

What I Learned from Interviewing 50+ Engineering Managers

Vidal Graupera
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Agenda

- What Started This
- About the Interviews
- Questions with real-life answers
- Next steps
- Q&A

What Started This?

- A bit about me
- Engineering Management is lonely place
- Most people receive very little training
- Lots of companies don't offer much in L&D training
- EMs don't share inside companies
- EMs are crazy busy
- Good or bad EM makes a MASSIVE difference
- 1000s of books and blogs on management and leadership but what is good and what applies? Only a handful on being an EM...
- What is an aspiring EM to do....?

About the interviews



- Side project, passion project. Started Nov 2017
- Focus on software engineering managers and leaders
- Intent: help other managers learn and improve
- 53 interviews published, plus some WIP. One not published.
- <https://www.managersclub.com>

More about managersclub.com

- Nicest surprise many people willing to share
- Biggest challenge getting started; managers are busy so finding time
- Started slowly, now people are even reaching out to be featured
- 2k-3k unique visitors per month and growing

“I wanted to express this website is quite remarkable. I am a young female engineer; I haven't found many female engineer mentors or a good website that teach me how to manage my team and time. This website gives me great information that I was curious about. I love the interviews and the resources.”

Jessica Arbona, 10 October 2018

Questions

- What's your background and how did you get into management?
- What are the biggest challenges you face?
- What is your approach to hiring?
- What's your advice for managers who are just starting out?
- What's your work day like and how do you manage your time, emails, etc.?
- What's a personal habit that contributes to your success?
- Share an internet resource or tool that you can't live without.
- If you could recommend one book to managers, what would it be and why?
- **What is your approach to mentoring and coaching members of your team?
- Where can we go to learn more about you? (LinkedIn, Twitter, GitHub)

What's your background and how did you get into management?

- Not a scientific study, or random sample
- Real challenge to find women and underrepresented minorities
- College graduates: 90%
- Technical education: 80%
- M.S. or higher: 35%
- M.B.A. < 10%
- Common theme. Started as IC. Asked to step into management (reluctantly), but then it worked out.
- Many moved into management at a early stage in their careers. Some had leadership experience in school and knew they wanted to become leaders right away but I would say this was not the most common path.

What They Said

“For example; one of the team members back then was going to be managed out because of his performance, but after I started interacting with that person I realized he’s actually really smart and knows a lot about the services and architecture. So, why was this person not performing well?

It turned out there was tension between him and the manager who had different opinions. The developer just happened to have a lot of ideas and was a very independent thinker. That’s the reason it didn’t work out well. After giving that person more responsibility and trust, his performance went up, and I think that’s something that I never experienced before. Being a manager means your job is to deliver something very personal, such as personal impact to the team members.”

[Interview with Jerry Li, Senior Director at Groupon](#)

What They Said

“Being an individual contributor, I was often frustrated with the environments within which I typically had to work, not being effectively supported, not knowing what was expected of me and not necessarily having what I needed to be successful. I sensed there had to be a better way and told myself if I was ever given the opportunity to lead, that I would turn the model upside down, putting the individual contributors first and focus relentlessly on supporting them.” [Mike Hansen, Head of Product Development and Engineering for Sonatype](#)

What are the biggest challenges you face?

- Hiring !
- Managing growth and scaling culture and processes
- Transition into management
- Time management
- Prioritization and saying no

What They Said: Hiring Challenges

“hiring the right talent. We are betting on some of the cutting edge technologies in the industry, and it gets increasingly hard given the market demand for such talent” [Chaitanya Atreya, Director of Engineering at Teradata](#)

“Hiring continues to be my number one challenge— the market is hot so there is a general shortage of people.” Rich Archbold, Senior Director of Engineering at Intercom

“diversity and inclusion”, [Katie Womersley, Director of Engineering at Buffer](#)

“recruiting is still one of the biggest challenges and frustrations” Daniel Dvorkin, Director of Engineering at Modern Tribe

What They Said: Transition to Management Challenges

“As an engineer, it’s difficult for me to give others the task I want to work on.” [Rui Peres, Engineering Manager at Babylon Health](#)

