

# Improving Your Team(work)

Engineering

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# What is this talk about?

- This talk is from the perspective of an Individual Contributor (IC)
- I wanted to look at behaviours within a team
  - And the impact that individuals' behaviour can have on the rest of the team
- Specifically:
  - What can go wrong
  - Why it goes wrong
  - What you (as an IC) can do about it, if anything

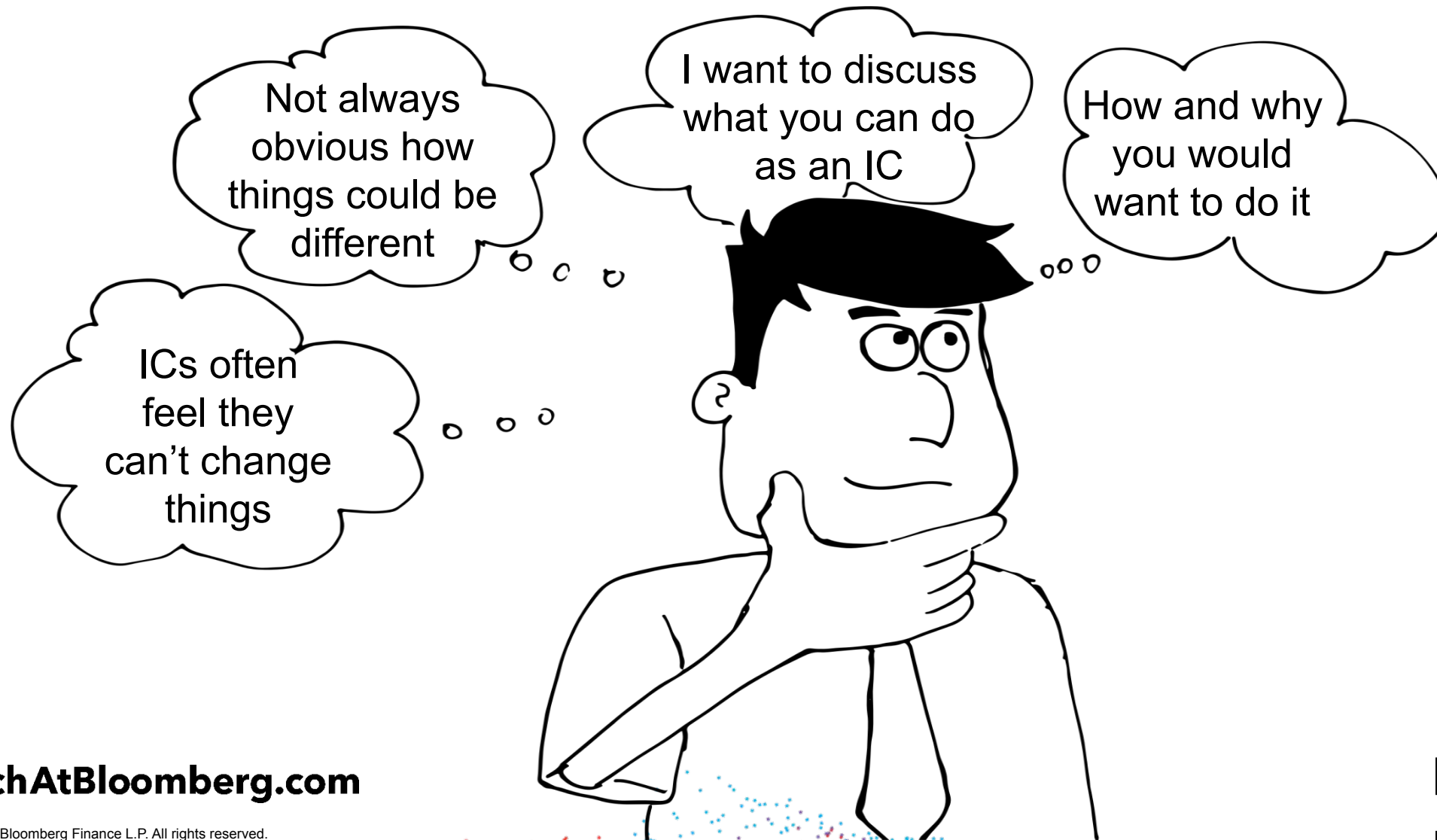
# Who am I?



