

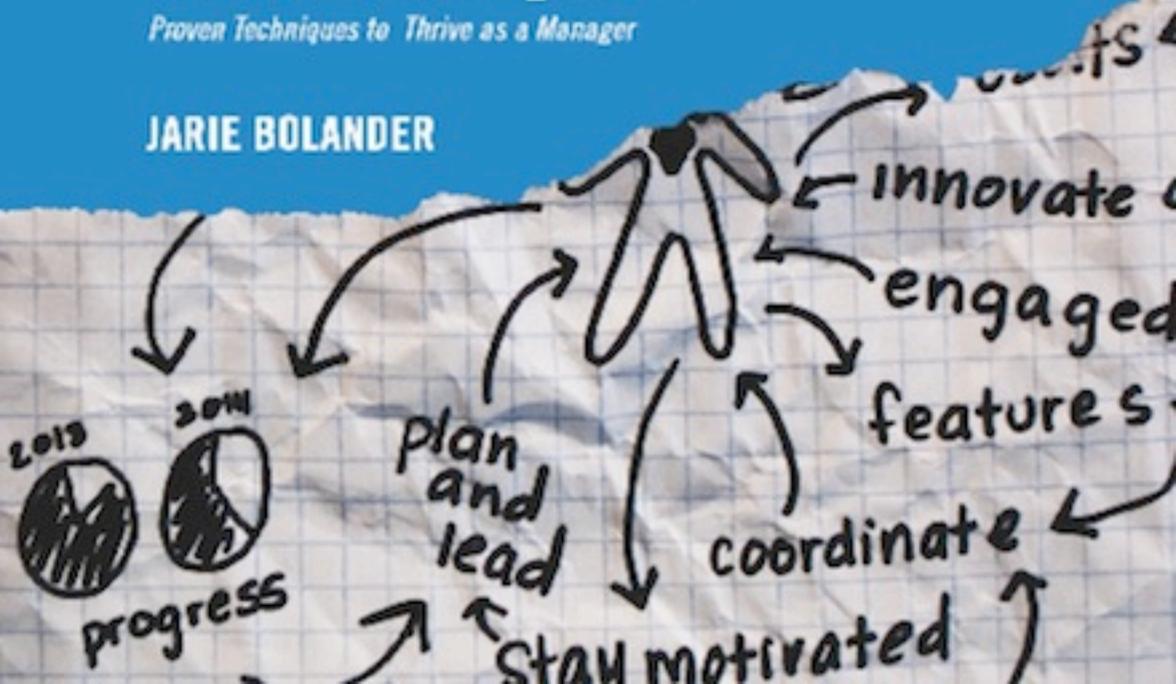
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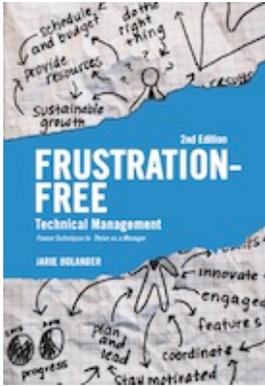
# FRUSTRATION-FREE

Technical Management

*Proven Techniques to Thrive as a Manager*

JARIE BOLANDER





*Frustration Free Technical Management* details the POEMS (Personal, Organizational, Emotional, Managerial and Sustaining) process. POEMS allows the technical manager to eliminate their frustrations by detailing common frustrations facing technical managers. POEMS then provides solutions to those frustrations.

# Frustration Free Technical Management

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# **Frustration-Free Technical Management**

**Proven Techniques to Thrive as a Manager**

**Jarie Bolander**

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ISBN 978-1-60910-035-3

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Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2014

Second Edition

## **Emotional: Developing Interpersonal Skills**

*“Your emotions are the slaves to your thoughts, and you are the slave to your emotions.” – Elizabeth Gilbert, Author*

Humans are emotional and messy creatures. Even the most logical, rational, data-driven and reasonable among us are influenced by our emotional state – engineers are no different.

Emotions drive our actions in ways that we don't always understand. When we are emotional, our primitive brains take over. This part of our brain will automatically implement the fight or flight response when we are threatened.

When our primitive brain starts to flood our body with hormones that make us emotional, it severely impacts our judgment and decision-making capabilities. When we are in this state, managing becomes difficult – similar to the difficulty we have focusing when we are hungry.

Fighting our primitive brain emotions can be a losing battle. It is a primordial body function that has been a part of us for centuries to keep us safe from harm, drive us to eat and allow us to procreate.

During an emotional state, we must be mindful of what we're feeling and channel those feelings of fear, anxiety and doubt into positive action.

Don't suppress your emotions, but rather channel your feelings into actions that will allow you to keep your composure so that you can still manage effectively.

## **Frustration #E1: Overly Negative Interactions**

### **Symptoms**

- *Focus is only on problems – not on what is going well*
- *Pessimism trumps optimism*
- *Long-winded, “woe is me” explanations*
- *General negativity, even when good news is announced*
- *Peers say you are overly negative*
- *Your boss says you are negative*

### **Solution #E1: Tell the Whole Truth**

By the nature of their training, engineers are pessimists. The reason is they are taught the scientific method, which teaches one to observe with methodical pessimism until a hypothesis can be proven.

