

Should You Become an Engineering Manager?

Larry Schrof

Quick logistics note:

I'm legally blind, so please don't hesitate to interrupt with any questions, clarifications, or anything you think I should know.

“The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms.” - Socrates

- IC: Individual contributor. Someone who has no direct reports
- Engineering Manager aka People Manager aka Manager: Someone, usually with technical background, who has official reports (ICs, other managers, or both.)
- Intern program: The process by which a company hires interns, usually with the intention to convert young talent to full time.
- Tech lead: Sets technical direction / vision for the team w/o having official managerial duties. Often provides input into managerial processes such as promo recommendations, perf reviews, etc.

So... should you become a people manager?

To answer this question, we will
apply the MMO framework...

MMO Framework

Do you have the appropriate:

Motive:

Reasons?

Means:

Skills and traits?

Opportunity:

Circumstances?

Motive

You should always be able to articulate the **why** behind your decision-making.

- A. Be brutally honest with yourself
- B. Discuss it with someone trustworthy who knows you well. Great candidates include:
 - a. Spouse or long-term significant other
 - b. Parents, siblings, or long-time friends
 - c. Mega points on the above for anyone who has managed before.
- C. Do your homework. (Books, mgmt. blogs, conferences, etc.)

Motive

Let's cover some common reasons folks consider becoming a manager...

(and my colorful opinions on them!)

Motive

Higher comp (\$\$\$)

Larry score: **-10 / 10**

(If you need to become a manager to receive increased comp, you have the wrong employer and/or the wrong approach! More on this in 'Opportunity'.)

Must-read on this topic: "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us." by Daniel Pink

Motive

More control over your work?

Larry score: **-8 / 10**

(Becoming a manager almost always means less control over your work, as your time now belongs to everyone else.)

Motive

More control over your work?

If you feel you lack control over your work, you may need to:

1. Ask yourself - are you over-committed? (Are you an uber-helper?)
2. Have a serious convo w/ your boss asking for more autonomy
3. Switch bosses... er, teams.
4. Switch to a different company with a different culture.

Motive

Have more control over the work around you?

Larry score: [-7 .. +2] / 10

This one is a bit ~~murky~~ complex, usually a good topic over beers.

In my experience, this motivation is almost always misdirected or not self-articulated properly.

1. You may be frustrated w/ your team's direction
2. You may be frustrated w/ capacity or velocity of the people around you
3. You may have other, subconscious frustrations

Depending on the factors, becoming a tech lead **may** get you some resolution.

Motive

Try something new?

Larry score: **3 / 10**

Do you lose interest in most things after a couple of years? (It's ok, many do!)

Be careful; this is a self-centric motivation.

Utilize your employer's intern program; also see 'Make It Reversible' under Opportunity.

Motive

You're curious

Larry score: **6 / 10**

Utilize your employer's intern program.

Motive

Have more impact?

Larry score: **7 / 10** (It depends)

It is very likely, given the right conversations with the right people, you could have more impact and remain an IC (Individual Contributor.)

Important: Do not conflate 'more impact' with 'more recognition'.

Motive

Develop new skills?

Larry score: **8 / 10**

Be aware, switching from technical IC to manager involves a whole new **class** of skills, not just skills.

Example: Imagine an Olympic athlete wants to become a politician.

Motive

Help people grow and be successful?

Larry score: **10 / 10** ^[*1]

[1]: Provided you have the right skills and tools in your toolbox.

Opportunity

“Luck is what happens when opportunity meets preparation.” - Seneca, Roman philosopher

For the context of this talk, Opportunity is:

The (mostly) objectively-measurable professional circumstances that directly impact your ability to transition to people manager **and likelihood of initial success.**

Opportunity

Step 1: Participate in your company's internship program if they have one.

Reasons:

- Gain sense of having influence on someone's career
- Test drive your mentoring and coaching abilities
- Learn to assign, **delegate**, and check progress of others
- Learn to trust others to get their work done
- Learn to assess performance of others in quasi-official capacity
- Learn to sell the company / team (assuming you want to hire them)
- **Get a taste of being responsible for others**

Opportunity

Step 1: Participate in your company's internship program if they have one.

Important

Managing interns **is not severely time intensive.**

So, just because you have plenty of time to get your own (technical) work done, don't extrapolate this to believe that when you become a people manager, you will still have plenty of time for the same technical work.

Opportunity

Step 1: Participate in your company's internship program if they have one.

Special Note

If you are **asked** to participate in this program, consider it an honor, regardless of who asked you or why.

Opportunity

Step 2: Yes or No - does your company support separate manager and IC career tracks?

At a majority of companies, you may reach a point where, in order to be promoted, you **must** become a manager.

Be very careful and deliberate in your decision to become a manager at these companies; it is often difficult to reverse while remaining at the same company.

Opportunity

Step 2: Yes or No - does your company support separate manager and IC career tracks?