- I am an IC and have been for most of my career
- I have tried being a Team Leader, but it was not for me
- Worked on a lot of different teams
  - Many had good aspects
  - Pretty much all had problems at some point



# Why am I giving this talk?



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## And what won't we discuss

- Some things aren't entirely under your control
  - Org structure
  - Workload
  - Planning
  - How and what is rewarded
  - Who is on your team
- Not covering TL and management responsibilities
  - Both have a big impact on how your team functions, but are out of scope for this talk
  - Many, many other talks on how to be a better manager and/or leader



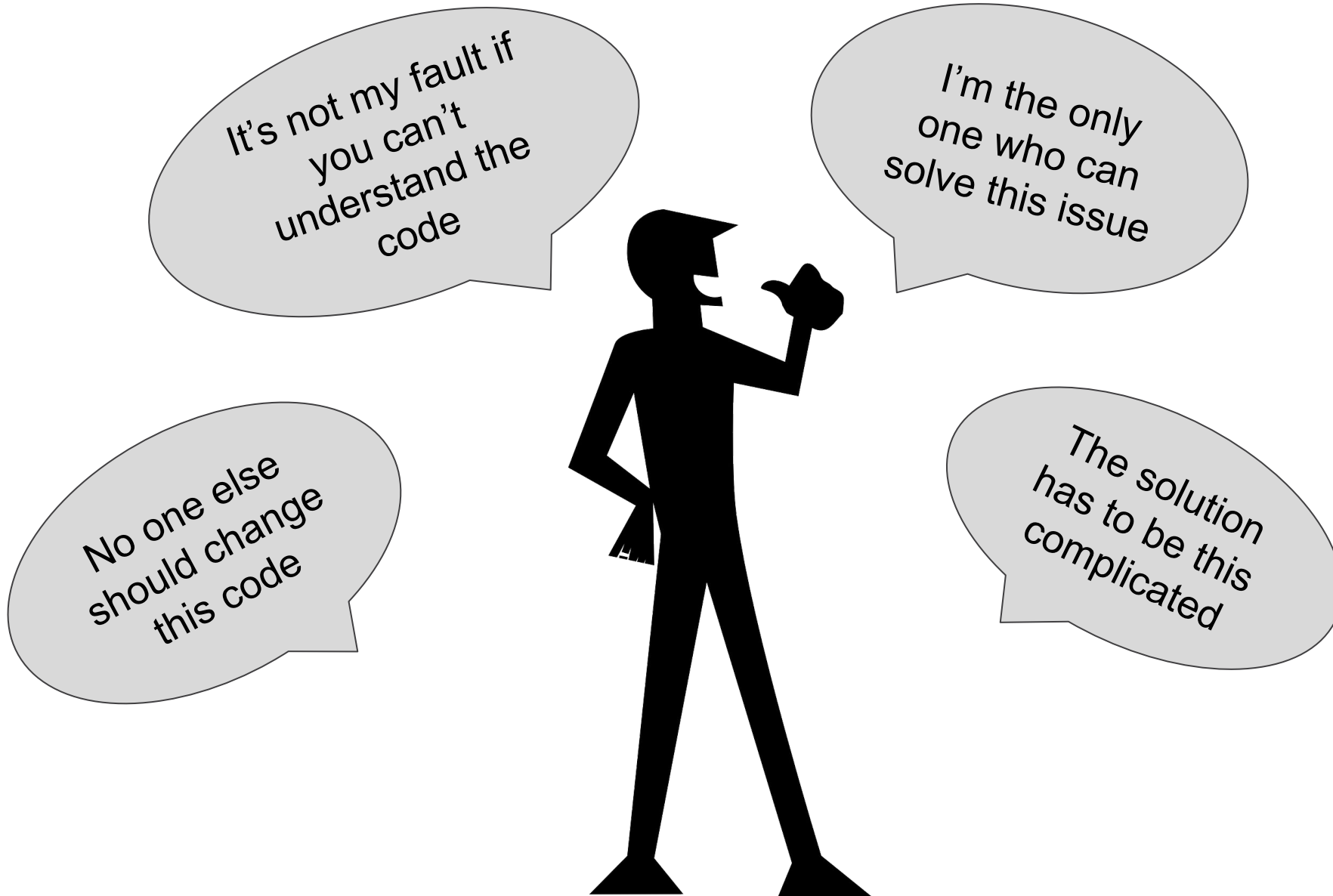
## And most importantly...