This pessimism allows for great engineering but ineffective status reporting because the emphasis is on the negative. This is the main reason technical people have such a difficult time telling the whole truth. In fact, most engineers think that if they tell any good news, it distracts from the real issues that need to be solved.

### **It is Not Lying**

Telling the whole truth is critical to your managerial survival. Overly pessimistic status reports or personal interactions will reduce management’s confidence in your ability over time. This does not mean you should sugarcoat bad news. It means that you should be fair and balanced concerning the situation your team is in.

This concept gives most technical managers heartburn since they don't see the value in minimizing real problems or celebrating small victories. They usually only focus on the bad news since that is what needs fixing.

Focusing on what is broken is important, but you must also remember that you are the face of the effort to fix problems. If you give off the constant impression of doom and gloom, you will be unsuccessful, as your management will start to believe you and take the steps to cancel the project or get someone else to run it.

### **Dragging Out the Good**

Technical people actually do have a lot of positive successes to report underneath all the layers of pessimism. Try this experiment. Ask a techie how their day is going and what they are doing. Chances are, you will hear about every problem and bug they are working on. Now, ask them what is going well. Chances are, they will stare at you in stunned silence even though they just shipped the latest product or crushed ten bugs.

Most senior managers don't have the time to do the dance to get the whole truth. They rely on you to tell it to them. This is a remarkable responsibility that a manager needs to take seriously. Your chain of command knows that things will go wrong, but they also want to know that you have a handle on it. You do this by telling them the whole truth, including the positive.

### **A Watershed Moment**

I first realized the importance of telling the whole truth when my team actually had a lot of good news to report. We had achieved something that no other group had done – transmitted a signal over the air via the radio we designed. Although it did not meet every specification, we did wirelessly transmit and successfully decode it on the other side.

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This was a huge deal. It was the culmination of years of work and tens of millions of dollars of investment.

How did I report it? It was a single bullet point, three points down, on a slide with six problem bullet points. That was it.

What do you think became the focus of the whole meeting? You guessed it: all of the remaining six problems with almost no mention of the tremendous milestone we achieved. So did I actually communicate the whole truth? Not even close.

### **What Works, What Doesn't, What's Being Done**

Thankfully, I had a great management mentor named Tom who took me aside and explained to me that while what I said was true, it did not give the executive managers a true picture of the project.

In this case, the project was going well, and we only had a few minor things to fix. Instead, what upper management heard was: it is not done, and it has all of these problems.

My mentor's premise for telling the whole truth is simple:

*Tell them what works, what doesn't and what's being done.*

This simple method allows you to focus on all aspects of what is going on. It gives you the opportunity to give proper weight to all parts of the project: achievements, problems and solutions. Remember that what you say may not be what is heard. You need to ensure that your words, tone and materials have the desired effect.

Senior managers are busy. They tend to filter what you say and only remember simple things that are reinforced. So, even if you thought you might have great news, it needs to be presented with the right attitude and delivery.

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### **Practice With Others**

Telling the whole truth takes practice. The best way to practice is to find someone outside of engineering, perhaps a marketing or sales person, and ask them to help you work on your delivery.

Your delivery is the key to communicating your message. How you stand and what you say will craft the impression that people remember. Communication is all about getting the desired message across, and sometimes what you think may be effective is actually counterproductive. By practicing with others, you'll start to understand how to effectively communicate.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Skill #S1: The Platinum Rule We Don't Even Know

## **Frustration #E2: Information Hoarding**

### **Symptoms**

- *Last-minute announcements of major screw-ups*
- *Private conversations differ drastically from public ones*
- *Nothing is written down or updated*

### **Solution #E2: Control Your Emotions**

It is a fact that calm people make better decisions because being calm allows you to control your emotions so that you can think rationally about the challenge at hand. When you're faced with a difficult situation, try and remain as calm as you can.

Panicking never solves anything and shows that you don't have control. A calm, rational manager instills confidence in others and shows that they can handle whatever is thrown at them.

### **Remain Calm**

Dealing with a crisis in a calm, rational manner will allow you to separate and process the pile of data that is flung at you during a crisis. If it is a true crisis, data and recommendations will be coming at you from all angles. You will need to sort through all of this data before you can make an informed decision.

If the crisis is a matter of life and death, then you clearly need to act fast and trust your gut. Rarely is a work crisis one of life and death, so it is okay to take your time before making a decision. When you do this, others will also calm down, and things will feel a little less scary for everyone. Once calm reigns, then issues can be dealt with in a rational and reasonable way.

### **Sometimes, You Can Freak Out**

There are times when you need to freak out a little to make a point. This should not happen very often though since it will lose its intended shock value.

Circumstances that warrant a freak-out are when the team bickers over trivial things, bad news is not shared until the last minute or complaints are made about doing a necessary mundane task. Then and only then does it make sense to read them the riot act and be a little irrational. It shows that you are human.

