

Engineering Principles at Ellevation

Determining performance for engineers is inherently tricky, because good engineering always involves tradeoffs.

We expect engineers to quickly deliver results for the business, but we also expect them to build systems which are easy to maintain and extend over time.

We expect engineers to do excellent individual work, but we also believe that great results are delivered by teams, so we expect them to help make their overall team stronger.

We expect them to take ownership over solving the problems that are set for them, but we also expect them to sometimes push back, and advocate for addressing other problems first.

Beyond those tradeoffs, we also believe there are different ways to be a great engineer.

Some great engineers solve densely complex technical problems.

Others figure out how to drive technical change across a big part of the organization.

Others are incredibly strong at creatively solving business problems, by working at the intersection of engineering and product management.

We want to be able to value all of the above – while holding all of our engineers to a similar standard of excellence.

Rather than try to solve the above challenges by creating a detailed checklist of expectations, we're going to try out something different.

We're going to focus on three core principles.

We believe these are general enough to cover the various ways that engineers can create value, but specific enough to support good conversations about performance.

We expect engineers at every level to demonstrate behaviors in keeping with these core principles.

The details of how they play out will change, but the core principles will be the same.

Principles

Ownership

Proactively signing up to achieve results for the business (particularly in the face of ambiguity).

Leadership

Helping your team perform at a high level.

Technical Stewardship

Owning the balance between the short-term (e.g. ship features) and the long-term (e.g. invest to ship faster in the future).

Ownership

Ownership means, fundamentally, that your team can depend on you.

It means that you can be relied on to take on something complex, and see it through.

To do so, you must understand the full business value being aimed for, so that you can ensure we achieve that value.

Note that "value" doesn't just mean what the product team is asking for -- we sometimes generate value by doing critical work to upgrade our systems, or instrumenting them to create visibility, or making them easier to test and deploy. Seeing through such complex work can be a powerful form of ownership.

Ownership means being tenacious in the face of obstacles... but it also means knowing when to raise your hand for help. That can be a tricky balance to pull off, but doing so is essential -- that is what allows the rest of your team to depend on you (and not be surprised to discover that you've been lost for weeks).

Ownership means communicating extremely clearly -- so that people know what you've taken on, learn quickly about any critical obstacles that arise, and know when you have something to share.

As you become more senior at Ellevation, your **scope of ownership** grows: both the complexity of the problems we ask you to take on, and also the duration of the projects you'll help lead.

Leadership

We believe that great results are delivered by **teams**.

Leadership means helping your team perform at a high level.

For a team to be effective, they have to have a clear, common goal (aka, "direction"), they have to have a shared understanding of the steps they're going to take to achieve that goal (aka, "sequencing"), and they have to constantly identify and address any problems that might be slowing them down (be those problems technical, organizational or interpersonal)

To do all of that, they must deeply trust one another.

Building on that trust, they must be willing to challenge one another: intensely, respectfully and immediately.

A central part of our vision of leadership is making whoever leads your team stronger – by being unafraid to challenge their thinking or approach. We value "challenging up" very highly.

Finally, in a domain as complex as software development, we see a core part of leadership as helping create a culture of learning and continuous improvement.

Technical Stewardship

Engineers must strike a balance between delivering immediate results versus investing in their systems to make future delivery faster.

You are a steward for your system – ensuring it will create value for Ellevation for a long time.

There are two faces to this: first, when developing new features, you must find a good balance between pragmatic expediency and long-term quality.

Second, outside of feature work, you must help to drive **technical investments**: improvements in our systems which your product counterparts aren't asking for, but which the engineers believe are **valuable** for the business.

We expect engineers, at every level, to help: identify potential technical investments; advocate for those investments effectively; and see them through safely and well.

A key part of this is "picking your battles" – exhibiting good judgment.

A note on what we mean by "quality" – of either code, or an overall system design.

High quality means: as simple as possible; easy for others to understand; as straightforward as possible to safely change. We do not consider overly abstract or fiendishly clever code to be high quality. If your team is impressed by your code, but afraid to change it, you are failing at your job. (The Zen of Python captures a good bit of our notion of quality)