Gen™

Staff+ Engineering: Leadership Beyond the Management Track

Extended Version

Gen Development Conference

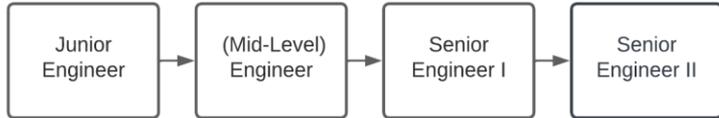2025-01-29

Petr Zemek

https://petrzemek.net
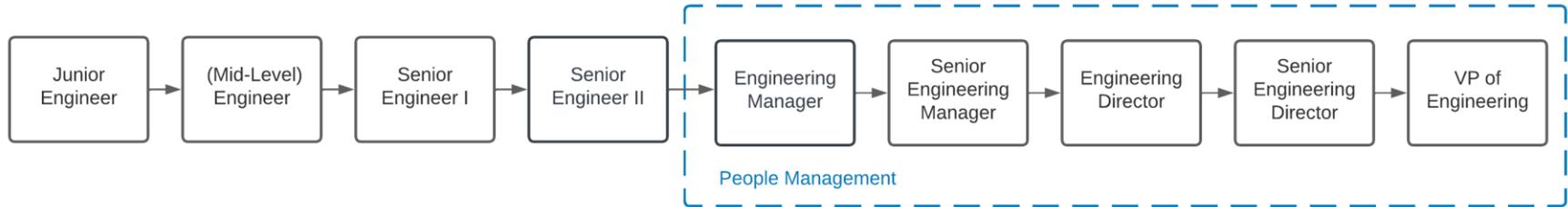
Before We Begin...

- Everything in the talk is someone's opinion, often mine ;-)

- Career ladders are highly company-specific

- Many of the points in this talk are rather theoretical than practical

- The talk is generic, not specific to Gen

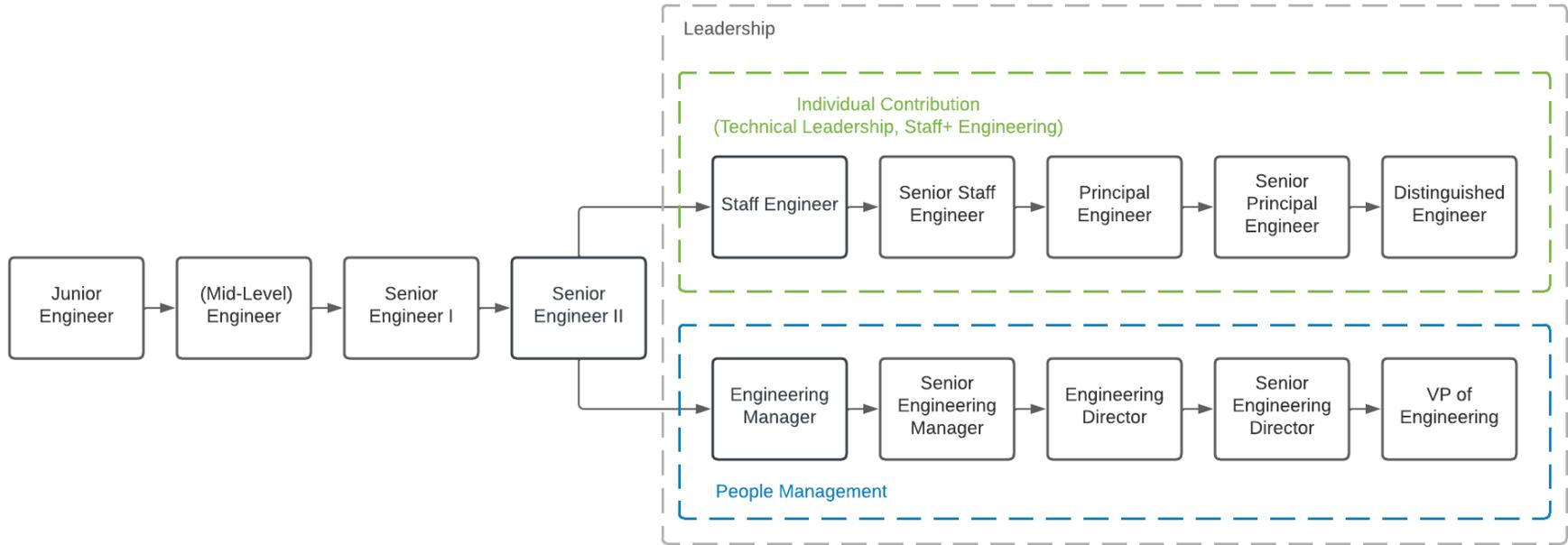- Motivation: Get you thinking about your career path ;-)