### **The Calm Before the Storm**

One of the hardest things to do is remain calm when someone is blowing up at you. Even though it is hard, this is the most important time to stay as calm as you can.

I got firsthand practice with this during a project trouble meeting. It was guaranteed to be a difficult meeting since it was our sixth trouble meeting. I had prepared a pitch a week before and sent it out to every vice president in the company because the problems we were having cut across the entire company, and no one wanted to have their issue come up first. They were all lobbying me to put their issue second or third because they all knew that the CEO was going to go ballistic.

This particular project was a first for the company. We had acquired two other companies to get it done and the costs were spinning out of control. We were late to the market with a product that looked like it was not going to be competitive. We were primed for a nasty blow-up.

### **Full-Blown Hurricane**

The day finally came when I had to present our status. I was really scared. This was not going to go well, and I would be right in the cross-fire. All I wanted to do was get it over with. I decided to lead off

with the issue that we had the most data on and which was the easiest to explain. After the usual introductions, I started in on my first slide, which had four bullet points describing the four main problem areas. Right away, you could see the anger building in the CEO. This was going to be bad. I was only on slide one and I could already see the veins popping out of his forehead. I reminded myself to remain calm, just state the facts and don't lose it.

### **30 Days to Live**

Halfway into the first slide, the CEO stopped me. At this point, I thought I was doing pretty well. I remained calm and was only stating facts that I knew. When he told me to stop, it shocked me. The next minute was the most uncomfortable moment I had ever experienced

Our CEO was a smart guy. While I was talking about X, Y, Z, he read between the lines and saw that what I was really illustrating was that the foundation of his company was fundamentally screwed up.

Clearly, this is not something anyone wants to hear, so he blew up. The exact phrases and four-letter words are a bit of a blur, but I did remember the ending. He looked around the room and said, "You all have thirty days to live." Heads were bent down; everyone avoided his gaze. We had our work cut out for us. It could have been worse – he could have fired us on the spot.

### **Don't Take It Personal**

This story illustrates two important things. First when someone is blowing up at you, remain as calm as you can because they will try and get you to blow up as well. Don't be tempted to lose control. Just remain calm and deal with it rationally.

The second thing is that blowing up can be effective if done correctly. The CEO had a right to be angry. He had spent a lot of money on a project that was in deep trouble, and no one on his staff was working

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together to solve the problems. They were hiding the bad news from him and that made him angry. He knew that the only way to spur true action was to lash out in a dramatic way.

This story has a happy ending. After the meeting, we got help from all over the company, and we eventually fixed everything before the thirty days were up.

**Additional Solutions**

- Solution #04: Have a Process, Any Process

### **Frustration #E3: Problem Employees**

#### **Symptoms**

- *Underperformance*
- *Confrontational*
- *“Checked out”*
- *Uninterested in making progress*

#### **Solution #E3: Understand the Root of Employee Issues**

Occasionally, you will run into staff who have checked out for some reason or another. These people usually performed well but something drastic has happened, such as a personal issue, a change in company direction or a group expansion.

When you notice a change in their behavior, try and deal with it right away. Sometimes people get into a funk and need some help to snap out of it. On rare occasion, a deeper issue is at play, and it will take longer to sort out.

#### **Understanding the Issues**

Getting to the root of why your star employee is underperforming is challenging. Usually, if you ask them if anything is wrong, they will clam up and say that everything is fine. This is a sure sign they have gone “radio silent,” and they may know you know something is wrong, but they don't want to talk about it.

The “radio silent” types usually don't think anything is wrong with their performance, and they will continue down this path until you step in. Assisting them through a difficult time requires you to come up with creative ways to uncover the real issue. For example, “radio

silent” staff members might be bored with what they are doing. Sometimes just giving them a side assignment that is more stimulating will perk them back up.

### **What’s Changed**

Another common cause of “radio silent” behavior is the changing of a group’s dynamic. Your problem employee may feel uncomfortable with having additional people around because they are worried that their status in the group has diminished. You can see if this is the issue by observing how they react to assignments given to new staff. If they are questioning why new people are needed or why these new team members are assigned the various tasks that you’ve given them, then these disgruntled employees are experiencing growing pains.

Pay particular attention to this when your group is rapidly expanding. If staff feel left out for an extended period of time, then they turn into the next type of problem employee – a walking zombie.

### **No One Home**

A walking zombie is an employee who sulks around and gets nothing done. They say they will get tasks done, but it is just lip service. These team members have checked out and don’t know what to do.

When a problem employee is at this stage, they are two steps out the door. If you want to keep this employee motivated, you need to act quickly and figure out what the problem is. You also need to make it crystal clear that their behavior is unacceptable, and that they need to change. Offer to assist them in any change they may need to make, which could include letting them go.

Sometimes just confronting the person will get them motivated to turn around. If you end up trying everything you can think of, and it is still not working out, then you owe it to yourself and to them to let them go. It really helps no one to have an employee who is not fully into the

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company still roaming around. Make sure your HR group is involved early so that any actions taken are within the company's policy and the law.

