

— BY JULIA EVANS —

HOW TO UNDERSTAND YOUR MANAGER'S JOB & DO AWESOME WORK TOGETHER



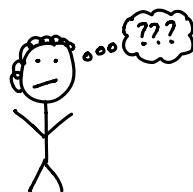
I HAVE A MANAGER!

HELP!

<https://jvns.ca/zines>
like this?
more zines at

Why this zine?

I've been working as a programmer for 6 years and I've had 8 managers. When I started out, I didn't really understand my manager's job or how to work with them.



Since then, I've had some GREAT working relationships with managers and a few less good ones. Having a good relationship with my manager is the most important factor in my happiness at work.



if working with my manager well is so important, maybe I can do things to make that better!

What this zine is about:

- strategies that would have helped my past self work better with her managers
- a little bit of explaining what a manager's job is

What this zine ISN'T about:

- how to deal with a bad manager ↗ very hard !!
- universal advice for everyone. I am just one person who's mostly worked at one company !!

further reading



thank you so much for reading!
Here are a couple people I've learned from:

The Manager's Path

by Camille Fournier ↗ also has a great blog!

A great book about engineering management.
Super useful for learning what a manager's job is, even if you never want to be a manager :)

Lara Hogan's blog

(<https://larahogan.me/blog>)

Mostly aimed at managers, but has some amazing posts for non-managers (for instance "what do I do if I'm being underpaid?")

★ acknowledgements ★

Cover art by Deise Lino

Thanks to Jay, Kamal, Brett, Maya, Marco, Maggie, Allison, Marc, Will, and many others ♥

19	further reading
18	getting a new manager
17	build your support system
16	figure out what they're great at
15	ask for specific feedback
14	understand their priorities
12-13	remember they're only human
10-11	promotions & performance reviews
9	talk about problems early
8	set clear expectations
7	keep conversations mostly constructive
6	what to talk about in 1:1s
5-5	what's your manager's job?

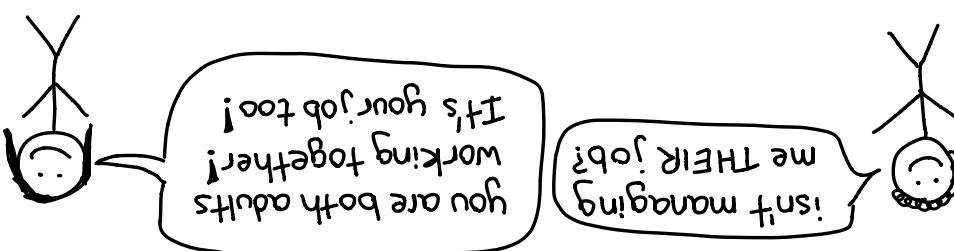
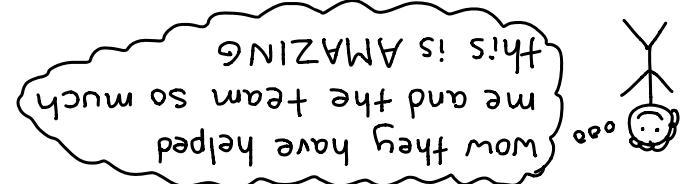


Table of contents

Some things I've found helpful:

- write a document explaining my past work to them
- ask them about any concerns directly - often they have great answers!
- pay close attention to what they do well → tell them when they do something great

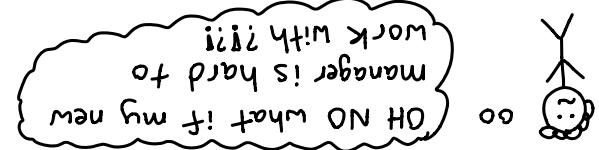
so I try to assume that's where we'll end up.



and ended up, a year later, at



But! More than once I've started out thinking

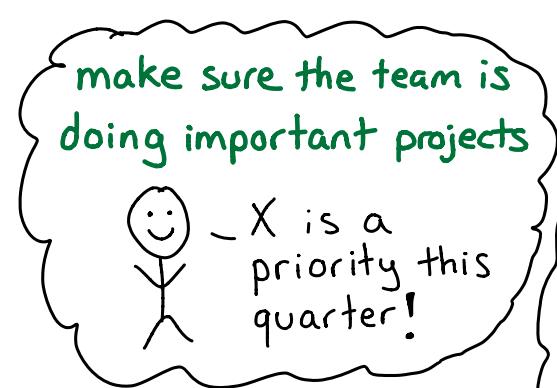


Not all of my managers have been great! Being assigned a new manager is a little scary.

getting a new manager

what's your manager's job?