“the shift away from coding into a focus on people and process is the biggest shift for me.” [Sam Boswell, CTO @ WorkGaps](#)

“The biggest challenge I face personally as a manager is remembering that I’m a manager. With an engineering mindset, it is very easy to view all problems as something that can be fixed or can be engineered for.” [Mike Dosik, Senior Director, Cloud Operations at Thomson Reuters](#)

What They Said: Time Management Challenges

“prioritization, time management, and making quick and clear decisions” Travis Kimmel the CEO, co-founder of GitPrime

“The constant challenge is probably time management.” Mike Oliver, VP of Product Engineering at Runkeeper / ASICS Digital

“...finding time on my calendar for action items...”

Matt Newkirk, Engineering Manager at Etsy

What is your approach to hiring?

- They don't care a lot about specific technical skills
- Potential, passion and ability to learn
- Clear goals and rubrics
- Have a good engineering brand to attract candidates
- High bar ... “if you have a bucket of white paint, a single black drop will taint it.”

What They Said About Hiring

“I hire for the skills that can’t be learned. If a person is passionate, intellectually curious and can take ownership, everything else is teachable (within reason). Hiring is a lot like throwing a football to a sprinting receiver. I hire for where I think the person is going to be, not where he/she is at the moment.”

[Interview with Mike Dosik, Senior Director, Thomson Reuters](#)

“I have some core attributes that I like to see in every candidate: a passion for learning and growing, reliability and a sense of ownership, honesty and the ability to collaborate and debate selflessly and respectfully.”

<https://www.managersclub.com/benjamin-encz-director-of-engineering/>

What They Said About Hiring

“In addition to group interviews, we requested that the individual conduct a 30 minute presentation about a technical achievement and communicate to us the value, like we’re customers. That allowed us to gauge their ability to effectively communicate technical concepts in a simple manner.”

[Interview with Andrew Mairena](#)

“These are all important attributes, but I’ve often said I know where to go to hire smart people but don’t know where to go to hire passionate people. I’ll take passion over experience any day.”

[Interview with Mickey Mantle](#)

What They Said About Hiring

“Generally speaking, I work hard to make the process human. Everyone will agree that hiring is expensive and stressful. What is often lost when developing a hiring process is that it’s expensive and stressful for both parties. As a result, organizations end up with a process that optimizes for the hiring party. Aggressive scheduling, an opaque process, sunset dates, and gotcha-style interview sessions all put a strong candidate at risk. And not just in terms of performance: Many of these are the antithesis of inclusive.”

[Interview with Anthony Mazzearella, Director BAMTECH Media](#)

What They Said About Hiring

“For hiring specifically, I’ve taken a lot of the advice about bias to heart and force myself to think critically to ensure I’m not hiring someone just because they’re like me. For each role we write out our expectations and first few projects that the individual will be doing. We also have rubrics for each interview question. That way, when we’re discussing the merits of each candidate we have alignment on the skills they need to succeed.” [Elena Tatarchenko](#)
[Engineering Manager at DataFox](#)

“My approach is very analytical. Before interviewing for a role, I take time to craft our all the interview questions and I outline the attributes of a great answer, and of a less than ideal answer. Then during an interview, I ask candidates the same questions and I score them against my previous definitions of ideal/lacking answers afterwards.” [Katie Womersley](#),
[Director of Engineering at Buffer](#)

What's your advice for managers who are just starting out?

- You are now doing a completely different job
- Your job is not to do but enable team to succeed and be a force multiplier
- Don't give the answer
- It takes time to see results
- Don't lose control of your time and become reactive
- Ask people who have been there before (but not too long before).
- 1 on 1 meetings with the team are the most important thing
- You are no longer part of the team you used to be on

What They Said About Starting Out

“Three big things:

1. Managing people is a completely different job than writing software.
2. Your first responsibility is the health of your team.
3. Manage yourself. The feedback cycle as a manager is much longer and less clear than when you're writing software, but the payoff can be huge.

First, you generally get to be a manager by being an excellent engineer. ...and it's almost like having a cheat code....but you should be very careful about how often you use that cheat code.”

