

# Getting Real About Managing Up.

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Hi!

# Thank you for coming!

Today:

- Who am I?
- Why “managing up” at a tech conference?
- The basics.
- Some advanced techniques
- What doesn’t work.
- Questions?

Most engineers, as hyper rationale beings above the fray of emotional persuasion are kind of “Ugh, do we have to” when the topic of managing up comes up, so thank you for coming!

# Who am I?



My name is Kellan Elliott-McCrea. Cards on the table. I'm the person you manage up to. (experience: Etsy, Flickr, various startups)

But I also advise and coach. (30+ companies)

This talk is drawn from all of that experience.

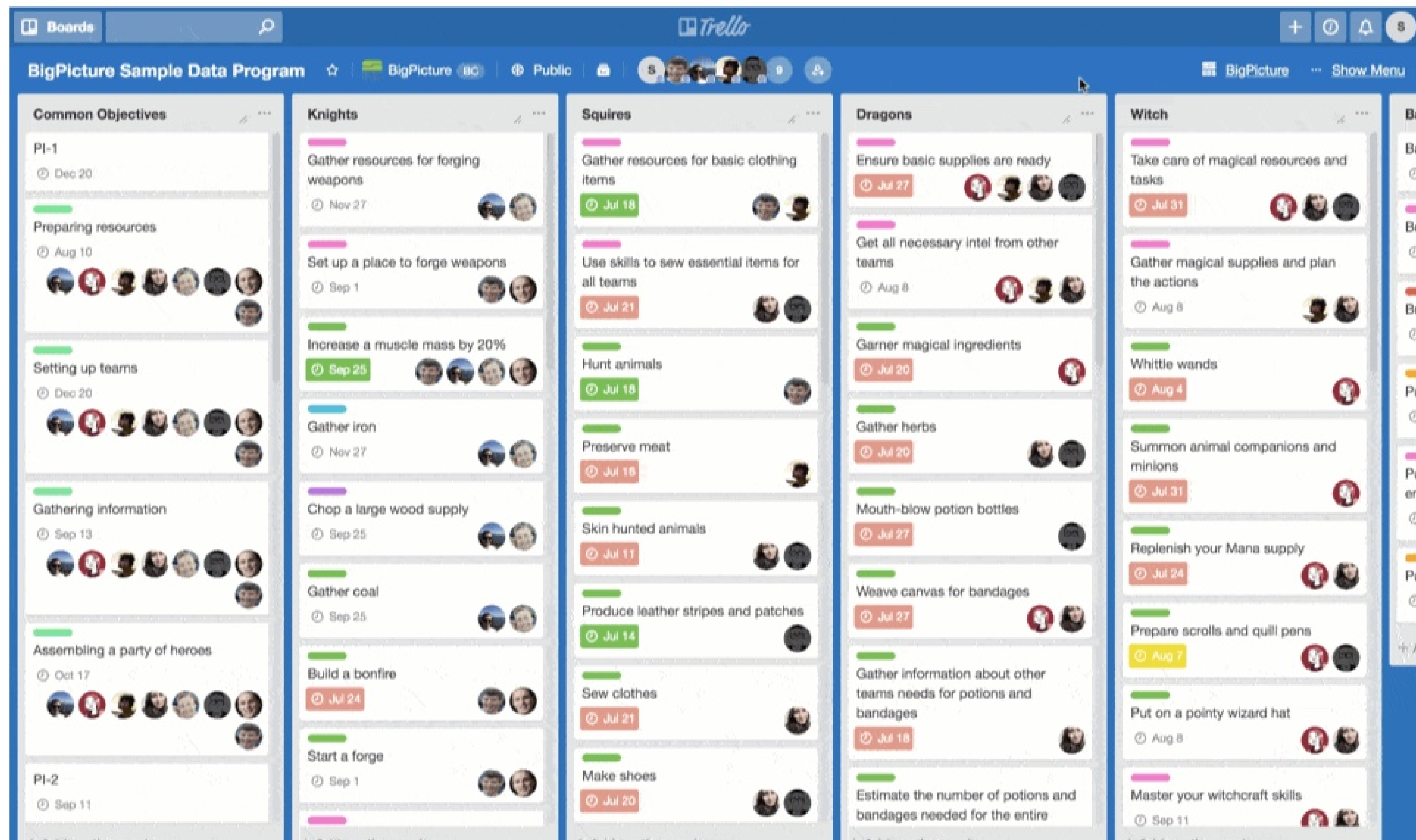
When Jean asked me...