Understanding a little about your manager's job helps you work well with them! Some things your manager is responsible for:



build the support system you need

The flip side of "figure out what things they're great at" is that there are always going to be things your manager can't help you with. When that happens, there are a few choices:

- ① Get mad that they can't help
- ② Resign yourself to not getting help with those things
- ③ Find help elsewhere!!!

her blog is GREAT

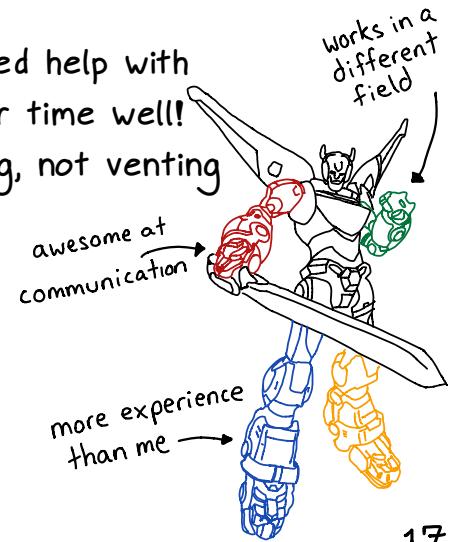
Lara Hogan has an ♥amazing♥ blog post called "When your manager isn't supporting you, build a Voltron" about building a crew of people with lots of different skills who you can ask for help!

Some tips she has:

- figure out what you need help with before asking. Use their time well!
- focus on problem solving, not venting

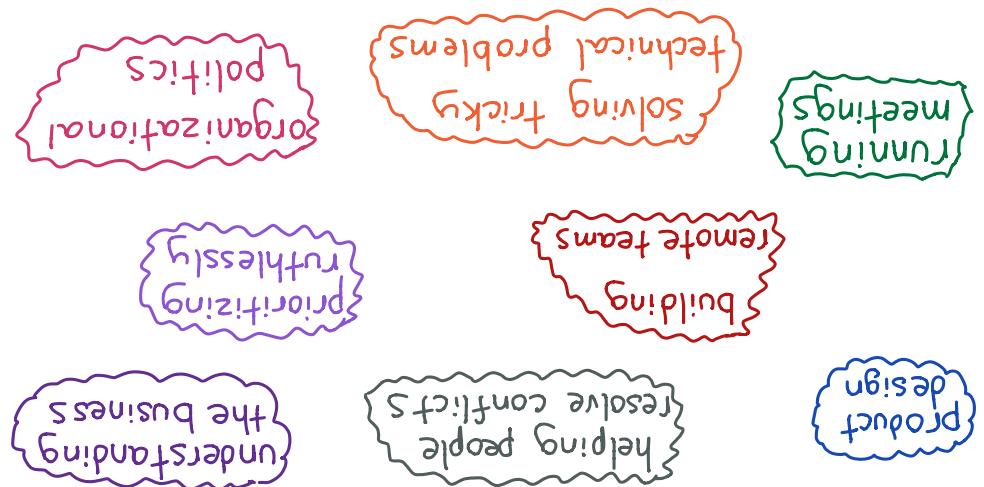
* A Voltron is a robot built out of several other robots

bit.ly/managervoltronbingo has a useful bingo card!



Also, strengths change over time! If they're not good at something today, maybe check back in a year & see if that's changed.

Not every manager is good at every single thing, those things a manager is awesome at and lean on them for and that's okay! I like to figure out what my manager is good at and build trust my



Different managers are good at different things! I've worked with managers who are amazing at:

they're great at
figuring out what

manager schedules regularly !!)

To start, let's talk about 1:1s (which hopefully your

get feedback

get promoted

understand priorities

build trust

solve problems

get awesome opportunities

Communication well can help you:

programming!!!

This is awesome because it means that if you just communicate with them well, then you can mostly focus on getting work done that will help the business.

Basically your manager's job is to make sure that your team is getting work done that will help the business.

