Us vs. Them Thinking

~~Building harmony~~

Or… not

Leaf (Jessica Roy)

Beyond Writing Code

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LeadDev StaffPlus, October 15, 2025; Q&A and Epilogue added later.

What we tried
Why it was worth trying
What I learned

Hi, I'm Leaf.

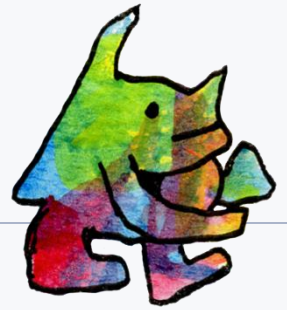
25 years in tech

Developer

Tech Lead

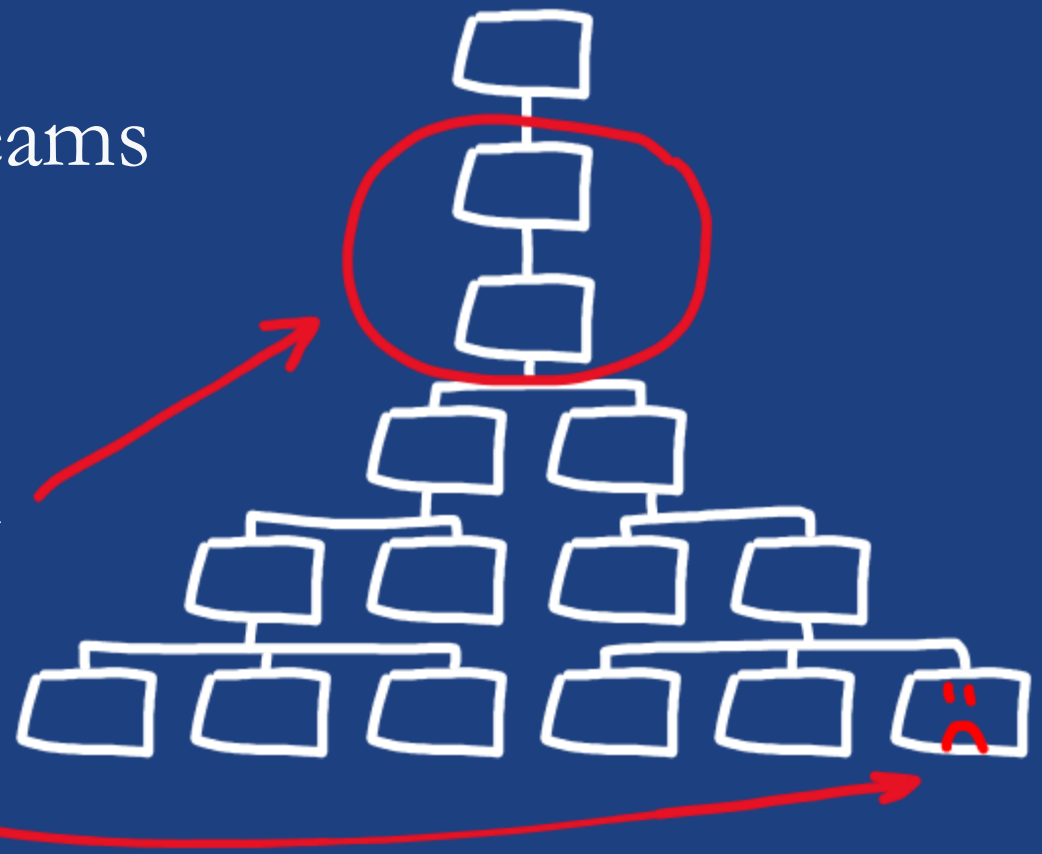
Application Architect

Writing a book



The scene: my first week…

Shared services for ~15 Dev teams
On a call with Ops
The project is behind schedule
Senior management is involved
And I now own it…



By the end of the call, *I am pacing*…

I can see how bad the conflict is.

I've resolved conflicts like this before.

I'm determined to resolve this one, too.