# Managing up in tech

- Distinct from generic “managing up”
- 3 key contributors
  1. Modern Software Development is Deeply Entangled
  2. The Myth of the Apolitical Engineer
  3. The Growing Expectation  $\Leftrightarrow$  Eng Manager Skills Gap

I believe engineering management is a distinct discipline from just management. Similarly managing up in technical organizations has some unique characteristics. Why? There are 3 key contributors.

# 🔑 1. Modern Software Development is Deeply Entangled



Modern software development, is fast paced, collaborative, iterative, experimental, built on deep and changing abstractions by cross functional teams.

To be good at it requires being good at collaboration, coordination, communication, planning, prioritization aka "Management skills".

# The Myth of the Apolitical Engineer

I don't want to engage in politics I just want to ...

- be allowed to do my work
- let the work speak for itself
- let the data speak for itself
- explain why this technology is clearly superior
- build a prototype to prove the point

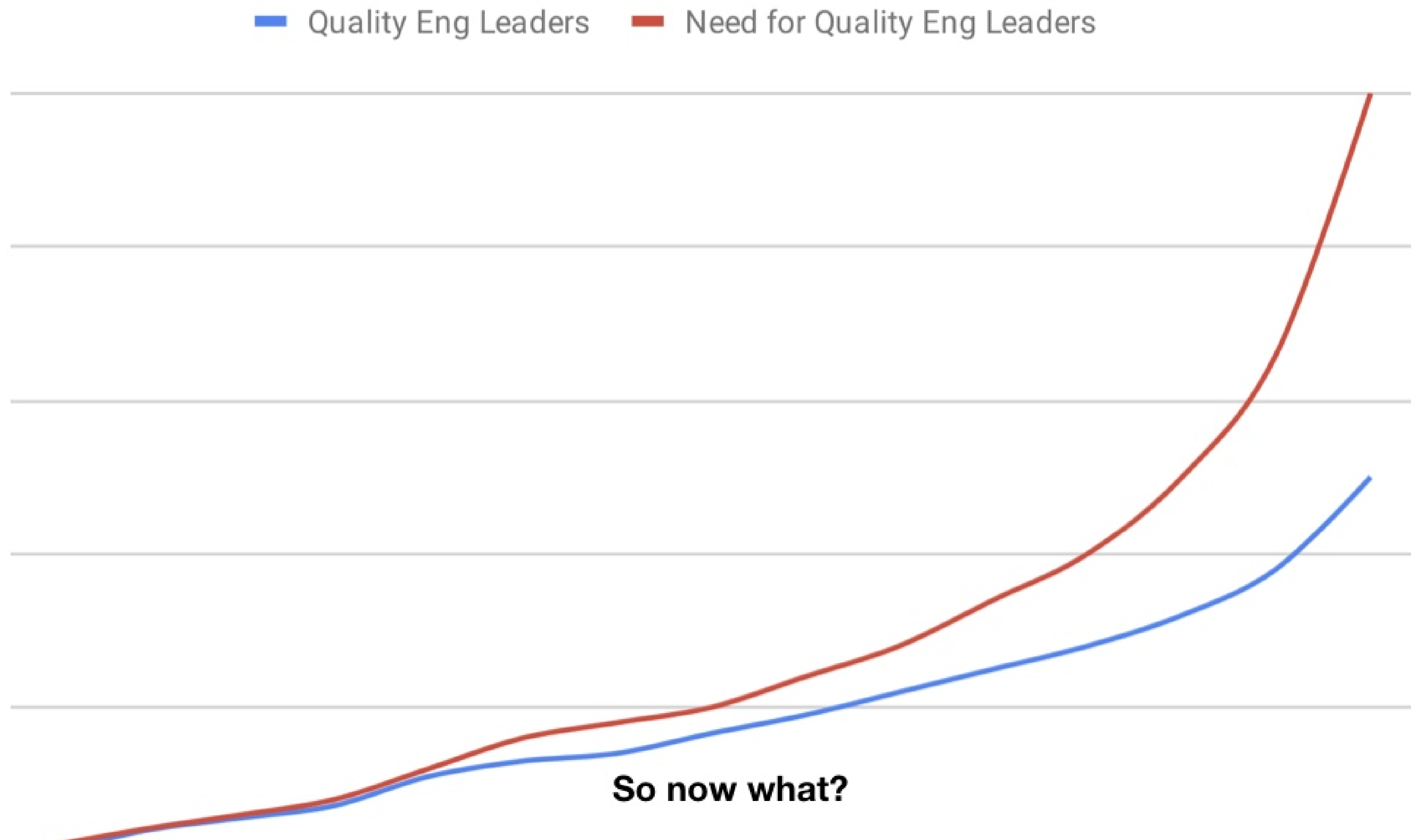
The second key contributor to why managing up in tech is so different is we allow ourselves to believe that we're apolitical.

