

# EMPOWERMENT <sup>VS</sup> DIRECTION

OR: THE THING I SCREWED UP FOR A DECADE  
AS AN ENGINEERING MANAGER

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A purple-toned illustration of a forest scene. Several owls are perched on tree branches, each holding and reading a book. The trees have thick, gnarled trunks and sparse leaves. The overall atmosphere is quiet and studious.

THE EARLY 2000'S WERE A

HELLISH LANDSCAPE

FOR ENG MANAGEMENT

We learned from our managers  
what to do *AND* what **not** to do

We learned to prioritize the  
**people** side of the work

2015 WAS A GOLDEN ERA  
OF ENG MANAGEMENT



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I'M PROUD  
OF WHAT I DID



BUT IT WAS  
ONLY HALF  
OF THE JOB



A stylized illustration of a landscape with mountains and a crescent moon. The mountains are represented by thick, wavy teal lines. A winding path, composed of parallel teal and purple lines, leads through the scene. A small crescent moon is visible in the upper right. The background is black.

2020

WAS A

NIGHTMARE

A stylized illustration of a landscape with mountains and a crescent moon. The mountains are represented by thick, wavy teal lines. A winding path, composed of parallel teal and purple lines, leads through the scene. A small crescent moon is visible in the upper right. The background is black.

2020

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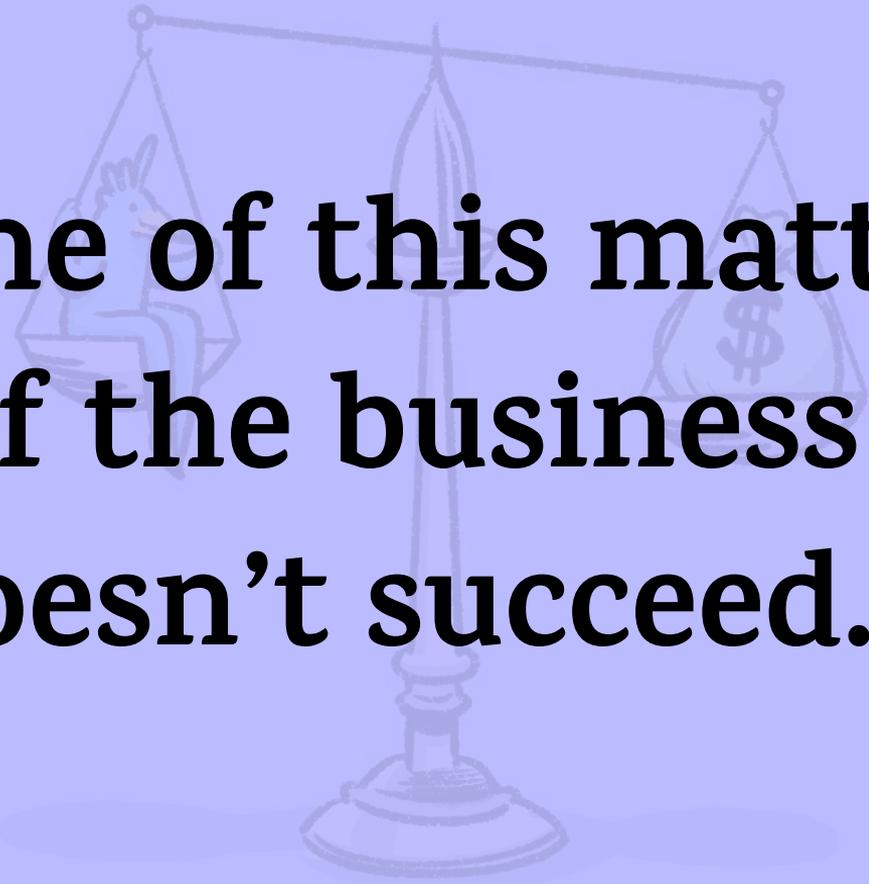
The business had  
become the bad guy.

"MARCHING ORDERS DON'T LEAVE ROOM  
FOR EMPATHY OR EMPOWERMENT."

The role changed back to  
what it always had been.

(WE HAD JUST NEVER TALKED ABOUT IT)





**“None of this matters  
if the business  
doesn’t succeed.”**

# Options

A. STICK WITH EMPATHY AND  
EMPOWERMENT TOOLS

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ORDERS-TYPE LEADERSHIP

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## Options

C. ZONE OUT AND LET THE  
WAVES WASH OVER YOU

D. FIND A BALANCE / SWAP THE TOOLS  
BASED ON THE CONTEXT

# Giving strong direction

WITHOUT BEING A JERK



Identify what you're  
**optimizing** for.

This is your “why.”

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E.G. MAKING FORWARD PROGRESS

MAKING FORWARD PROGRESS → DELIVERING ON BUSINESS NEEDS

Identify the **who/what/when/how**.

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STOP ASKING "WHAT IF'S" IN PLANNING MEETINGS

Identify the **who/what/when/how**.

STOP ASKING "WHAT IF", START MAKING DECISIONS

Identify the **who/what/when/how**.

STOP ASKING "WHAT IF", START MAKING DECISIONS

Couple it with your "**why**."

MAKING FORWARD PROGRESS → DELIVERING ON BUSINESS NEEDS

**Bottom-line it.**

IT'S CRITICAL THAT WE

START MAKING PROGRESS ON THIS PROJECT.

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AND **START** MAKING DECISIONS,

SO THAT WE CAN **DELIVER**.

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WE WILL MISS SOMETHING BIG.

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# Stay forward-facing.

LET'S DECIDE WHAT FIRES WE ARE GOING TO LET BURN.

This will feel uncomfortable.

# Empowerment vs Direction

**Empowerment**

**Direction**



# Empowerment

# Direction



**Coaching** teammates to connect their own dots

**Sponsoring** teammates for visible/stretch assignments

**Group brainstorming** to create roadmaps

# Empowerment

# Direction



**Coaching** teammates to connect their own dots

**Sponsoring** teammates for visible/stretch assignments

**Group brainstorming** to create roadmaps

**Choosing** project deadlines

**Scheduling** oncall rotations

**Assigning** work to each teammate

**Writing** job descriptions

# Empowerment

# Direction



## Good when:

- Gathering buy-in
- You need more creative ideas
- Teammates are developing new skills/career growth
- There's lots of time

# Empowerment

# Direction



## Good when:

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## Good when:

- People crave clarity
- When someone's new to the team/company
- There's big risks afoot
- There's urgency



! DANGER !

DONT DO IT!

! DANGER AHEAD!

WARNING !



! DANGER !

DONT DO IT!

! DANGER AHEAD!

WARNING !

# Moving along the spectrum

More Empowering

More Directive



Draw a star on the spectrum:  
your default approach.

More Empowering

More Directive





1

Your product manager  
isn't doing their job.



2

Your teammate wants to be promoted, but you're not sure if they're ready.

3

Your teammate has come to you with a competing job offer at 2x their current salary.



4

One of your teammates  
has yelled at their colleague  
when you're not around.



5

When a new request comes in for your team, no one jumps in to triage or address it.



6

A senior leader  
routinely interrupts  
you in meetings.



**Let's debrief**

Your approach will be informed by:

- the team's context,
- the needs of your individual teammates,
- who you are as a leader, and
- what the organization needs.

**Get comfy with each end  
of the spectrum, and the  
spots in between.**