What we tried

Trust
Clarity
Connection
Collaboration
Intention

Trust

They're our colleagues

- We're their customer! (and blocked)
- They'll track the work

But they…

- Aren't keeping track (no one is)
- Avoid commitments
- Don't do what they say
- And will deny having said it

Trust is low

Clarity

Setting clear expectations

- Meet every week
- What we need, why, who, when…
- They agree

But they…

- Don’t follow through
- And still say they’re “done”

At least there’s *some* progress?

Connection

Making 1:1 connections

- Let's just talk, as peers
- How is this for you?
- Let's make this better, together

But they…

- Are polite but distant
- And don't want to talk about it

We can't tell what's going on

Collaboration

They're busy, so…

- Offer to work side by side
- Do what we can up front
- Make suggestions, share expertise

But they…

- Reject all of it
- Redo the work we did
- And break stuff :(

They don't trust us either?

Intention

(2 minutes early)

Listen with **curiosity**

Speak **clearly** and **respectfully**

Be of **service**

Look for **shared purpose**

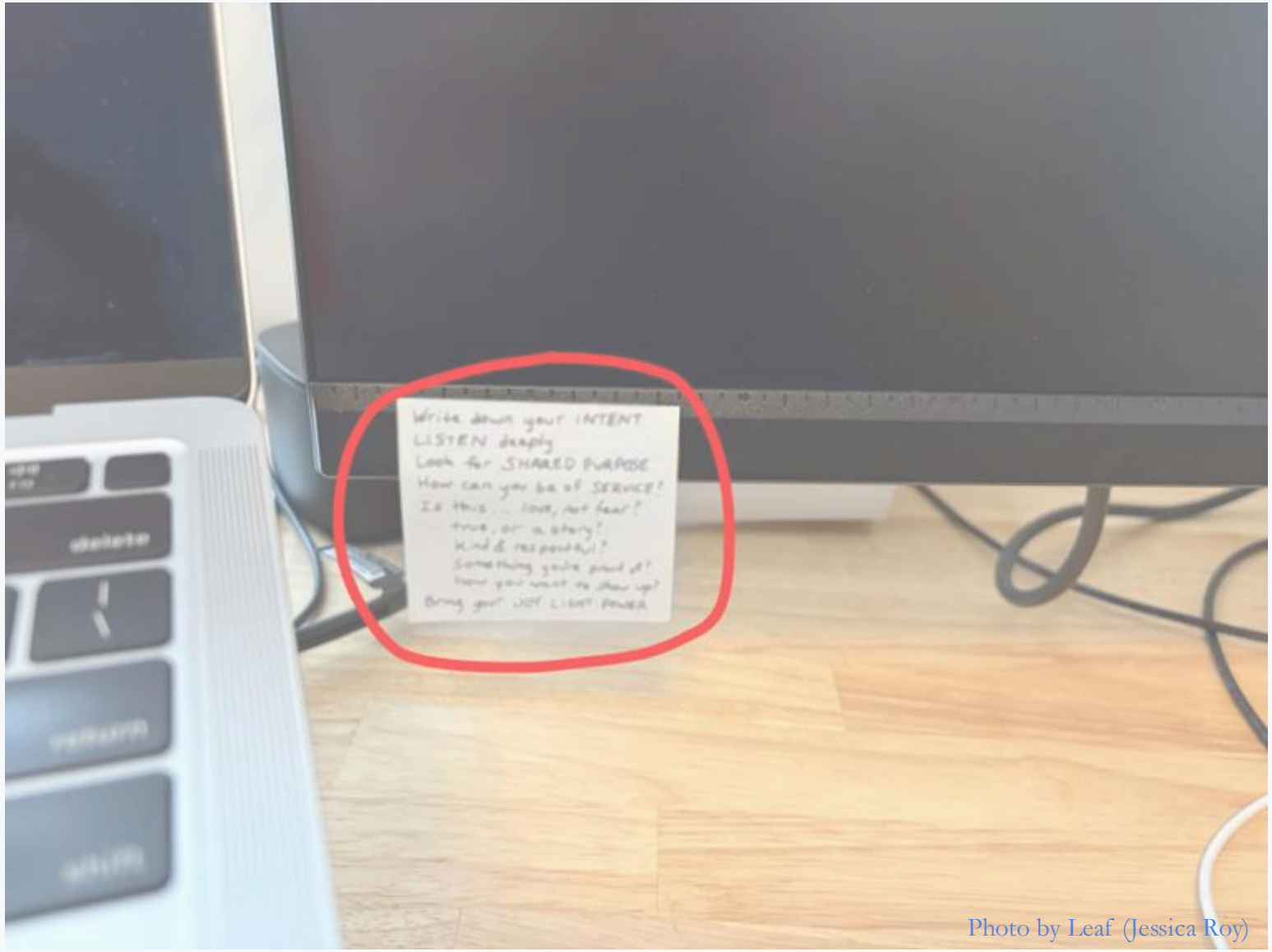


Photo by Leaf (Jessica Roy)

Questions

Is it…

… **kind?**

… **true**, or a **story**?

… ***how I want to show up?***

But…

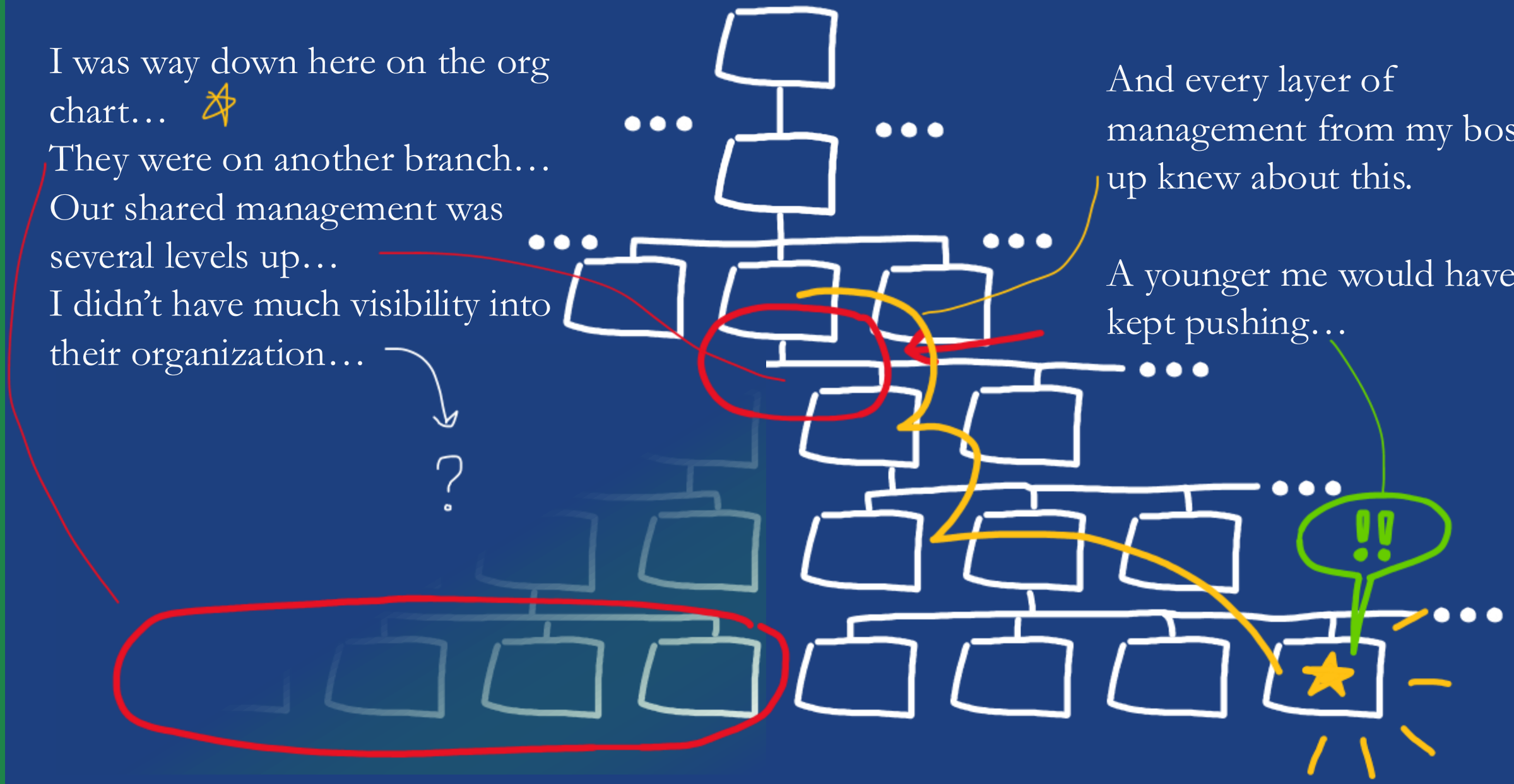
Everything is
still awful.