Here are the challenges when switching IC -> manager at companies that do not support two separate career paths:

- These companies assume that because you were an effective IC, you will therefore be an effective manager. Maybe... maybe not.
- When ICs are considered 'worker bees', the company tends to have unhealthy attitudes, culture, and career-development opportunities
- Many times, switching back -> lower pay -> means demotion -> not allowed!

Opportunity

Step 3: **Make It Reversible!!!**

- Find out the official stance from HR if is possible to try out being a people manager, and then switch back if it doesn't work out.
- Beware of Catch-22s / snags. e.g. :
 - Positive perf reviews often required for any role change
 - Comp framework restrictions. (As manager you may earn a bit more. But they won't let you go back to IC because they claim it would be a demotion. See previous slide.)

Opportunity

Step 4: Talk to your manager

Give them a heads-up that you're contemplating a switch **eventually**.

Observe their reaction carefully, even if you trust them.

A good manager will be supportive, even if it means potentially losing a strong IC contributor to the team.

Opportunity

Step 5: Find an opening

Ideally, this is at your current company, as you have:

- A reserve of social capital and good will built up
- Familiarity with the culture, people, and environment
- (Hopefully) built a good reputation as a contributor and solid citizen

Where to look:

- Your manager's network
- Internal job bulletins
- Your org. structure
- Your grapevine

Opportunity

Step 6: Leave on good terms; help your boss out.

Always leave your current position on good terms:

- Give your manager as much advance notice as possible
- Help to find (and possibly interview / hire) your replacement
- Don't be in a rush. It may take weeks or even months to replace you.
- Identify all your responsibilities and projects. For each:
 - Document thoroughly
 - Finish if possible; kill it, or else hand it off
 - Train those coming in after you
- Be prepared to offer some amount of post-transition support

Opportunity

Step 7: Go for it!

My suggestions for your “minimum try-out period”:

- Absolute minimum six calendar months.
- Ideally, 9-12 month minimum.
- If your company does performance reviews, stick around through one complete cycle.

Means

Are You Cut Out For This ????????????

(I could write a book. Maybe someday I will.)

Means

Larry's hypothesis:

The day-to-day activities required to get your work done must bring you joy.

MEETINGS

Ideas -> documents

Hiring / recruiting

Travel

Onboarding to your team

Onboarding new employees

Managing budgets

Salary / comp adjustments

Performance management

Vacations and team health

Reports' personal issues

Docs / wikis / diagrams

Comms w/ mgmnt chain

Comms w/ peers

Comms w/ execs

MEETINGS

Contractor / vendor invoices

RFPs

ICs moving on / off team

PIPs / exits

MEETINGS

Acquiring head count

MEETINGS

Promotions

Therapist / therapy sessions

MEETINGS

Direct report 1:1s

Volunteer work

Performance reviews (360)

Attend town-halls / AMAs

Give AMAs

Conflict-resolution / diplomacy

Finding time off (good luck!)

Reorgs

Coaching

DON'T FORGET MEETINGS

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

#1 Be-all end-all in my book...

**Puts the success of others before themselves...
ALWAYS.**

As a people manager, you **must always** define your successes as the success of others.. **especially those reporting in to / through you.** When they fail, you failed. When they succeed, you succeeded. That simple.

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

Be a communicator.

Being an introvert is okay; it means your interactions (with others) deplete your energy, not replenish it. However, you must **enjoy interactions** and be having them **a good amount of the time**.

If you prefer to work alone in a silo, people managing is probably not for you.

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

Relinquish control of the **how** the work gets done.

Prepare to give up most of the IC work you were doing. You owe it to your reports to focus on their careers.

Micromanagement is only useful in specific, limited, temporary situations. Don't do it!

“Your job, as a manager, isn't to have the answers. Your job now is to make sure all the questions get asked.” - Steve M, good friend of mine.

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

(For perfectionists): You can no longer hold your reports to the same mega-high standards you hold for yourself.

Do your reports hold each other accountable for quality? Do they do overall good work? Do they give the company what is needed and often more? Then Shut Up on the nitpicking and super-polishing.

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

- Objective: Could you fire a friend and promote a stellar employee you personally dislike?
- Can you wait weeks or months to see the consequences of your decisions? (Management is more like Civilization than Mario Kart.)
- Empathic: Are you able and willing to completely understand a situation from someone else's perspective?
- Proactive: Do you ever have to wait to be told what to do?

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

Become **profoundly resourceful.**

Know what to do when you don't know what
to do.

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

BECOME A STOIC

Negative emotions **sap** your energy. Left unchecked, they damage your reputation and career.

You must learn to control (not repress) your emotions. If you need to vent, use a trusted peer.

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

- The Serenity Prayer

Means

Most Important People-Manager Attributes (According to Larry)

“Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react.”

- Charles Swindoll

A Final Thought on People Management

(and parenting for that matter...)

“It’s Not About You Anymore.”

- L. Schrof (just some random guy)

Reach out any time!

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