COMMUNICATION

Most of the rest of this zine is about

with your manager
how to work well

what to talk about in 1:1s

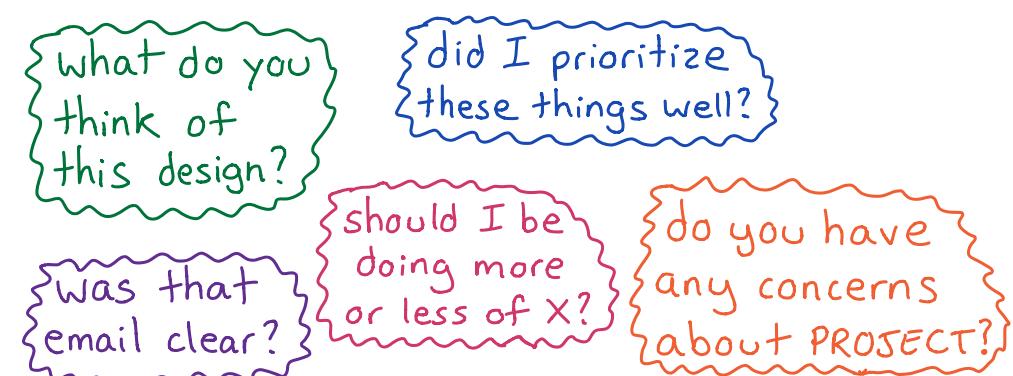


ask for specific feedback

I used to ask for feedback like this:



I've learned that I get ★WAY BETTER★ answers if I ask more specific questions!



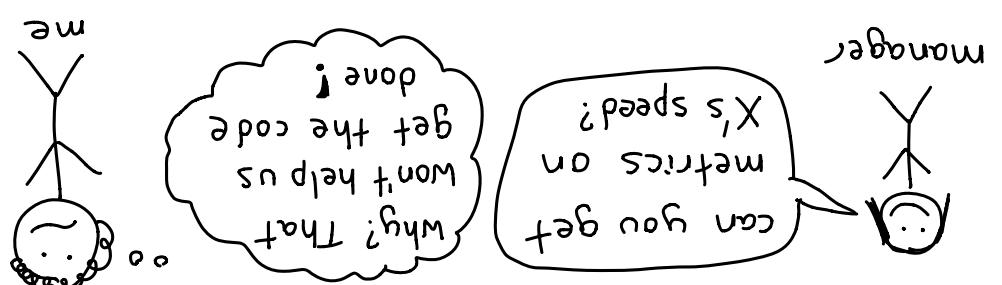
Bonus: asking specific questions forces me to actually think about which areas I might want to focus on !!

Understand their goals and priorities

and priorities

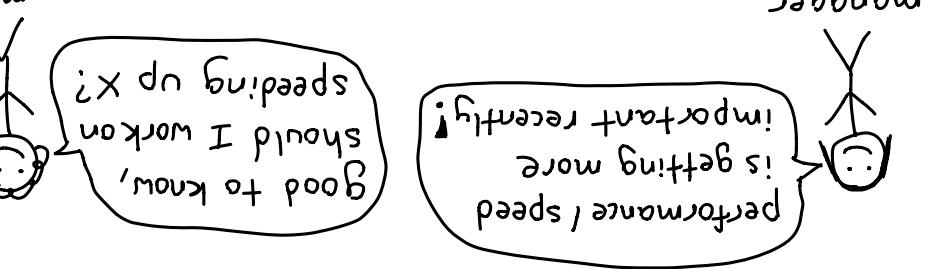
and priorities

They might be asking for metrics because:



- ① they're hearing complaints about X being slow (that you might not be hearing!) (2) without metrics, it's hard for them to have an informed conversation about those complaints for the team is SO USEFUL and means that I'm surprised less often !! Having regular conversations about their priorities is important and recent!!
- ② defend you if X is actually fast! (if X is actually fast)

Having regular conversations about their priorities for the team is SO USEFUL and means that I'm surprised less often !!



Venting can be useful too though sometimes! If there's a problem, it's often helpful to bring it up even if I don't have a solution.

Venting can be useful too though sometimes! If there's a problem, it's often helpful to bring it up even if I don't have a solution.



These days, I try to bring up problems that I'm interested in fixing and bring ideas for solutions when I can. Often we just talk about our work:

Without metrics, it's hard for them to have an informed conversation about those complaints for the team is SO USEFUL and means that I'm surprised less often !!

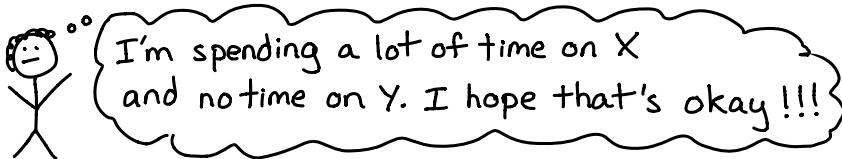


I've had periods with some managers where, every time we talk, we're talking about SOME problem:

keep conversations mostly constructive

set clear expectations

I used to often get stressed out about whether the way I was prioritizing my work was reasonable.