When will they realize that we're all on the same team?

When will they realize we're all on the same team??

—*"Them"*

I was way down here on the org chart…
They were on another branch…
Our shared management was several levels up…
I didn't have much visibility into their organization…



And every layer of management from my boss up knew about this.

A younger me would have kept pushing…

I can see how bad the conflict is.

I've resolved conflicts like this before.

~~I'm determined to resolve this one, too.~~

This wasn't mine to fix.

Continuing to try to be the hero was only hurting me.

Takeaways

Trust, clarity, connection, collaboration, intention…
are all still worth trying.

How do you want to show up?

Know when it's time to redirect your energy.

Q&A

Q&A

Q: Was there no sense of shared ownership?

A: I don't think so. If they were "done" and our so-called "requirements" were extraneous, then from that perspective, they had completed everything they owned.

The hole was not on their side of the boat, as people say.

Q&A

Q: Did you ever try talking to *their* manager?

A: We asked their manager to attend the weekly meeting with our teams where we reviewed our list of requirements. He came once or twice a month.

Seven or eight months in, he attended a forum with our developers. We had asked him to attend to answer developers' questions about the project….

Q&A

He again asserted that they were “done.”

“Except for the list of requirements of what we need before we can start,” I said.

And he said: “What list of requirements?”

The list we review with your team every week…?

Q&A

Q: Leaders are sometimes more inclined to believe people in their own organization rather than outsiders. Was that a factor here?

A: Possibly. People also tend to present their bosses with a rosier picture than reality.

By the time the story got up to our shared leadership… well, I'm not sure what information she was receiving from either of her direct reports.

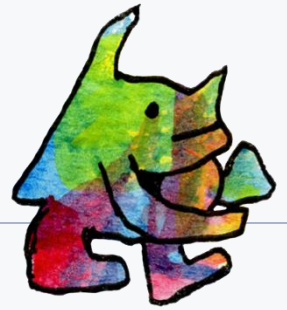
Epilogue

Epilogue

The question I got most: how does the story end?!

Oops! Inadvertent cliffhanger! We did get the project done, but it was slow and painful all the way.

Also, the deadline got extended. Isn't that interesting how deadlines evaporate sometimes.



But there is also a happier ending to the tale…

Epilogue

Their manager left. Things defrosted… slightly.

A while later, they had a reorg. A new person emerged as a leader (without the title, at first). He stepped up repeatedly to help.

We were delighted, but we were also just waiting for him to vanish like other helpful people had…

Epilogue

He didn't vanish. He is still on that team. And he's got the title and authority now, too!

My team now has a helpful and friendly ally on the other side of the org chart. The dev team tech leads speak of him with affection. He's a problem-solver.

Not everything is perfect – culture change can be slow. But he and my team's manager sit near each other, each ready to help the other.

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leaf@beyondwritingcode.com