I have a good news and bad news for you.

Bad news: none of the above tactics are how groups of humans make decisions.

Good news: if any of the above have worked for you, congratulations you've got a decent manager out there trail breaking for you.

# 🔑 The Growing Expectation <=> Eng Manager Skill Gap



Again good news/bad news. The total number of quality engineering leaders is going up! There are better resources, we're investing more in training, we've figured a few things out.

Bad news - the demand is going up faster. More teams, building more complicated software, more expectation that work is fulfilling and well-run.



# Influence Based Leadership

- *Staff Engineer - "You are entrusted with a significant amount of influence ... identify off-roadmap opportunities where we are under-serving business goals and can use their influence to get them on-roadmap ... They mentor other engineers and take on sponsorship responsibilities."*

**What does that mean?**

If you've spent any time hanging around career ladders or promotion committees in the last few years (and I mean, who doesn't, yeah?)

Then you've encountered a term like "influence based leadership".

Highly correlated with senior ICs (that managers speak for people who don't manage), principal engineers, staff engineers, tech leads.

What does that mean?



**It's a trap!**



It means I, as your manager, am completely overwhelmed by the accelerating demands of my job, and I'm going to shift some of that load to you. You're all drafted and deputized. You're welcome.  
But actually this is good news: giving you control of your own destiny

# **The Basics**

Make your manager's job easier.

- Get Curious
- Understanding your manager and their job
- Build a Positive Relationship
- Make Your Manager Look Good

We know that the largest contributor to people's happiness, and sense of satisfaction at work is their manager. That's the context in which we approach managing up.

End: In tech our managers are barely keeping it together. So let's help them.

# **Get Curious**

- “What did they say when you asked them that question?”

This is the foundational skill to managing up. (also down, sideways, and backwards)  
End: Curiosity both shows a willingness to care about someone, and increases the likelihood that when you try to solve the problem, you're solving the right one.

# Understanding Your Manager and Their Job

The most important thing to know:

