is that ROLI tends, as a company, to perform a convincing pantomime of working through customer data, interaction and experience design best practice, and other

daily considerations, but none of these efforts will be allowed to coalesce until long after an object's final form is too established to change.

The Christmas launch season will precipitate a crisis every June, when a flurry of last-minute features will be added, or an app cancelled and rewritten, in the hope that it will broaden the product's appeal. Regardless of our talents, the result will inevitably be rushed, unconfident, and inconsistent. Thus the GRAND's controls are too minimalistic; the control panel of the RISE is ergonomically disappointing and inconsistent with its software, with its slide function and the X-Y pad underutilised and its USB socket too fragile; the LightPad has an arbitrary side-switch, the DNA connectors are mostly a gimmick, and the product could have been about 40% cheaper to build had we dispensed with expensive features that customers did not care about. NOISE was ostensibly a mass-market app, functionally straightforward, but was packed with iconography and workflows that would have alienated all but a seasoned electronic musician: the result appealed to very few people.

How much is too much information

Any boss will feel compelled to intervene when they lose confidence in a subordinate. The difference at ROLI is how often this comes about. Most weeks, trust that a team member has won over months is undone in an instant.

In theory, Roland is no longer directly responsible for every decision that is made at ROLI, and cannot maintain full situational awareness. Meeting every interview candidate and personally signing every contract are ways in which he keeps control of the bigger things, but even these are slipping. CEOs are insecure about their loss of absolute control and total awareness as the business scales, as they should be. Witness the press conferences and parliamentary committees at which CEOs of multinational corporations are expected to know everything.

It is a professional and legal necessity to keep Roland aware of any significant decision that is made. He sees a lot more than most of us: this perspective means that feedback is often useful. He is more annoyed by being in the dark than by being supplied information that he doesn't need (although he will regard both as irritants), so err on the side of providing too much data.

Roland responds well if he knows bad news quickly, and may decide not to wade in if he feels that a situation is in competent hands. He will, however, demand daily updates until a situation is resolved. As long as you're en route to coming up with a plan or a solution, it's better to alert him even when there's still no way out.

Even if a decision is yours to make, draw it to his attention using a Cc. There is almost always time to do this, and it should be done before you commit. The worst that will happen is that you'll be mildly told off for wasting his time should he be under particular pressure from elsewhere.

Keep a distance from your work

Roland has an unhealthy conception of the work-life boundary. If he asks for information outside working hours, give him an enthusiastic response at the earliest hour if he's likely to be awake. Few things upset him more than not being able to find you when you're the most reliable source of information.

Senior team members have been criticised for holidaying in places with poor mobile reception, and for being unreachable on a long-haul flight. If you're senior and interested in remaining senior, don't fall off the radar even on holiday. A few minutes of your time is all that Roland may require. If you must be unavailable or find yourself in a place with no mobile signal, let him know the rules.

Enough team members have been affected by relationship break-ups and physical and mental health problems outside work to state this explicitly: nourish good friendships outside work, and establish and maintain healthy work-life boundaries, even as you're told it's our policy to strive for work-life synergy and obliterate the line that divides the two. As welcoming as it can be, ROLI is too political to constitute a surrogate family, and part of your day must be your own.

Humour

Use humour sparingly and, if you really want to use it, telegraph it. Package humour or levity, for example, with 'If I were joking, I might say ...' or 'This situation reminds me of something funny ...' just in case. It's best to keep things formal and concrete to give Roland a safe way of keeping his upper hand. He has difficulty following the vacillation between formal and informal registers that is a cornerstone of British humour. Do this with him and he'll suspect that the joke is on him. (Because it is.)

All this said, Roland usually has the grace to deal with mistakes, can be self-deprecating if not entirely self-aware, and possesses enough levity to accommodate playfulness in the intended spirit. But only when he's in control. If he doesn't get it, let him off the hook, and don't make him the target.

Never stray into territory that could be construed to offend a minority group even in a lighthearted or deliberately provocative way. Any language of the kind that divides or diminishes is beyond the pale at ROLI, even when the joke is constructed to land upon you. It can result in disciplinary action.

Junior narcissists, Machiavellians, and schemers

There has been a tendency among some new hires to invite Roland to take active participation in the work they're doing in the hope that it will increase their visibility. There are good reasons for supporting partnerships like these, but they are seldom handled with sufficient care.

Here is the risk: at ROLI, each manager has a tenuous influence over the work they think they own, and over their team. Aside from the parlous state of executive politics, there are frequent hires and acquisitions that can alter the landscape of responsibility in ways that are seldom clear. We fix this in a big meeting once or twice a year, where roles are shaken and re-dealt, so the next game can begin.

Your own loss of status may begin when you lose sight of a project that you are running that suddenly becomes important. The only effective way of pre-empting this is to use the PAL and mentorship systems to provide junior team members with a continual source of trust, so that you have their confidence and they don't decide to work for somebody else. Keep the hierarchy shallow. Stay interested in their work, schedule regular catch-ups, and at least you'll know what they're doing. This is a good way of learning what else is afoot.

Epilogue

*The game with the Super Fascist is defined as follows:
If you do something bad, the SF gets at least two points. If you
don't do something good that you could have done, the SF gets
at least one point. And if you are OK, nobody gets a point. The
aim is to keep the SF's score low.*

– Paul Erdős

In love or labour, you know that you're dealing with a tyrant if you begin the game with all the points you'll ever have, and only lose them as it progresses. Any such game ends with you being discarded in one of two ways. Should you commit what is perceived to be a grievous offense, your score will be zeroed irrespective of any good you have done, and you will be swiftly banished. Otherwise your favour will erode more slowly, until one day you lose out to an untested newcomer with a clean slate and a lack of situational awareness.