- Always communicate with your TL and Manager
- Be aware of your existing commitments and deliverables
- Idea is to have a look at some issues that teams have and whether there is anything you – as an IC – can do about it



# Examples of problematic behaviours

# Ego



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# Lack of Respect

- Being rude, insulting, dismissive or confrontational
- Trying to undermine other people
  - Team members
  - Team Leader or Manager
- Leaving people out of meetings or discussions

# Lack of understanding or direction

- We're not talking about this at a team level
- At individual level
  - Not sure how one's work fits in with other team members
  - Not sure what the individual / team priorities are
  - Not sure what you are delivering
  - Not sure why you are delivering X



# Team members competing

- No consideration for blocking other people's work
- Only concerned about individual deliveries, not team delivery
- Quantity over quality
  - Highly dependent on how work is rewarded

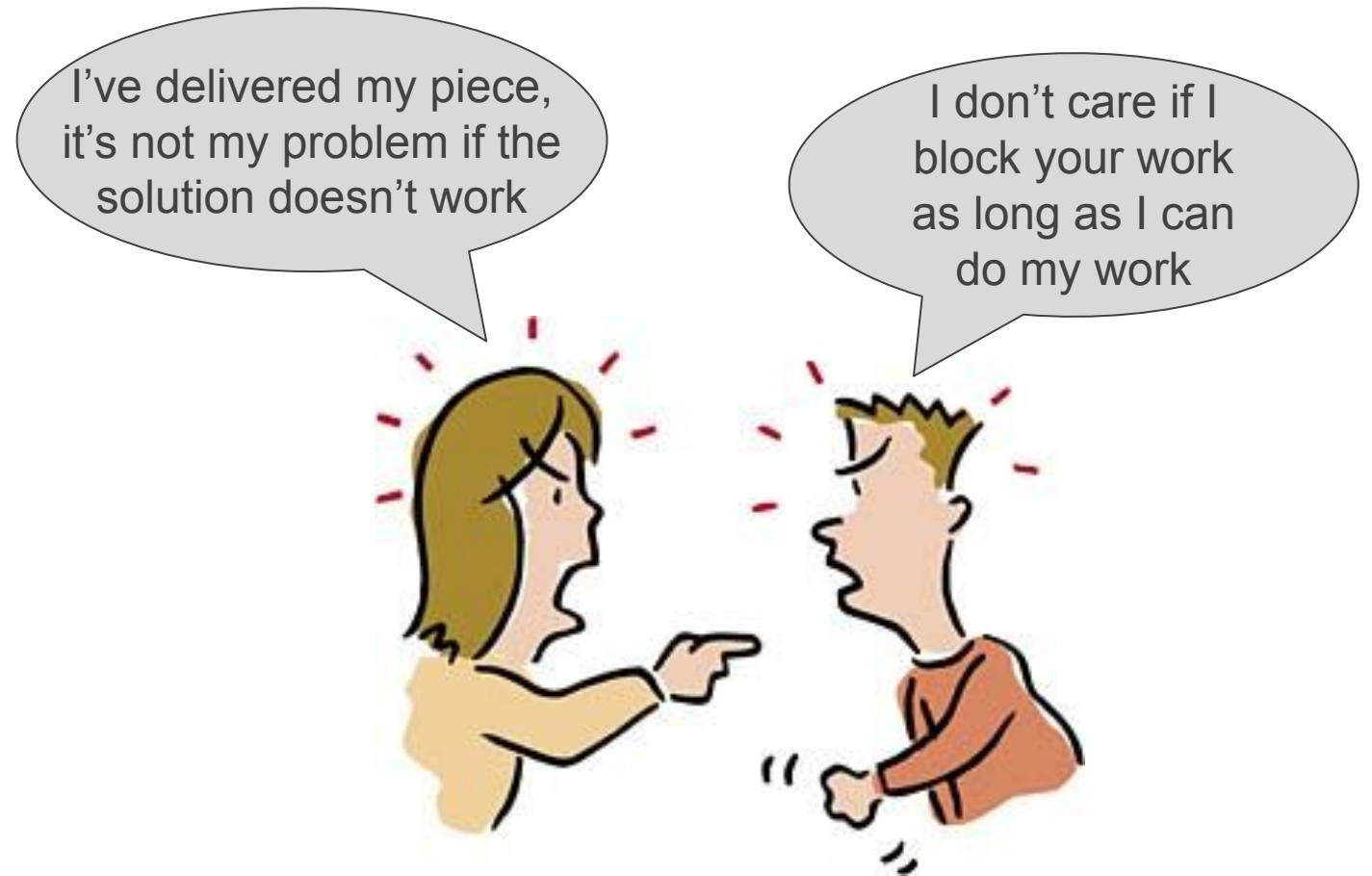


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# Taking credit for others' work or not giving due credit



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- *“That was my idea!”*
  - Maybe, but did you implement it and actually make it work?
  - Or has someone taken it and made it something you’d never thought of
- *“I delivered that!”*
  - What about the three other team members that helped you out at certain points?
  - Did you design it and test it as well?