**Additional Solutions**

- Solution #E5: Assholes Need Not Apply

## **Frustration #E4: Staff Motivation**

### **Symptoms**

- *Requirements are barely met*
- *Tasks finish at the last minute*
- *Excessive overclarification*
- *Only the minimum required gets done*

### **Solution #E4A: Understand People's Strengths and Weaknesses**

People are driven to succeed by doing what they do best. Understanding your staff's strengths and weaknesses will allow you to set them up for success. This is critical to a productive team.

Strengths are easy to spot. These are the tasks that your staff members accomplish easily and often. Use strengths to establish a baseline from what your staff is comfortable with.

Weaknesses are more subtle. Weaknesses are what team members do poorly or what they avoid doing altogether. Most people don't like to admit the areas that they are weak in. My first interview question with a potential employee is asking them what their weaknesses are because the truthfulness and thoroughness of their answer shows me the level of their self-awareness – a valued trait in this field. Everyone has weaknesses – none of us are perfect.

### **Outside the Comfort Zone**

Sometimes the only way to spot a weakness is to put people out of their comfort zone. You can assign them something they have never done before and see what happens. The way they react to this new circumstance will tell you a lot. If they embrace it, struggle through it and are successful, then they are capable of turning a weakness into a strength. If they try and then give up, they are incapable or don't want to learn. And both of these issues need to be addressed.

Someone who is incapable of change might need a new assignment or more specific training. They need more time and attention to develop their skills. Alternatively, a team member who is resistant to learn new things is doomed to be pigeonholed into a role that will eventually be eliminated. You don't want these people in your group because they are set in their ways and will never change.

### **What's Your Group Like?**

To better understand your staff's strengths and weaknesses, determine how they work. This is not an exact science, so you need to be flexible with how you categorize your staff.

As a starting point, consider these four main types of technical workers: **starters**, **finishers**, **scientists**, and **mechanics**. People can exhibit multiple types simultaneously, so it is best to continually monitor their performance for any changes. Understanding the working style of your employees will help you manage them effectively.

#### **Type #1: Starters**

Starters are the first ones out of the gate to start the project. They are the most productive at the genesis of an idea. These people get things

going and always want to jump onto the next big idea. They bore easily and don't like the mundane.

Starters are also good at meeting customers since they want to be involved in the latest and greatest idea. Be cautious that they don't overcommit you to something you cannot execute since they will be eager to move on and do new things, potentially leaving you with the project they started.

### **Starters Thrive in Manageable Chunks**

Have your starter work on planning your next project. They will be most effective working on anything new and exciting.

Conversely, since starters bore easily, it is best to break things up into manageable chunks that afford little wins. This reinforces that finishing is just as important as starting, which is what you want them to do more of. You can also have a team member who is strong at finishing projects mentor them.

### **Type #2: Finishers**

Finishers are driven to ship the best product they can and are eager to make that happen. Nothing satisfies them like working on final details of a product, and they are the drivers of the last 20% of a project. These are your checklist people who fret over how the logo looks on the package or where to put the dialog box on your website. They thrive on getting the product out and on the shelves, as opposed to the starter.

Finishers usually mature into program managers. They sometimes struggle with starting because they want to finish what they are presently working on. They also tend to over-plan, so they can know exactly when they will be done.

### **Finishers Make the Details the Devil**

Finishers thrive on crisp requirements and well-defined timelines. They do a great job of ensuring everything is ready to release. That is why you find most finishers migrating into program management. Catering to the finisher's strengths means controlling your starter's overwhelming desire to add more features and functions as they start working. This behavior drives a finisher insane. Correcting the finisher's weaknesses involves getting them to understand that requirements can change and sometimes the end state is unclear. Getting them more involved at the start of a project allows them to see the potential issues in advance. This allows them to build strengths as a starter.

### **Type #3: Scientists**

Scientists are your thinkers. They can spend all day thinking about a problem without doing any visible work. They enjoy deriving equations, proving theorems and dissecting hypotheses. Scientists like to understand how things work and why they break. Usually, they have a hard time starting and finishing projects because they are busy understanding everything. These people are your technical conscience. When they worry, you should take notice.

### **Scientists Love to Dig Deep**

Scientists are great at figuring out if your wacky product idea has a chance of working. They are also great at troubleshooting difficult issues since they are deep thinkers who are great assets to struggling mechanics – the last technical personality type.

Developing a scientist past their weaknesses requires setting limits on what is good enough – craving perfection is the curse of a scientist. You can get over this hurdle by giving them well-defined tasks to

finish. This will reinforce the value of finishing, as well as showing them that good enough does work.

#### **Type #4: Mechanics**

Nothing makes a mechanic happier than getting stuff done. They just love finishing tasks and checking them off their mental checklist. They tend to not care that much about how things work – just that they work.

Mechanics tend to be good at fixing things but not at explaining why things are broken. Mundane tasks are fine for mechanics since they love to complete tasks. Mechanics get a lot of stuff done but have to do a lot of rework because they didn't fully think through the tasks that they are doing. Mechanics are critical to any team since they do the tasks that scientists and starters find boring. A mechanic is similar to a finisher.