Everything got easier once I could just:

- ① come up for a plan for what to prioritize
- ② tell my manager the plan and ask if it sounds good
- ③ trust them when they say yes !!



Setting expectations is awesome because:

- I feel confident that my plans are reasonable
- my manager is aware of what I'm planning and can coordinate

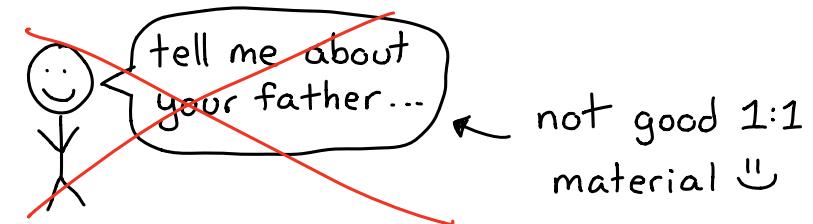
Everybody wins!!!

On emotional labour

"Emotional labour" is the idea that dealing with feelings-related problems is work.



Emotional labour is part of what managers are paid to do. But!! Managers aren't therapists.

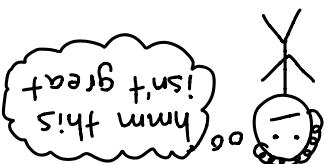


When I'm upset about something, I try to be clear about why and ideally explain what I think a reasonable resolution would be.

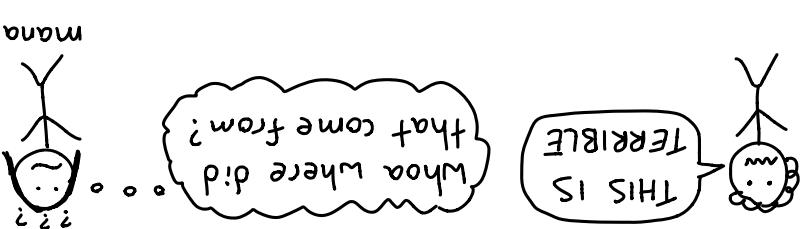


Problems early talk about

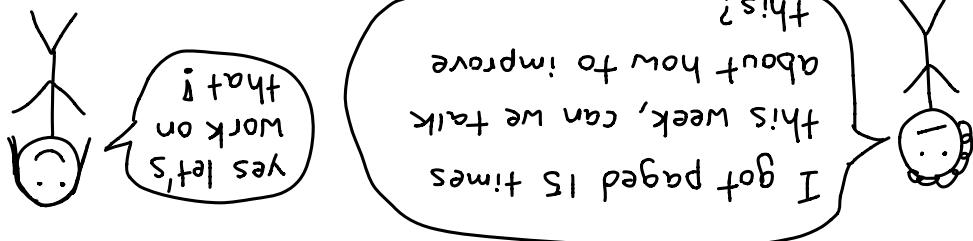
Every so often I'll start with a small problem



and forget to talk about it until I'm REALLY MAD



It's way better to bring up a problem early and figure it out before it turns into a big deal!



Sometimes I fall into a trap where I think my manager should be able to solve **EVERY** problem on the team and if they're not then they're not doing their job.

It's helpful for me to remember that at any given time they're probably dealing with a lot!

remember they're only human



work with your manager to get promoted

Where I work, my manager *wants* people on the team to get promoted. If people are being promoted, it (hopefully) means that they're growing & getting more awesome at their jobs, which makes the team's manager look good!



huh, maybe promotions are just a normal thing we can have a conversation about?

Some ways to start conversations:

- can we walk through the expectations for the next level to make sure that I understand them?
- what areas do you think I should focus on?
- if I accomplished X Y Z, do you think that would be enough to get promoted?

If this is something you care about, keep checking in periodically! The person who cares the most about your career is you ❤️

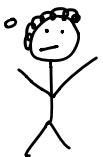
on surviving performance reviews

Performance reviews can be really stressful.



here's the self assessment form to fill out!

AWESOME PLAN:
procrastinate for 2 weeks and then do it at the last minute in a panic!



Here's what I've been doing for the last year or so, which has helped! About a month before performance review season comes around, I'll compile a **HUGE DOCUMENT** with:

- every project I did in the last year
 - * the project's goals & results
 - * cool graphs/metrics that show it was a success
 - * what my contributions to the project were
- people I've mentored (eg an intern!)
- project plans & documentation I've written

and send it to my manager. My manager's reaction:



THANK YOU! Having all this information makes it really easy for me to explain why your work is so great!