Competence is not a winning strategy because nobody is infallible. Those who fare best at this game are not the greatest leaders or practitioners. Instead they are mediocre journeymen, aware of what's in it for them. They bear the ride for as long as possible, amassing whatever they can grasp and sacrificing their colleagues to buy themselves time. Inevitably, they too bite the dust. If you enjoy such a game, you're likely to be a fellow narcissist or an enabler, and will have seen Roland coming.

This document has a cathartic dimension for me: I held six roles here since 2013, all of them ending in demotion. But it started with a desire to build a better company. Underneath the rituals and the nonsense, we are united by an authentic connection to our work. We need to practise and make better mistakes, elsewhere if not here.

Like everybody at ROLI, I accepted the challenge of helping it to flourish. We have accommodated engineers, designers, and managers of the first rank, and it is clear that nobody can. Roland is a persecutor who cannot modify his behaviour or cede control, so his company cannot learn or grow. The only healthy strategy is to escape him, outgrow him yourself, and excise him from your life. While Roland treats you well, it is because he needs you around. Know why, trust yourself, don't let him distort your judgement, and keep your lifeboat well stocked. Your career is far greater than his plans for you, and remains your primary responsibility.

Take this as you would any other form of soft training. It may help you to anticipate Roland's behaviour and achieve better outcomes. Be careful, though: nobody appreciates being played, even if it's for their own good.

Appendix:

Roland's notes from the leadership meeting in full

In the leadership meeting of 19th May 2015. Roland presented an impromptu guide to how we should manage him. Having intended to write this handbook for some time, I accepted this unsolicited gift, borrowing and extending his material to its present form, and updating it as I learned.

The notes that aren't in italics are verbatim and from Roland himself; the rest of this document concerns the application of them, and how to deal with the consequences.

Sentences I Like to Hear

Can I take that off your desk?

When would you like that done by?

I will get that done by [a precise time] on [a precise date].

Note: Roland survives by building a strict timetable around these deadlines, even when they're self-imposed. He is derailed or annoyed if people fail to deliver to them, but very reasonable about fluctuating workloads. In summary, take pains to mention any drifting deadline that involves Roland as far in advance as possible, and set a revised one.

It looks like I'm not going to be able to hit the deadline of [a specific time] I set myself for [some work]. I apologise for misestimating how long it would take. My judgment is that doing [a second piece of work] continues to be a higher priority. If you agree, I will stay focussed on [the second piece of work] for the next 48 hours and then turn back to [the original work]. I will deliver that to you by [a specific time]. Otherwise, let me know and I will adjust priorities and focus as needed.

Earlier today you asked me to do [something]. My understanding is that, to do that, I must first complete [a number of other things that have since come to light]. I will now complete this by [a precise date and time], cc-ing [other people], who need to be in the loop.

[Something] happened that fell below expectations or projections. This was my responsibility. My plan to address this and get us back up to speed ASAP is: ...

Where do you think I can add the most value in the coming days/weeks/months?

In order to succeed, I need help with the following three specific things: ...

How can I do better?

Things I Like to See in Email

Short, clear, well-formatted emails with numbered elements.

Thoughtful and clear email subject lines.

Good judgement regarding the creation of new email threads.

Note: Do this especially when a longish conversation turns into the need to make a decision, or if Roland is specifically name-checked: he may mute or unintentionally ignore burgeoning conversations.

Replying to emails that I'm cc-d on quickly.

Replying to emails from me super-fast.

Putting me to bcc when applicable.

Protip: this is appropriate when you expect to receive a lot of reply-alls to an email, but Roland will only need to see the original.

Directed content towards me at top of email (and definitely use my name in the 'to' field at the top if there is content directed towards me).

Sometimes bcc me on interesting, relevant emails to keep me update with key relationships etc, but don't overdo it.

Use countdown decisions sparingly. Always reference these with URGENT in the title of email, and keep Charles on cc.

Request meetings with super clear agenda and minimal time requirements – always cc Sharina and Charles. Don't just send a calendar invite.

Any queries to me should be surgically precise. Make it easy for me to forward and connect the dots.

Provide a professional auto-reply when travelling or on vacation with alternative contact info.

Paste all Google docs into email, so that they're readable on mobile devices no matter whom they're shared with.

Things I Like to See in General

Energetic focus during morning cleanup. Your own space, in particular, should be made and maintained tidily.

Clear projection in morning meeting and generally.

Punctuality, especially for morning meeting.

Passionate and rapid engagement with Role Owner [recruitment] tasks.

Effective networking and ambassadorship.

Willingness to give people feedback, respectfully to their faces; conversely, aversion to criticising people behind their backs or admitting this into team culture.

Leadership by example.

Generous but exacting treatment of colleagues and teams.

Initiative and willingness to take risks.

Note: There is one detail that softens this: contract-signing. Roland should still sign all contracts. This serves two purposes: it keeps him informed, and it allows us to get any such contracts inspected if necessary. You are [probably] not a lawyer.

Roland-specific Good Practices

Reach out to Roland directly if you urgently need an answer.

Let Roland know if you think somebody is performing either exceptionally well or unacceptably poorly.

Ask Roland for help if you feel out of options.

Absolutely let Roland know right away if something is troubling you.

Aim for clarity in briefing documents, and chase Roland to sign off where applicable.

Follow instructions from Charles.

Things I'm Not Into

Passing the buck.

Lack of ownership and lack of initiative.

Coming into Roland's office while he's working or on the phone.

Complaining.

Passively identifying problems.

Poor understanding of project-stage-specific issues.

Withholding bad news.

Careless mistakes.

Poor email etiquette, especially with external partners.

Politics.

Drama.