An Example Career Ladder – "Starter Pack"

Gen

An Example Career Ladder – People Management Track

Junior Engineer → (Mid-Level) Engineer → Senior Engineer I → Senior Engineer II → **People Management:** Engineering Manager → Senior Engineering Manager → Engineering Director → Senior Engineering Director → VP of Engineering

An Example Career Ladder – Technical Leadership Track

Managing Expectations

- Job titles and responsibilities are highly company/org/team-specific

- Startup vs corporation

- Moving into leadership/management is more a different job than a promotion

- Promotion: There has to be a business need, opportunity, and budget

- An (artificial) example of position distribution:
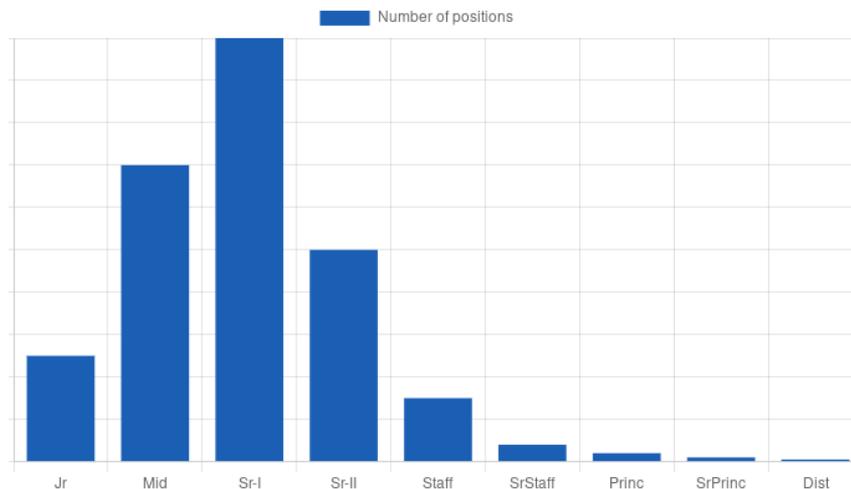
Who are Staff+ Engineers and What Do They Do?

- Technical role models leading the design and execution of large/complex projects
- Highly autonomous, select problems to work on largely by themselves
- Problem finding, advising managers what should be done
- Big-picture, strategical, and long-term thinking
- Project management and execution
- Leveling up people around them
- Communication, coordination, and collaboration
- Advocating for people in technical matters
- Removing roadblocks, unblocking people
- Digging into arbitrarily complex issues, even spanning many systems
- Designing systems, writing specifications, and reviewing technical proposals
- Setting technical direction
- ...and **much** more!

But I Will Still Write Code… Right?

Well, yes, but… It is complicated.

(from Tanya Reilly's talk on glue work)

Archetypes, or Choose Your Staff+ Flavor

- The "standard four":
  - Tech lead
  - Architect
  - Solver
  - Right hand
- Other:
  - Disrupter
  - Hyper-specialist
  - …

From Wikipedia:

*An **archetype** is a recurrence of characters or ideas sharing similar traits throughout various, seemingly unrelated cases in classic storytelling, media, etc.*

Examples:

- The hero
- The sidekick
- The villain
- The wise old man

(source)

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

(source)

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

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

What Is the Right Career Path for Me?

(source)

- Ask yourself:
  - What type of work energizes me?
  - What do I want to get better at?
- More information:
  - Petr Zemek: Not All Developers Want to Be Managers, and That's OK (2019) - article
  - Petr Zemek: A Look at Software-Engineering Career Ladders (2021) - talk
  - Petr Zemek: Choosing a Software-Engineering Career Path (2022) - article