# What issues can these behaviours cause?

# Negativity within the team



Team negativity can also be caused by:

- Goals changing
- Wrong people rewarded
- Lack of clear direction
- Unachievable targets

# Lack of belief / engagement



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# Insecurity



People need to feel they understand the domain

If not:

- Leads to defensiveness
- Figure out one bit and cling to that
- Create a little world for themselves:
  - They own all the code and the changes
  - No one else touches the code
  - All issues are delegated to this individual



# Selfishness or hoarding ideas

- Not helping a struggling team member
- Keeping quiet instead of sharing an idea on how to fix a problem that another team member is working on
- When you see a team member make a mistake, you keep quiet
- Not putting forward suggestions on improvements a team member could make to their project/code



# So, what would we like to see?

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# Team Members working for each other

- ✓ Individuals want to contribute because it helps a team member
- ✓ When someone asks for help, you choose to help them
- ✓ When you ask for help, others help you
- ✓ No one expected to struggle on their own



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**This doesn't mean you should spend your time doing other people's work!**

# Teaching and Learning from Each Other

- ✓ Share knowledge; don't hoard it
  - Doesn't this make me less valuable?
    - Your value is not just what you know now
      1. What you can learn in the future
      2. What you can teach others
    - Doesn't stop someone learning what you know on their own
- ✓ Share your ideas
  - Other people will build on them and take them in new directions
- ✓ When code you've written is merged, it is no longer “your code”
  - Help others understand it so they can extend and maintain it
- ✓ Watch and learn from others



# Senior team members as role models

- ✓ If you are a senior team member, recognise that fact and behave accordingly
  - i.e., behave in a way you'd be happy for others to pick up and copy
  - “Senior” can sometimes be about relative experience
- ✓ If you are more junior, learn from more senior team members
  - But don't be afraid to question or challenge them

# Respect Team Lead / Project Manager's Decisions

This is an important one.



In general, it is good to question or challenge a plan/process/design, etc., but:

- Recognise it is not entirely your decision to make
  - As an IC, you give input, share opinions and advice
- Support whatever decision is taken, even if you disagree
- Look for ways to make it work, not for ways to make it fail



No harm in putting an idea forward

- Having your idea turned down is NOT a rejection of you personally

# Be inclusive



## Try not to form cliques

- Although this will sometimes happen naturally
  - Not everyone wants to play football or go for coffee at 3 PM
- Most importantly, don't make team decisions in these sort of gatherings
  - If something comes up, arrange a further team meeting to discuss with the whole team



## Don't deliberately exclude people from team discussions

- Senior team members-only meeting
- Only people who agree with you meeting

# Understand other team members work



Always good to understand how your work fits with others at a high level

- You can catch where things might not work in advance
- Know who is best placed to answer your questions
- Start to influence the direction the team / solution goes in



Enables you to know what everyone's priorities are

- Learn who might have time to help you if you have a question

Only need a high level understanding





**I'm just an IC.  
Why does this matter to me?**

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# Isn't it the Team Leader's or Manager's problem?

*“Not my place to get involved”*

*“I just want to do my job”*

- Fair. But it would be better if working with your team was a positive and enjoyable experience
- TL can't change how the team works unless the individuals within the team change how they work
- Want team members to share ownership of the team's direction



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# But the problem isn't me – it's everyone else

Are you sure?

- Focus on yourself, not everyone else
  - No one likes being told they are doing it wrong
- Approaching other team members
  - Do so carefully if you feel confident about it
  - If not, maybe discuss approach with the TL