[Interview with Patrick Joyce, Director of Engineering at Stitch Fix](#)

What They Said About Starting Out

“The last piece of advice is about building a peer network. After switching from individual contributor to management, the aspect of a team changes too. Your team becomes not the team you manage, but managers and leaders of the organization. I recommend to start building those relationships right away. It helps to get to know your peers and have people you trust to bounce ideas off of.”

[Interview with Natasha Vinnik, Senior Engineering Manager at Google](#)

“Assume you are responsible for EVERYTHING your direct reports do wrong. How could you coach, lead, guide, the person better next time?”

[Interview with Michael Tobias, Principal at New York Engineers](#)

What's your workday like & how do you manage your time, emails, etc.?

- Todo lists are huge
- Getting in early before everyone else and things get busy or planning it out
Sunday night
- End of week review
- Blocking time time on calendar to work proactively
- No meeting days
- Several people mentioned “Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule” by Paul Graham
- Pro-tip from Vidal: Personal Kanban board

What They Said

“I do one of the most important things to any successful manager; create a daily “TO DO” list of the things I want to accomplish TODAY, which starts by transferring over the list of things I didn’t get done from the previous day’s list.”

[Ron Lichty, Consultant, Interim VP Engineering and Author](#)

“I don’t look at every email I receive and prioritize those that are directly addressed to me. I pass through my emails very quickly and take one of the three actions: for things that I can reply to in two minutes, reply right away; for things that are non-blocking but need to be thought through or acted on, put them on my daily TODO list with a deadline..” [Lei Yang, VP of Engineering at Quora](#)

What They Said

“I have a family and it’s important to be to be home for dinner; so I tried to be out the door at 6pm though sometimes that slid to 7. One day a week (usually Monday) would be my “work late” night; I’d stay until midnight and that was my productive no-meeting time to plan, write, read, or catch up on backlog. It might not be for everyone but for me it was a great way to start my week with a lot of momentum, and to have time with my team members who were night owls.”

[Interview with Jocelyn Goldfein, Managing Director, Zetta Venture Partners
\(former Engineering Director at Facebook\)](#)

What's a personal habit that contributes to your success?

- Physical exercise
- Being organized
- Personal sense of responsibility
- Being thankful and empathetic

What They Said About Personal Habits

“Saying “thank you.” I think it was all the way back in my first managerial role at Apple, I read a piece about the importance of saying “thank you” and stuck a note in my “to the office” folder to “Say thank you 12 times this week” and promised myself that every time I came across it I’d pause and think about who I owed a thank you to. I still think I under-thank. I still look at the note.” [Ron Lichty,](#)

[Consultant, Interim VP Engineering and Author](#)

“Being empathetic with those around me. Empathy cuts through arrogance and frustration faster than anything I’ve found and gets me on the same side of the table with the other person.” [Marcus Blankenship](#)

What They Said About Personal Habits

I tend to ask “what” more than “why”. Instead of, “Why is this thing going off the rails?” it’s much better to ask, “What do we need to do to get this back on the rails?” ... the typical human inclination is to ask “Why?” and it tends to delay getting on the path to progress. “What?” leads to a bias for action versus analysis.

[Mike Hansen, Head of Product Development and Engineering for Sonatype](#)

Share an internet resource or tool that you can't live without.

The following resources and tools were recommended by more than 1 guest.

- **Rands Leadership Slack.** This is an awesome public slack group for management and leadership.
- Google Calendar and Gmail
- Slack
- OmniFocus for managing todos.
- **Medium.com.** This site has a huge number articles and several leaders I interviewed write on medium also.

If you could recommend 1 book to managers, what would it be & why?

Top recommendations. Each mentioned by at least 3 or more guests.

- "The Manager's Path"
- "High Output Management"
- "Managing the Unmanageable: Rules, Tools, and Insights for Managing Software People and Teams"
- "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable"
- "Managing Humans"
- "Radical Candor"

Next steps

- Read the interviews at <https://www.managersclub.com>
- Volunteer or refer someone to be featured
- Take part in 2018 Survey of Software Engineering Management
<https://www.managersclub.com/2018-survey-of-software-engineering-managers/>
- eBook planned, podcast #1 request
- Contact me: vgraupera@gmail.com or
<https://www.managersclub.com/contact/>

Q&A