# Support/Training/Expectations for Staff+ Engineers
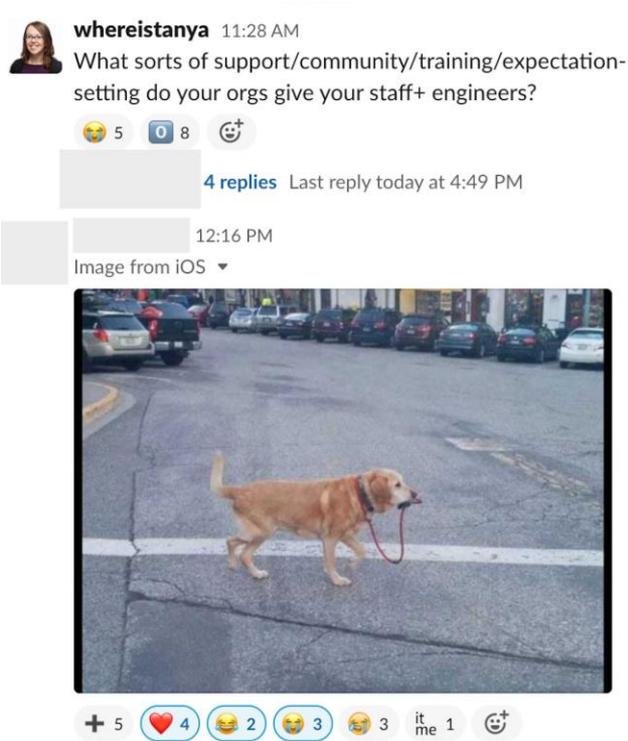

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Miscellaneous Notes

- Etymology of the words *"staff"* and *"principal"*

- Moving into leadership/management is more a different job than a promotion

- If you love coding, fight for higher salary and stock options, not better title

- People should not be forced to move into leadership/management

- Technical leadership and people management are two sides of the same coin

- Switching tracks, or the engineer/manager pendulum

- Where to report in the organizational hierarchy (low vs high)

- Being technically correct is only the beginning

- Petr Zemek: My Career So Far (2023-12) - article

Recommended Reading

- Will Larson: *Staff Engineer: Leadership Beyond the Management Track* (2021)
- Tanya Reilly: *The Staff Engineer's Path* (2022)
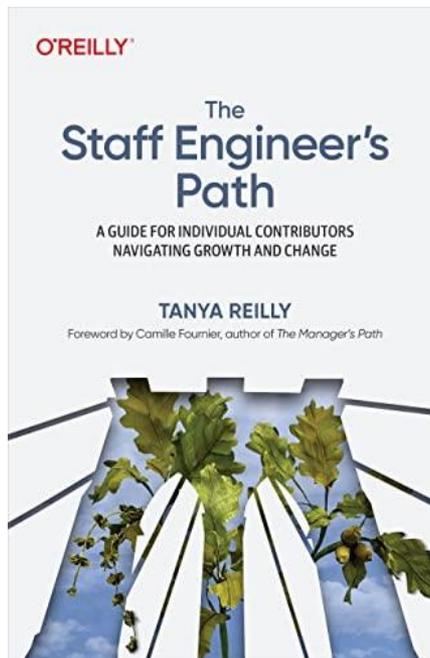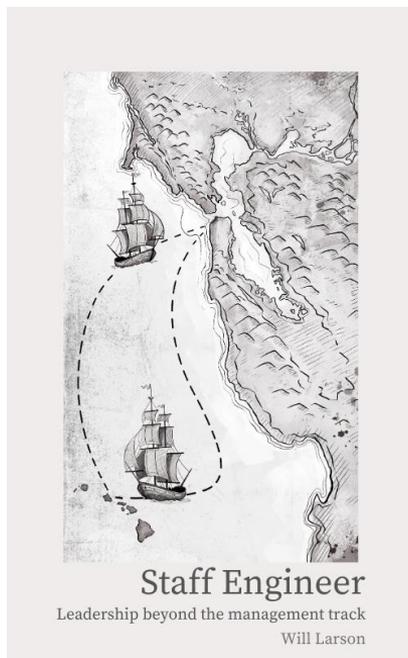
Summary and Q&A

- Some companies (including Gen!) provide a **dual-track** career ladder: **individual contributor** (IC) and **people management**

- The IC track that is parallel to the people-management track is often called ***"staff+ engineering"*** (named after two common job titles: *Staff Engineer* and *Senior Staff Engineer*)

- Career ladders, job titles, responsibilities, **greatly differ from company to company**, especially the IC track

- Staff+ Engineers have **various responsibilities** (leading large/complex projects, big-picture and strategical thinking, problem finding, leveling people up, designing systems, reviewing technical proposals, etc.)

- The amount of **coding** that a Staff+ Engineer does is highly variable (generally less than Senior Engineer but more than Engineering Manager)

- In general, there are several **staff+ archetypes** (tech lead, architect, solver, right hand, etc.)

- The **right career path for you** depends on many factors, such as what type of work energizes you or what do you want to get better at

- There are **two canonical books** when it comes to staff+ engineering (by Will Larson and Tanya Reilly)