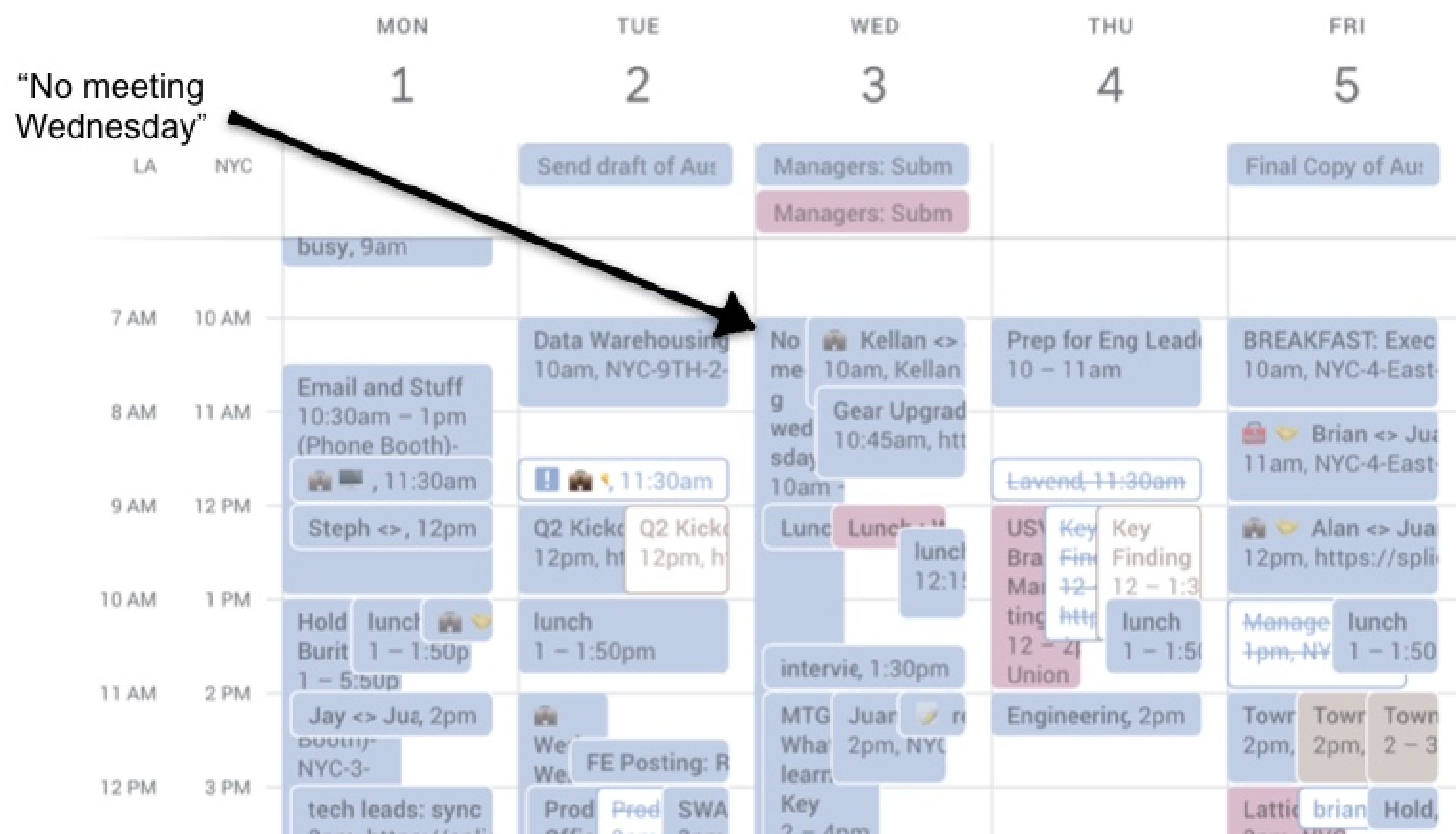
**Your manager spends about 85-90% of their time thinking about themselves (because they're a human).**

When it comes to understanding your manager...

End: The great news is that when I piss you off, it wasn't personal. (which isn't an excuse for bad management btw, just the reality)



# Understanding Your Manager's Different Perception of Time



Just one example of understanding how this asymmetry of attention works  
Which means, when you asked them for help two weeks ago, it was an eternity. But they've thought about it twice for 15 minutes since then, which means "why are you so impatient?"

# 👍 Questions regarding your manager

- What exactly is their job?
- What do they value?
- How are they being evaluated?
- What are they particularly good at?

*Don't be surprised if your manager can't answer these questions. If this stuff was easy they'd already be doing it!*

If you've not done their job, consider picking up a good book on the topic.  
Some value tech, some value learning, some value predictability,  
Good at? coaching, meetings, architecture, politics, explaining the business



# Establish a Positive Relationship

- Get to know them.
- Keep it mostly constructive.
- In the beginning, keep it actionable.
- It's okay to complement them. Make sure it's genuine.

The research tell us people hear negative messages at 10x the strength of positive messages. Your balanced update isn't being experienced as balanced.

When you're building the relationship come with frustrations/problems they can help with. People like helping.

Complement: tell them something they've taught you.

End: you want them to enjoy working with you.



# 👍 Make Your Boss Look Good

- Align yourself with your team's mission.
- Do great work.
- Equip them to speak fluently about your work.
- Translate into their frame.
- Help them see around blindspots.

Alignment: they're being judged on alignment. If your priorities don't align, that's a great opportunity for a constructive conversation.

Your boss is going to get asked about the status of project X, they can either use your description or make something up on the spot.

Blindspots: possibly the most important and mutually beneficial technique.

# Help Them See Around Blindspots

- Management breeds blindspots.
- Even the best managers need to be managed up to.
- *“It’s my job to be pushing, I need you to tell me when it looks like I’m pushing us off a cliff.”*
- Who is killing it? Where is distraction coming from?
- *“I had lunch with some folks from marketing and did you know they have a totally different idea on how to drive conversion?”*

**Is it working?**



# Advanced Techniques

- Ask for advice, not feedback.
- Closed loop communication.
- Your boss is repeating themselves, listen.
- Dealing with an unreasonable desire for detail.
- Give them something to talk about.



