Welcome to Hiring, Firing, and Inspiring an Exceptional Team!

**Once upon a time…**

To introduce myself and explain why I feel qualified to stand up here and talk about this stuff, I want to tell you a quick story.

<click>

Once upon a time, I was a programmer. I think I was a pretty good programmer, and after a number of different jobs I landed on a team at my current company.

<click>

I spent a good six or seven years on this team as an individual contributor, slowly gaining more and more technical leadership but really not *responsible* for anyone except myself.

<click: promoted to management>

Eventually, however, I was promoted into management. My head grew a few sizes, and instead of spending my day doing code reviews in Visual Studio I began spending my days doing TPS reports, time sheet approvals, 1-1s and other super awesome and exciting stuff.

<click: Things were great for awhile>

Things were great for awhile and the team seemed happy and productive. I encouraged them to be open and honest with me about problems they might have, no one said anything, and so I believed there not to *be* any problems.

<click: but all good things come to an end>

But all good things come to an end, and eventually

<click: someone quit>

Someone quit. There had been some morale issue and some communication dysfunction that boiled over and drove out a key team member.

<click: shook>

This really shook me.

<click: uncomfortable>

This was my first real blow as a manager, and I faced the uncomfortable truths that everything was *not* sunshine and rainbows for everyone.

<click: worked hard>

But it turns out that I have an exceptional team, and we worked on it. I began to recognize the ways that I was influencing the team dynamic, both good and bad, and the team learned some things about me and my management style.

All in all, while no one on my team sends me “Best Boss” mugs on Bosses Day, and I don’t quite think any of them would jump in front of a bullet for me without at least a *little* hesitation, I think we’re very strong and healthy and functional and productive.

<click: 3 months later>

Some of the strongest evidence of this came a few months later, when something amazing happened.

<click: hey team, haz job>

The person that had left came back. A short stint on a new team had made him realize that while we aren’t perfect, we’re still a pretty exceptional group, and with that perspective he decided to return.

<click: yay>

My point is that I have an exceptional team. Some of their exceptional qualities are because of me and how I lead, some of their exceptional qualities are *despite* of me and how I lead, and many of their exceptional qualities are due to their individual characteristics. I’ve learned a lot from leading a team like this and I think I can share some of that with you.

**Why are we here?**

There are three types of knowledge. The first is the stuff you know, which is obvious.

The second type is the stuff you know you don’t know. This is knowledge that you don’t possess, that you can’t apply in problem solving, but you know that *some* people have this knowledge, and you have at least a vague notion of when that knowledge would come in handy. Presumably, when you find yourself in such a situation, you can then decide to do the research or the training or the whatever to move that knowledge from bucket 2 to bucket 1.

The third type of knowledge is the stuff you don’t know you don’t know. This is stuff that you don’t even know exists, or maybe you’ve heard a term or concept but it’s so undefined that you have no realistic chance of recognizing that you’re in a situation where it would come in handy.

Pretend you’re lost in the woods. An example of “stuff you know” is recognizing an apple tree and knowing that apples are safe to eat. But let’s say you come across a bunch of wild berries. An example of “stuff you know you don’t know” would be recognizing that *some* berries are poisonous, and that you don’t know how to differentiate safe from deadly. So while you don’t have the knowledge to satisfy your hunger in this case, at least you know enough to avoid getting sick.

But what if you *didn’t* know that poisonous berries were a thing? If you were raised in some sheltered village somewhere and never taught that bad berries even existed, then you’d see the berries and would happily eat your fill, and then maybe get sick and die. That’s an example of why “stuff you don’t know you don’t know” can be so dangerous.

Today’s talk is about this third type of knowledge. Unfortunately, it’s very common for people to be promoted into management without any real training. You’re good at your job as an individual contributor, you start to accumulate more responsibility bit by bit, and eventually you get promoted. And then all of a sudden, all of those individual contributor skills that served you so well for so long start to not matter so much. You’re no longer evaluated on what you do individually, but instead by how you get things done *through others*. This is a huge shift, especially for those of us that got into software precisely because computers were easier to deal with than people!

New managers are often like a person, lost in the woods, with no concept that some berries are poisonous. You try to motivate someone, and you end up demotivating them instead. You try to build a culture of teamwork, but somehow everyone adopts a “just gotta get mine” mentality instead. Without a wider perspective of management science and management as a profession, it’s very difficult to even know what to search for when you’re looking for advice.

The purpose of this talk is to introduce some concepts that I’ve found helpful in my own management journey. I’ve tried very hard, however, to make this more than just another “here’s 10 random things I learned about being a boss” style talk. My objective is to introduce you to a couple of different frameworks that I’ve found helpful as I’ve built and managed a team. These are things that exist out there in the world, not stuff that I’ve made up on my own.

I’m not going to dive super deep into any of these topics. My goal is just to introduce them, and move them into your “things you know you don’t know” bucket. That way, when you find yourself lost in the proverbial woods, and you stumble across a bunch of berries, you’ll be able to do some educated research and figure out how to proceed rather than dying a painful death of dysentery.

This talk is designed for newer managers and leaders that do not already have a well-defined understanding of these concepts. If you’ve been in a leadership role for a long time, or if you’ve already applied these things in your own practice, then this might not be the best use of your time. You won’t hurt my feelings if you “law of two feet” your way out of here.

**“Once upon a time”**

Now that we’ve