

Introduction to Staff+ Engineering

Petr Zemek

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TIS P2P Talk @ Gen

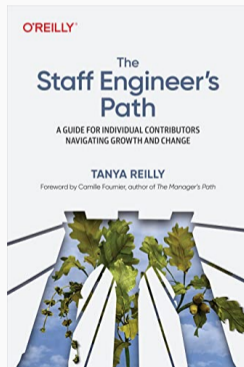
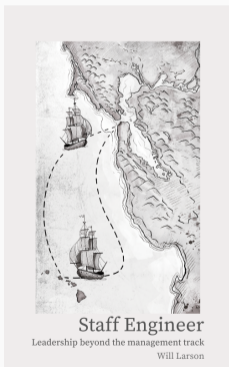
Before we begin...

Disclaimer:

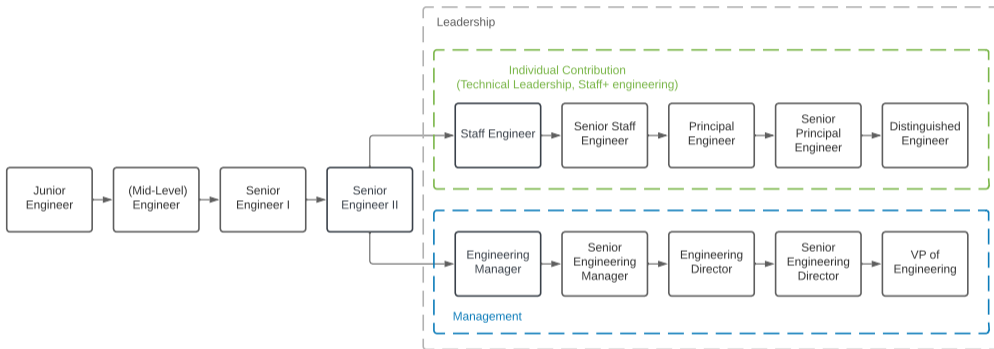
- Everything in the talk is someone's opinion, often mine ;-)
- I do not have all the answers
- Career ladders, job titles, and job descriptions are highly company-specific
- Many of the points in this talk are rather theoretical than practical
- The talk is meant to be generic rather than specific to Gen

What the Talk is Based on

- Will Larson: Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track (2021)
- Tanya Reilly: The Staff Engineer's Path (2022)
- My own research, experience, and opinions



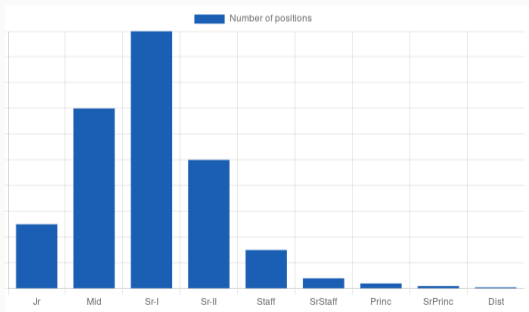
Sample Career Ladder



Petr Zemek: A Look at Software-Engineering Career Ladders

Caveats

- Job titles and responsibilities are highly company/org/team-specific
- Startup vs corporation
- Dual track (IC and management) vs single track (management) career ladder
- Promotion: There has to be an opportunity, budget, etc.
- To manage expectations, here is an (artificial) example of position distribution:



- Staff Engineer
- Principal Engineer

Who are Staff+ Engineers and What Do They Do?

- A part of what they do is similar to what Senior Engineers do (*)
- Technical role models leading the design and execution of larger/complex projects
- They are not managers (no reports), but they are leaders
- They are the adults in the room
- Highly autonomous, often choose the problems to work on by themselves
- Big-picture thinking, strategical
- Project management and execution
- Mentorship, sponsorship, leveling up people around them
- Communication, coordination, collaboration
- Removing roadblocks, unblocking people

Who are Staff+ Engineers and What Do They Do? (Continued)

- Influencing via nudging
- Interviewing, onboarding
- Lots of reading and writing
- Lots of so-called *glue work* (Tanya Reilly's talk)
- Problem finding, advising managers what should be done
- Setting technical direction
- Designing systems, writing specifications, and reviewing technical proposals
- Having vast technological knowledge, often more in-breadth than in-depth
- Advocating for people and the team in technical matters

But I Will Still Code... Right?

Well, yes, but... It is complicated.

I will code more.
Soon.



Time	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5
09:00					
09:30	busy, 09:30				busy, 09:30
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17:00					

(from Tanya Reilly's talk on glue work)

Archetypes, or Choose Your Staff+ Flavor

"Standard":

- Tech lead
- Architect
- Solver
- Right hand

Additional:

- Disrupter
- Hyper-specialist

Staff vs Senior Staff vs Principal vs ...

Usually, the higher up you go:

- The broader your scope and area of impact are
- The more power you have to influence things
- The more responsibility you have
- The more strategically you have to think
- The higher your compensation package is
- The more you have to deal with people
- The more meetings you have
- The less coding you do
- The fewer people on that position there are
- The more abstract the job descriptions are

Some of the Reasons To Become a Staff+ Engineer

- You enjoy leading people and projects but do not want to be a people manager
- You want to be able to build bigger projects than you could build alone
- You want to have a more strategic role, more power, and more responsibility
- You want to be in "the room"
- You want to use and improve your soft skills as well as hard skills
- You want to be able to choose the problems to work on largely by yourself
- You do not mind being constantly interrupted and having lots of meetings
- You enjoy or do not mind being in a supportive role
- You want to earn more money (or have a fancy job title)
- You want to have a sense of progression on the ladder while still actively coding

Petr Zemek: Choosing a Software-Engineering Career Path

Some of the Reasons NOT To Become a Staff+ Engineer

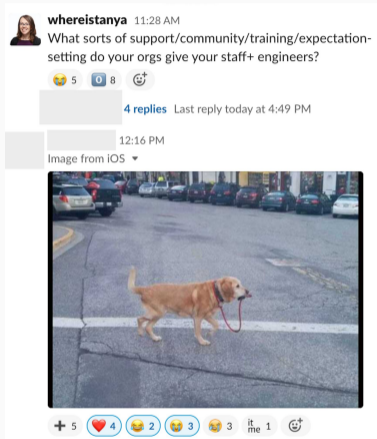
From the Senior Engineer perspective:

- You want to be deep in the code most of your time
- You really enjoy what you do and do not want to be doing anything else
- You have no interest in moving into leadership or management

From the Engineering Manager perspective:

- You enjoy the people side of engineering more than the technical side
- You enjoy working with and through people more than working on your own
- You either do not want to code anymore or do not mind coding only sporadically

Support/Training/Expectations for Staff+ Engineers



(Tanya Reilly's Twitter)

Miscellaneous notes

- People should not be forced to move into leadership/management
(Petr Zemek: Not All Developers Want to Be Managers, and That's OK)
- Technical leadership and people management are two sides of the same coin
- Moving into leadership/management is more a different job than a promotion
- Switching tracks, or the engineer/manager pendulum
- Being technically correct is only the beginning
- Where to report in the organizational hierarchy (low vs high)
- If you love coding, fight for higher salary and stock options, not better title
- What type of work energizes you? What do you want to get better at?