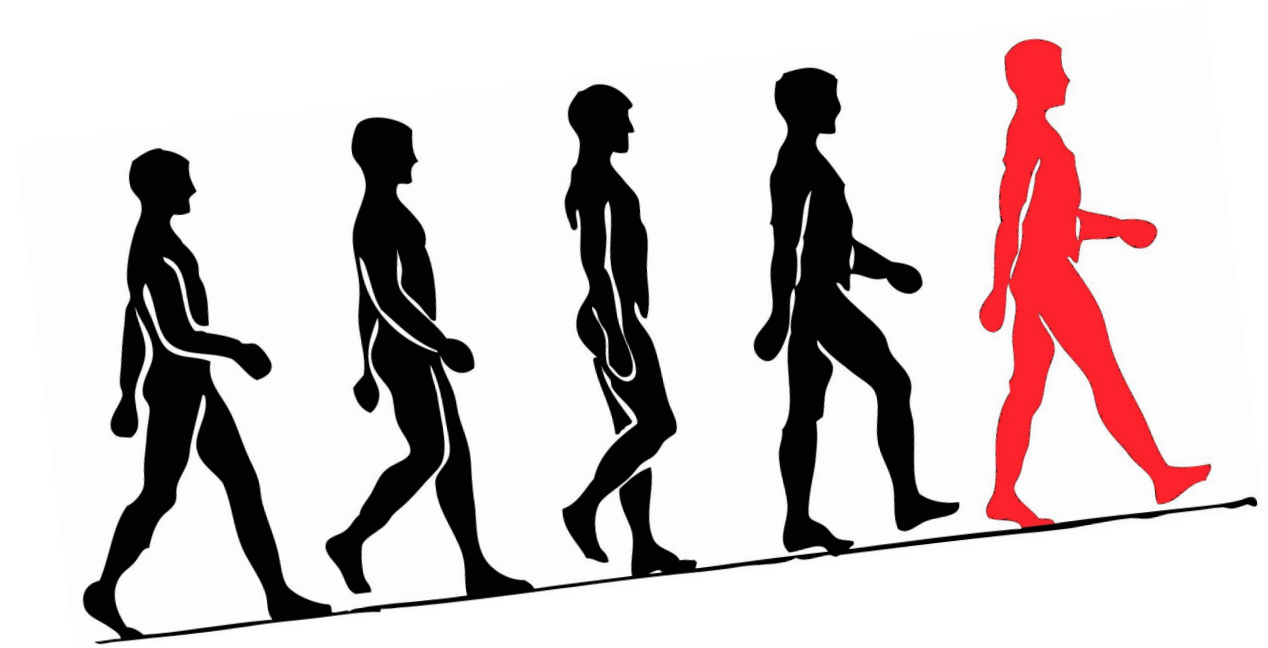
# So, what should I be doing?

- Work out what behaviour in the team you'd most like to change
  - Talk to your team, but don't single out individuals
  - Start doing it yourself
  - Recognise that, as an IC, there are some things you can't change by yourself
- Try and understand what is driving other people's behaviour
  - Is that something you can change?
- Give praise and thanks publicly within the team
  - Doesn't need to be a big deal



# So, what should I be doing?

- Propose solutions
  - Don't just highlight problems
  - Take ownership of the solution
- Lead by example
  - Invite people into the conversation
  - Ask questions
  - Share your knowledge
- Communicate with your TL and/or Manager







# So, how do I communicate effectively with my team?

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# Putting forward your ideas

- Different approaches depending on whether you are directly involved or not
- Explain the problem you are trying to solve, but emphasise the positives of your solution
  - Don't dwell on the negatives of the existing situation
  - Be honest and realistic about costs
- Have in mind what you want the outcome of your suggestion(s) to be
  - Setting up a trial or even just starting a discussion can potentially be seen as a win



# Commenting on other people's ideas

- Keep comments constructive and supportive
  - If you agree, then say so
  - If you don't like the idea, say why
  - If something is missing, say what
  - Avoid blanket negativity
- Make it clear you're glad they put the idea forward
  - Even (or especially) if it doesn't go anywhere
- Keep it positive
  - Not: *"This is a waste of time, it's just another idea that won't go anywhere"*



# Don't make it personal

- Keep comments and feedback on the topic being discussed
  - Not: *“Claire always wants to use the latest everything”*
  - Better: *“What is the benefit of upgrading the compiler?”*
- Discuss the problem, not the person
  - Not: *“Steve is always late to this meeting”*
  - Better: *“Can we find a better time everyone can make?”*

# Importance of listening

- Listening vs. Waiting to talk
  - Listen and respond to what someone says
  - Don't just wait to make the point you want to make
    - At best, people feel ignored
    - At worst, they feel insulted





# Communication in General

- Keep it positive
  - Try and avoid sarcasm
    - *“Oh, this is team X. Why would we ever do ...”*
    - *“We work for Y. Why would we ever use tool ...”*
  - May intend to be funny, but it gets very trying very quickly
- Encourage team members to speak up and give their opinions
  - Give others the chance to speak first
  - But if no one is speaking, be the first to speak, then pause
- If you agree with someone, then say so
  - Especially if they were hesitant in speaking up
- If you disagree with something said, then also say so
  - But say exactly what and why you disagree



# What should I take away from this?

# 1. Be aware of your role within the team

- How do you interact with others?
- How do others see you?

## 2. Look for ways to encourage positive behaviours

- What could be improved?
- Who can you learn from; who is a good role model?
- What can you share; what can you contribute?
- How can you support the team?

### 3. As an IC, remember to meet your own targets first

- You may not have time for anything more than this
- This is a problem, but not a problem you can solve alone
- You can't change the world; but with help, you can start



# Thank you! Questions?

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