# Ask for advice

- *“Do you have any feedback for me?”*

Your boss dreads this question. Um, no, I wasn't thinking about you, I was thinking about the project. Um, uh, Nope you're doing great!

Instead, “I'm having trouble talking to our PM about why this work is important, do you have any advice for me?”

Please \_love\_ giving advice. It centers it on them vs on you.



# Closed Loop?

- The Zeigarnik effect
- A contract to push your manager the information they need.
- Sitting on the [CEO] during an outage

In psychology there is something called Zeigarnik effect, we obsess about things that aren't finished, or that we're worried we'll forget about.

If I have to worry about ... focused on doing your job instead of doing mine. And nobody wants that.

Find out how your boss best consume information and on what cadence, and push it to them.

Consistency is important.



# Your boss is repeating themselves, listen.

- *“You know, the best boss I ever had just left me alone to do my work.”*
- *“It seems like we aren’t hiring fast enough?”*
- *“I’m worried about our July deadline.”*

“That’s interesting. Can we get back to the part where I was asking you for help?”

“We’re hiring great people, we wouldn’t want to lower the bar.”

“You known engineers, estimates are never accurate, don’t worry about it.”

None of these are the right responses.





# Dealing with unreasonable requests for detail.

- *“I just need to know what everyone is going to be working on every hour between now and launch so I can help people prioritize.”*

Why is X late? Well you know, the spec changed, and some surprise. Great. I can get you that, it will take some time as that isn't how we store the information. Before I do, is there any advice you have for me on things we could be doing better? The data is a bit noisy, is there a format that would be helpful for you? You know, one metric we've been tracking lately is cycle time. Would you like to see that graph?

# 🏂 Give them something to talk about.



Especially effective for managing CEOs, board members, etc.  
Graphs, insights, and stories are currency.  
Building empathy is very powerful.

# **Some things that don't work.**

- “I got this”.
- Drown them in details.
- Catastrophizing.
- They should appreciate me for me.
- That's not my job.



## ***“I got this”***

- It's good to talk about your challenges.
- When you don't talk about them your boss just assumes you are clueless and don't know about them.



# Drown them in details

- *“Why are they micro-managing me? If they really want to know what I’m up to let me subscribe them to all the Github notification emails!”*
- Like, “I got this”, your boss just assumes you don’t know what’s important.

End: Btw if you ever get the feedback that you’re thinking tactically, not strategically, that means, “You’re using your vocabulary, I need to use mine so I can understand it.”

# Catastrophizing

- *“Oh my god, everything is broken, this sucks, it’s all awful!!”*

*/giphy jack nicholson “you can’t handle the truth”*

All I’m hearing is, “I can’t be transparent with X because he freaks out, I guess I’ll only include him in conversations after everything has already been decided.”



# Appreciate me for me.

- Being loved and appreciated for who we are is a basic human need. And not what work is for.
- Remember, I'm not thinking about you.

End: you will be able to talk to your boss about what you value. The relationship is a give and take. But you can't demand it and expect to be successful.





# That's not my job.

- *“Sounds like you are asking me to manage the team, that's not my job.”*
- No. I'm asking you, as the subject matter expert who wants respect, to help out.
- **A word of caution:** bias and the perception of “non-technical” work.

# Stressed boss vs Bad boss

- Your attempts to manage up won't always be appreciated.
- It won't always be a good idea to try to make things better.

Bad bosses absolutely exist. For the sake of this talk we've mostly assumed bosses doing the best they can. Which, stretched thin, likely doing a job they weren't trained for, the best they can do may not be very good.

Even good bosses bark under pressure.

Bad bosses are something different.

But most people aren't a bad boss. They're just stressed and overwhelmed and need help. And that's where you come in.

# Questions?

- Thank you for coming!
- And thank you to the many friends I've discussed this with over the years including: Julia Evans, Duretti Hirpa, Maggie Zhou, Silvia Botros, Allison Kaptur, Alice Goldfuss, Camille Fournier, Marco Rogers, Jason Wong, Juan Pablo Buritica, Harry Heymann, James Turnbull, Michael Gorsuch, Andrew Morrison, Dan McKinley, and Niccolò Machiavelli (obviously none of these people are responsible for the egregious mistakes in this talk)
- A couple of additional resources:
  - "Help! I have a manager" by Julia Evans - <https://wizardzines.com/zines/manager/>
  - "The Manager's Path" by Camille Fournier - <http://shop.oreilly.com/product/0636920056843.do>