#### **Mechanics are the Devil's Minion**

Just like a finisher, mechanics like well-defined tasks with an end point. The more well-defined the better. When you need to get a specific task done, assign it to a mechanic. The mechanic's main weakness is that they don't like to think through a problem. They need to be taught that analysis and thinking are also valuable. Mechanics tend to get bored with these types of activities since they think they produce no real results. Getting them to mature as a technical innovator requires being mentored by a scientist or being assigned a specific research task that caters to their "getting stuff done" mentality. They thrive as the workhorse of a group.

#### **Solution #E4B: Understand People's Work Habits**

There are a lot of different work habits. Some people just want to get their job done and go home while others work hard to get ahead.

Figuring out these different work habits will allow you to manage your team better.

There are four basic types of work habits: **solid citizen**, **superstar**, **walking wounded** and **higher life forms**.

### **Type #1: Solid Citizen**

These people get stuff done and have consistent output. They are always willing to help out and don't shy away from doing the mundane. You always know what to expect, and they rarely disappoint. Solid citizens want to please and can be any of the archetypes: starters, finishers, scientists or mechanics. They should make up the core of your group.

### **Solid Citizens Need Support and Challenges**

Solid citizens want to succeed and do interesting work as well. They will always do what is best for the group. Your job is to keep things interesting so they stay engaged. Given enough training and mentorship, some will develop into superstars. When that happens, you'll need to do what you can to keep them engaged enough so that they stay.

### **Type #2: Superstar**

Superstars are the whole package. The team respects them for their technical ability and will routinely approach them for advice. You build teams around superstars. These people know what they are doing, want to learn and grow and are excellent mentors. They can sometimes become full of themselves but are easily brought back down to earth. Superstars have that unique blend of smarts and people skills that make them natural team leaders.

## **Your Replacement is Your Best Superstar**

Superstars will want your job one day. You should be happy to groom them for it and ensure that they are given opportunities for advancement. One weakness to watch out for is the transformation into a higher life form. You'll need to prevent this by mentoring them in good management skills and knocking them down to earth with challenging projects that might fail. This reinforces that they aren't invincible and that reinvigorates their humility and empathy.

You can have the problem of having too many superstars in your group. This can be a challenge to manage since they tend to want a lot of attention, gravitate toward the most cutting-edge problems, want to be promoted quickly and flourish as the center of attention. Keeping them engaged is also challenging, which is why superstars tend to want to move around from project to project.

### **Type #3: Walking Wounded**

For some reason, the walking wounded have checked out. They used to contribute as a solid citizen or even a superstar but for some reason, they are now a shell of their former self. The walking wounded are usually burned out or upset at a recent situation that they feel is unfair, unjust or downright mean. Perhaps they did not get the promotion or the project they were working on was canceled. Whatever it is, you need to figure it out fast or they will spiral out of control and potentially bring your whole group down with them. Some walking wounded are unreachable, and you need to let them go.

### **Each Walking Wounded is Unique**

The walking wounded are easily perturbed. They have a strong sense of how different things affect them, but they have a limited world view. You need to get them out of this mindset and back to their former self before it is too late.

Getting them to open up about their situation can be tricky because simply inquiring, “How are things going?” usually gets the curt, “I’m fine” or a blank stare of translating to, “Why are you wasting my time?” So how can you get to the bottom of the issue? For starters, ask someone who is close to them and who you trust what is going on with them. Once you’ve done some reconnaissance work, then you need to directly address the team member via candid dialogue. Only through open and empathic dialogue can you start to determine if you can rectify the situation. The sooner you can bring them back to being productive, the better it will be for everyone.

#### **Type #4: Higher Life Forms**

These people are in a class of their own and usually have an ego to prove it. They typically are starter-scientists who think they know everything, can do everything and are above everyone else. These people are the most frustrating team members to manage. They tend to question everything and feel management makes such stupid decisions. To them, their ideas are king.

What makes the higher life form so dangerous is that they lack the ability to admit that other approaches are just as good as theirs. They do have good ideas and accomplish great work when they engage, but usually their narcissistic complaining prevents them from being effective team members. These types can turn into walking wounded quickly, especially when you try to improve them.

#### **Higher Life Forms are Radioactive Isotopes**

When you have a higher life form in your group, try and give them tasks that are independent from your core group. Tasks that are good to assign are defining new products or thinking about future directions. They are best at these tasks and enjoy them the most. The day-to-day grind frustrates them because they think they are above it. It is hard to change a higher life form.

Developing them beyond their “my way is the only way” attitude takes a lot of work and might not be worth it. If you catch one early, you may have a shot but don't waste too much time. The best way to bring them down to earth is to have them under a well-respected technical lead or project manager who can demonstrate to them that they don't have all of the answers.

