# My Experiences as a Team Lead for 3 Years and Why I Quit

This is the story of my experiences as a team lead / manager at two non-tech organizations. From what I can tell other’s experiences can vary depending on the company. This story starts around late 2021 at some random insurance company. The past couple of years I had been a senior software engineer running a successful project and I was up for promotion. At the time I was unsure as to what direction I wanted to take my career. At your typical non-tech corporation there are two paths to choose after senior software engineer. The, first and most common is to go into “leadership” via team lead, to manager. The second is to go the architect route. I had worked closely with architects in the past and I had a fairly good idea what that job entailed. The leadership route was the road less traveled. I had never led anyone before and never had any leadership responsibilities. So, in trying to get out of my comfort zone I chose to go into “leadership” and eventually accepted the promotion to “team lead/manager”.

In 2021 I was still a senior software developer, but I was “unofficially” leading a team of two engineers on a project. When this project started I quicky established myself as the go-to guy for all things. My duties included the following:

* Collaborated with executive sponsors to manage timelines and deliverables.
* Collaborated with businesspeople to define the work.
* Collaborated with the developers to do the actual coding.
* Wrote code.
* Managed the release schedule.
* Supported the application in production.
* Managed the testing schedule.
* Managed the backlog.
* Reported all this back up to my manager.
* And anything else which came up.

During this time, I was doing much more than architecting, coding, bug fixes, etc… I was going above and beyond my role to establish myself as the go-to person for all things related to this project. I believe that all this extra work drew the attention of leadership and was one of the primary reasons I was eventually promoted to team lead. After about a year of this, talks of promoting me were in the air and at the time I felt team lead was the best path for my career. In the push to drive my career forward I had not yet realized the level of stress I was under. I assumed when I was promoted it would all be great.

In early 2022 I was promoted to team lead. Along with the title came a modest pay increase and two direct reports. Early on things seemed to be going great. I was having one-on-ones with my team, mentoring the junior developer, helping the mid-level developer become a senior dev. I was enjoying producing monthly status reports to leadership, participating in leadership meetings and being part of the decision process. I felt I had broken though to management, and I finally had a seat at the adult’s table.

But the honeymoon phase ended sometime around summer of 2022. I was starting to notice I was exhausted by the end of the day. At the time I had no idea why. In hindsight I should have recognized that I had been going for about 18 months at this pace. In June of 2022, I took a much-needed two-week vacation with my family. We left the country and spent 10 days in the Caribbean. I came back to work fully recharged ready to crush my new role as team lead. But by late August my stress returned. Now that I was fresh back from vacation, I was concerned what was up. I set out to figure out why I was so stressed out. Some of the early signs that I was in the wrong position were:

**Constant task switching**. I started to realize that the more frequent the interruptions the more stressed out I became. I start each day with a to-do list of all the things I would like to accomplish that day. And by mid-morning I was pulled into so many different directions that the items on my list were a distant memory. I was bouncing from one issue to the next. As a team lead, I was expected to be on top of everything. And I mean everything, from handling production issues, to doing everyone’s code reviews, to doing actual development work, etc… all while attending 3-4 hours of meetings a day. What ended up happening was that by the end of the day my list had on average 3-5 outstanding items on it that would have to be handled the next day. But guess what happened the next day, yep more of the same. What started out as a couple missed items each day turned into me simply not getting things done.

**Putting out Fires.** in addition to bouncing from one thing to the next I was on production support as well. At any given time, any random businessperson can send an e-mail to my team’s production support distribution list. As team lead, I am in-charge managing this. If we did not respond to an issue in a timely manner which on occasion, we could not, then things would get escalated to leadership.

**Project work.** In addition to maintaining all the existing systems I owned I had to be involved in upcoming project work. This is where the cracks finally started to show. With all the other things going on we were not making any meaningful progress through new projects. Because these projects had project managers, executive sponsors, and scrum masters our lack of progress was starting to get noticed. This drew the attention and ire of leadership as they wanted to know “why we were not getting our required work done.” This went on for a couple of months and by fall of 2022 I was just trying to get through the day. I was drowning in team lead responsibilities with no relief in sight.

