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Look Forward

About

A Terse Guide on Hiring Your First Engineering Manager

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Hiring an early-stage manager can bring up powerful fears of making a bad hire.

- What if they ruin our culture?
- What if we lose good people because of them?
- What if they cause harm?

This mindset can lead to fear-driven-development of the job description. The "what-ifs" turn into a laundry list of requirements without much coherence between them, and this leads to stressful hiring experience both for the candidate (who feels like they need to be superhero to succeed) and for the folks doing the hiring (who feel like they might never find the right person.)

What Makes A Manager?

When it comes to defining a manager's role, I encourage people to start with a simple baseline: Look for someone who is effective at *performance management.*

That term might make you cringe depending on your experience. However, [modern performance management](#) is quite a bit different than the discipline that spawned the term decades ago.

This is a whole topic in its own right, but for our purposes, let's define performance management as "bringing people and resources together to make the right things happen." It's simple, but it's hard!

TL;DR The baseline for an effective manager is that they can lead their teams in getting from "why" to "what" to "how".

An effective performance manager has competency in three areas:

Direction

They understand and contribute to the company's strategy at an appropriate level.

This means that they:

- See it as their job to understand and represent what the business is doing (in their area, at least)
- Help their reports and peers to understand that direction for themselves

Red flags can look like:

- Seeing their job as "protecting" their team from "the business"
- Talking about "the business" like a foreign entity

Alignment

They can lead their team from "why are we doing this?" to "what are we doing?"

This means that they:

- Lead teams in designing solutions to problems
- Contribute well as peers with other disciplines

(product management,
design, etc.)

- Effectively guide people
  through conflict as it
  arises

Red flags can look like:

- Viewing their teams as
  "order-takers" for
  product management /
  design / etc
- A need to control rather
  than influence (e.g.
  requiring direct reporting
  lines to any area where
  they need to get things
  done)

Progress

They get results. This means
going from "what are we
doing?" to "we're doing it!"

More specifically, they:

- Get the right things done
- Use simple,
  understandable
  measurements to know
  that the right things are
  getting done
- Continually grow and
  resource their team

Red flags can look like:

- Dogmatic belief in a particular project– management process
- Shying away from taking ownership of outcomes
- Can't hold multiple priorities in balance with one another (e.g. treats people terribly to get results, or sacrifices results to treat people too gently)

How Do I Use This?

Starting with this short list of capabilities, you can:

- Add a couple of other things that are important to the job (e.g. technical skills)
- Use the list of capabilities you came up with to write the job description
- Build an interview to test for these things

If you're looking for more detail, I wrote a guide on hiring for jobs you don't understand well that should help you put it all together.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why isn't there a "Communication" section? Isn't that an important skill for a manager?

It is common to test for communication directly. However, I don't think it's specific enough.

Think for a moment: Have you worked with a manager who was great at communicating with other engineering teams, but struggled in group sessions with product management, design, marketing, or other roles?

How about someone who was great at storytelling, but who had a hard time communicating how to turn that idea into reality?

These are all different types of communication, but they happen in different contexts.

The person who does well with their teams but poorly with product and design may be more comfortable with

making progress than with *creating alignment.* Our storyteller may be great at communicating *direction* but not so good with the rest.

None of these gaps are necessarily deal-breakers on their own, but they do paint a clearer picture of where manager's strengths might lie, and this extra specificity might help you make a better hiring decision.

Q: This direction/alignment /progress stuff sounds a bit fluffy. Aren't there better words for it?

I tend not to use these directly with folks unless I'm explaining the underlying model. When talking about it with everyone else, you can use something like "Strategy", "Focus", "Execution"; or, even more simply, "Why", "What", and "How".

Q: You haven't spoken about leadership at all. Aren't leadership qualities important in a manager?

This is a big topic. In short, my experience is this: It takes a lot of experience and pain to become a strong leader. There are some really interesting, deeply-thought-out leadership programs out there (e.g. Co-Active Leadership) but even those will push their trainees into different forms of suffering to develop their character.

Performance management, however, is a pretty distinct set of skills that can be learned quickly with some dedication. I think it's a lot more reasonable to find someone who has these skills (or who can develop them on the job) than to expect them to have a lot of difficult-to-acquire leadership qualities, especially for front-line managers who tend to be earlier in their careers.

Need Help?

I like talking about hiring. Ping me on Twitter or LinkedIn if you'd like to chat.