### **One More Thing: Consider Your Boss Part Of Your Team**

It is very useful to categorize your team members so that you can better understand how each individual thrives. You should also consider your boss as part of your team. If you can understand your bosses' strengths and weaknesses, then you can “manage up” effectively. The key to understanding your boss is having a consistent one-on-one time with them. These meetings will give you clear clues as to what type of technical worker they are and how to work the best with them.

### **Setup For Success**

Knowing your team's strengths, weaknesses and work habits will allow you to maximize their productivity. There is nothing more counterproductive than assigning a task to someone who cannot be successful at it. You can also cross-train your group when you have a better understanding of all of their individual work personalities. Getting the mix right is also important since you want a diverse spectrum of types working for you. If you hire the right mix of people, your group's success will endure.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #O3: Pay The Pig – Silly Traditions, Awards and Punishments
- Solution #E3: Understand the Root of Employee Issues

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- **Solution #E5: Assholes Need Not Apply**

## **Frustration #E5: Brilliant Person But a Total Asshole**

### **Symptoms**

- *Rigid world view*
- *Inflexible given contradictory information*
- *Talking down to peers and subordinates*
- *Private discussions differ from public disclosures*
- *Can't understand why management doesn't get it*

### **Solution #E5A: Assholes Need Not Apply**

Hiring your team is a big part of your job. Hiring the right mix of staff with complementary skills and attitudes is a lot of work, and it is essential for a smoothly run group. Your current staff should be involved in the hiring process. They will have to work with any new hire and their feedback will tell you a lot about the candidate.

Most candidates will try and kiss up to the hiring manager, so you will not really know what they are like until they have to deal with peers and subordinates. One of the most telling signs of an asshole is how the candidate treats your receptionist. Treating a receptionist poorly shows that the candidate looks down upon subordinates, which is a big red flag. This is typically known as a “kiss up, kick down” attitude.

### **Too Much Ego Is Evil**

Candidates with huge egos should be avoided at all costs. People with ego are blinded from their own faults and alienate themselves from the people they should be collaborating with. The superstar egomaniac is

just not worth it. Their usage of your management bandwidth will be disproportionate to their output.

Smoking out an egomaniac candidate can be tricky. They are usually really good at saying the right things and impressing the hiring managers. The best way to reveal them is to send your most junior staff in to see how they treat them.

If in an interview, the candidate says “I” instead of “we” or “my team” instead of “the team” or “our team” more frequently than they are likely to think they were solely responsible for their team’s success.

A great book on uncovering egomaniacs and assholes is Robert Sutton’s *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t*. In it, Bob details all of the signs of assholes and how to avoid hiring them. I have used some of his techniques and they work well.

### **It is Not the Answer, It is the Process**

Hiring technical talent is different from hiring for any other position in the organization because you have to evaluate two distinct categories: **technical skill** and **cultural fit**.

A candidate’s technical skills are usually pretty easy to assess. I usually have my most senior engineers drill them on technical problems. The point of this drill session is not to try and trick them with the technical questions, but rather to see how they deal with being in uncomfortable situations. Most candidates will be nervous, so it is preferable not to make the technical questions too tricky, causing them to freeze up.

Technical questions should be relevant to the position and based on what they have put on their resume. Good technical questions usually involve a whiteboard discussion on how to solve a problem. These interactive questions are a great way to see how a candidate thinks.

The approach to solving a problem is far more important than them actually solving the problem. Even if a candidate does not know the answer to your technical questions, ask them about the process they would take to get to the answer. How they answer will be a good indication on how they deal with setbacks and barriers.

### **Cultural Fit, First and Foremost**

How a candidate fits into your group's culture is far more important than their overall technical skill. Don't get me wrong; they need to know what to do, but they don't have to be an expert. I weigh the culture fit and their attitude far more than their technical skill.

Someone with intellectual curiosity and the desire to improve their technical skills trumps the skilled "expert" asshole every time. At some point, everyone has to learn their craft. The candidates who strive to continuously improve themselves and learn new things are the ones you want on your team. These are the "I can learn how to do that" type of people. These are the people with heart who will work hard to not let you down.

### **The "Right Stuff"**

One of my favorite movies is *The Right Stuff*. It's about the U.S. space program in the 1960s and tells the story of the Apollo space program and how NASA picked their astronauts. Their criteria was to look at what they accomplished and to test both their physical and mental abilities. Through this process, NASA reckoned that it would find the men with natural right stuff.

Most managers apply this same "right stuff" criteria to their hires by looking at a candidate's accomplishments and assuming that those accomplishments were because they were born with the right stuff. They also look at other outward signs of the right stuff, including where the candidate went to school, where they worked or what honors

they many have. At first blush, this may seem like the best way to find the ideal candidate, but in fact it is incomplete.

Morgan McCall, a professor at the University of Southern California, found a causal theory as to why someone had the right stuff. His theory goes that it is not because someone was born with superior skills but that they honed their skills by having experiences that taught them how to deal with and overcome challenges<sup>26</sup>. It is these types of experiences that make up the right stuff, and not accomplishments or successes.

What this means when hiring someone is that you need to look beyond the resume, accomplishments, titles and schools and dig into the candidate's experiences that honed their skills. If those experiences are what you are looking for, then you have a potentially good hire.