One day in September my wife and children sat me down and basically had an intervention. They told me that my job is making me miserable and that I am short tempered constantly complaining about work. They also told me that I would get moody and depressed around Sunday evening. My wife asked me one evening what was wrong and I said, “I am dreading going back to work on Monday”. It took that conversation for me to start to really internalize what this job was doing to me. I had lost the joy that attracted me to the software career in the first place. I was caught in some corporate grinding machine and if I did not get out it would have serious ramifications.

This company was a legacy insurance company and thus it was highly dysfunctional. I was there for 5 years in total, two of which were as a team lead. Not wanting to give up hope and my career aspirations I assumed that the issues I faced were exclusive to this one dysfunctional organization. In early October 2022 I started looking for a better company to call home. In just over two months I landed a team lead role at another company.

In Jan 2023 I took a development team lead position at a company in the banking industry. I know what you are going to say, “you went from one dysfunctional industry to another.” But I had to get out of a bad situation and this company seemed to be a fairly well-run organization. In the interview they talked about agile, scrum, and process and the people I talked to seemed enthusiastic about their work, and for the most part I was right. As I write this in late 2023, this company is a good place to work and well run. I feel the leadership has good intentions. But a year into this new job I started to realize that it might not be the company that is the issue, rather it is the position. I started to dwell on what exactly is a team lead. I wanted to figure out what was common to both companies.

So, what is a team lead. Please stop reading and google it. Below is my manager’s definition of a team lead:

* Works closely with the Product Manager to have a solid understanding of business and product.
* Is accountable for the applications the Dev teams owns and assists with questions and PROD support when needed.
* Takes an active role in managing QA and tech support.
* Should be competent presenting technical information to a range of audiences including non-technical audiences.
* Leads a team working on significant and critical projects. Provides both technical and team leadership and mentoring.
* Responsible for managing the releases and maintaining the project schedule.
* Able to jump in at a moment’s notice and code 20 to 50% of the time. Yes, he said that!
* Demonstrate industry leadership in technology, consortiums, or standards.
* Perform other duties as required and assigned by manager and upper management.

That is a lot of stuff. And oh, did I mention it was expected that I code anywhere from 20 to 50% of the time. Thus, a bunch of time you as team lead will be forced to sit through say 2-4 hours of meetings each day. In my three years of being a team lead I would say the average for me is about 3 hours. And for my company the last bullet point translates into this “jumps into anything their manager wants them to do to make their goals regardless of the outcome on the current project.” All these responsibilities for around $130,000 per year. To put it into context a senior software engineer on average makes about the same. This was the big revelation to me. This was my ah-ha moment. I took on 2x or more responsibility and stress for the same pay. What was I thinking?

I am going to repeat that just so it sinks in. I took on 2x or more responsibility and stress for the same pay. This has been my experience being a team lead for three years. The other revelation I had was in the 3 years of being a team lead I could see my development skills atrophying. Due to all my additional responsibilities, I was unable to focus on code and architecture long enough to become an expert, thus I was struggling to fulfill the “must be an expert” part of the team lead expectation. This scared me more than anything! If I could not be technical, then what would separate me from the masses of semi to non-technical people scattered throughout most organizations. How was I expected to speak to the technical details of complex systems if I was not allowed the time to focus on them? Our technical skills are our superpower and what makes us unique and able to command such high salaries. As a team lead, I was losing my technical ability. I became a cross between a project manager, scrum master, release engineer, and bureaucrat.

To sum it up I do not think a team lead is the right choice for me. I can make the same amount of money for a lot less stress. But I know what you are going to say. “Where is a senior engineer to go if not into management.” Well, that is a good question. One I am still trying to answer. But I can tell you what I do not want to do anymore, and that’s be a team lead.