### **Smarter Than Me, Really?**

Hire people smarter than you. This ensures that your team's talent is constantly fresh. Being smarter than the boss implies that your candidates know the latest and greatest technology. It also ensures that you will not fall into the technical contributor trap and end up doing more technical work than management.

Hiring smart people is subjective. Make sure you are calibrated to the right type of smarts that you need and rely on your team to provide evaluation of the candidate's capabilities. Doing your own evaluation is a good idea, too. If you were a technical contributor in your former life, probe the candidate on their specific approaches to see if they are stuck in the past or are advancing with technology.

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26 Christensen, Clayton M., Allworth, James & Dillon, Karen "How Will You Measure Your Life?", 2012 HarperCollins pg. 143

### **Like Anything, Have a Process**

Interviewing does take a lot of time. It involves a lot of research and preparation before and after each interview. To best deal with this, you need to set up an interview process that makes it easy on you and your staff. Remember, it is ideal that your whole staff interview each new team member.

Each staff member can be assigned roles. Some of your staff may be used to vet the candidate's technical ability while others will deal with the cultural fit. As a manager, you will need to coordinate the process and find candidates to interview. The process that works for me is:

1. Gather resumes from people that you know and trust rather than from job listing responses.
2. Phone screen each candidate before you bring them in.
3. When you bring the candidate in, have an agenda and copies of their resume.
4. Bring your group together beforehand and assign each person specific topics. That ensures that you cover all of the topics.
5. During the interview, leave time for the candidate to ask questions. If they have none that is a red flag. Everyone should have questions about their future employer.
6. After the interview, get together right away with your team to debrief while the memory of the interview is fresh. If you can't get a face-to-face meeting together, have your team send you an email with their feedback.

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7. Everyone has to approve of the candidate or they can't progress to the next level.
8. Check their references – both the ones they give you and through your own network. Do this regardless even if everyone on your team thinks they are great. It is great to trust your team's first impressions, but someone who knows the candidate more intimately will have better feedback.
9. Follow up with the candidate whether or not you will make them an offer. It shows that you respect them and their time.

### **When In Doubt, Leave It Unfilled**

It is hard to hire the right people. Interviewing someone for a few hours does not tell you a lot about how they work or will interact with your team. Ultimately, you need to trust your own and your team's intuition. It is best to leave a position unfilled if you are unsure. A bad hire will drain your management bandwidth and make your team less productive.

### **Solution #E5B: Three Steps to Dealing with Assholes**

Dealing with assholes is frustrating; probably the most frustrating part of any work culture. Assholes act like assholes because they feel entitled. One of the most stunning realizations that I have had is that assholes are actually rather meek when called out.

For those of us who find it hard to call out an asshole, I have created a three-step process that has worked for me over the years.

### **Step #1: Don't be Threatened by Standing Up for Yourself**

The hardest part of dealing with assholes is that kind people can't grasp the behavior and feel threatened by an overbearing, loudmouth, grade A asshole. I have frequently caught myself questioning my own competency when an asshole shocks me with their rude behavior.

Shock is an asshole's favorite tool, and it is extremely effective because, when used, it makes the recipient of the negative behavior question their capabilities.

Speed is another favorite tool for an asshole because the faster they talk, the more fear they instill in others. This asshole "shock and awe" is reduced by slowing down the interaction and standing up for yourself. You can simply start out by saying, "Your behavior is unacceptable and I won't tolerate it." This may be all that is needed to put an asshole in their place, but if not, then move on to step 2.

### **Step #2: Know the Circumstances and the Data**

Assholes thrive in situations where their counterparts are not as confident as they are. The boldness stems from their ability to spin a circumstance or data set to their advantage. For the rest of us, this can be frustrating since we know they are creating conflict out of falsehoods.

Because the rest of us don't engage in this behavior, we need to do more work and research to get the circumstances and data right. This is a big burden but one that needs to be completed to combat the asshole.

In some cases, the asshole may have deep and detailed knowledge of what they are talking about but their delivery is abrasive and condescending. In this case, it is important to know the circumstances and the data inside and out because you are then armed with the same level of knowledge – a critical weapon to managing them.

### **Step #3: Band Together**

Once you gain the confidence and have the data at your fingertips, the next step is to band together with your team members to make your case to the asshole. Bringing a team together to discuss issues with the asshole will eliminate the potential arsenal of comebacks, such as phrases like, “Someone needs to be the bad guy,” “I’m looking out for the company” or “I’m just being honest.”

Recruiting your asshole neutralization cohort can be challenging, but if they have a pervasive reputation already, you’ll find plenty of allies. Make sure your allies have all gone through steps one and two already. An untrained group going after a highly functioning asshole can get clobbered quickly – so recruit with precision.

Confronting an asshole must be done with extreme care because you don’t want to come off as a combative asshole as well. The goal is not to stoop to their level; it is to mollify the negative working dynamic this asshole has created so your team can be as effective as possible.

The confrontation also needs to be well-orchestrated and accomplished with the same shock and awe that the asshole engages, so it will have the maximum impact. The asshole may try and retaliate this attack. That’s why it is vital to have others around to help combat the counterattack.

The whole point of the confrontation event is to demonstrate that you and your cohort are not afraid and will stand up for yourselves. When you stand up for yourself and your cohort you demonstrate that the asshole’s behavior is unacceptable to the group.

Backlash can occur from this confrontation. Most assholes hold grudges and will remember those who tried to put them in their place. This is another important reason for the attack to come from all fronts. There really is strength in numbers.

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**Additional Solutions**

- Solution #E3: Understand the Root of Employee Issues

## **Frustration #E6: Finger Pointing**

### **Symptoms**

- *Screw-ups are always someone else's fault*
- *Trouble meetings dissolve into arguments*
- *Senior staff blames junior staff for issues*

### **Solution #E6: Treat Everyone the Same But Differently**

Management is not one size fits all. People are different. They have different aspirations, fears, goals and skills. You need to cater your management style to each employee, but overall you still need to treat everyone the same by not playing favorites or adversely picking on employees that aren't performing to your standards. The management paradox is that at the same time, you must adjust your approach to match each person. It is important to mentally categorize the type of person you are dealing with so that you can adjust accordingly.

Favoritism will drive a wedge through your group just like it does between siblings. When a manager plays favorites, it sends the message that style is more important than substance because favoritism is a subjective determination based on personally traits and not necessarily on skill and accomplishment. If you go out of your way to be as fair as possible, then infighting for power, bad feelings about promotions and lying to push agendas will likely not occur.

### **Everyone's Voice Matters**

Once I attended a meeting focused on solving a particularly difficult technical problem. The room was mostly filled with upper management who had varying theories as to why things were broken. Among the participants was a junior engineer who was doing most of

the grunt work. This grunt work included running all of the wacky experiments that we had come up with. Midway through this meeting, Kevin came up with a far-fetched but plausible cause for our problems that most people wanted to accept since the cause would fix our problems all at once. The debate raged on arguing all the various sides, when in the midst of all the noisy chatter a soft-spoken junior employee named Mark raised his hand.

### **Even If It Cracks**

With a crack in his voice, Mark told Kevin, who was 20 years his senior, that what he just said was not correct. He calmly explained the situation and then quickly hushed up. Everyone was in shock. Typically when a junior engineer calls out a senior, they are reprimanded in the worst way, never to utter another word again. But this time, it was different. With a Cheshire smile, Kevin paused thoughtfully to reflect on the junior engineer's feedback. He thanked him for his input and told him he was right.

In fact Mark was right. Because Kevin treated Mark like an equal and respected his feedback, we were able to progress with our project effectively and soon after went to launch our successful product.

### **Be Consistent**

When you treat everyone with the same amount of respect, you show that everyone's opinion counts. Even if you have favorites, never make it known, under any circumstance. The same goes for your least favorite. Being consistent means you are being fair. Being consistent means you value a thought process that enables the best decisions to be made. Being consistent means you are not swayed by emotions or the solution de jour.

### **Level Setting**

When you treat everyone the same, you drastically reduce the level of finger pointing. Finger pointers assume that they are more important than others. This emboldens them to blame others for their mistakes. When you build the reputation of treating everyone the same, all you care about is the problem and why it happened – not about the personalities of the people involved. To you, it is a problem that needs to be solved, and your whole team has to work collaboratively to solve it.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #E4A: Understand People's Strengths and Weaknesses

## **Frustration #E7: Downsizing**

### **Symptoms**

- *Company performance is poor*
- *Rumors of layoffs*
- *Rumors of reorganization*
- *More frequent senior executive closed door meetings*
- *Your boss asks you to rank your group*

### **Solution #E7: Doing the Same With Less**

One of the most difficult jobs that you'll ever have is looking someone in the eye and laying them off. Hopefully that will be a very rare event for you. Layoffs takes a physical and emotional toll on everyone. The process is long since the repercussions of layoffs stick around for much longer than the actual event. The actual layoff meeting is only the midpoint of the process. Once layoffs happen, you will need to deal with the fallout.

### **Deciding Who Lives and Dies**

Before the actual layoff, there will be heated debate among senior management as to the depth and breadth of the reduction in force. These meetings are truly awful to be a part of. Everyone bickers back and forth trying in vain to save their department from the axe. It actually gets downright ugly at times because emotions are running high and no one really wants to do what has to be done. If you are privy to these discussions, then you need to try and look out for what is right and fair. You need to look out for your group, while doing what's best for the company. Sometimes, layoffs will be used as a power play for aggressive empire builders. They will try and influence

groups to tip things in their favor. Watch out for this. Try and thwart it before it gets out of hand.

### **No Surprises**

When laying staff off, it is best to give them as much heads up as you can. A surprise layoff will be far harder to deal with on both ends. Be empathetic to their situation, open about the reasons but don't share the specifics, since that will lead to debate and potentially to the desire in you to change your mind. Assist them to the best of your ability to find another job and be available to them if they need to talk. Once you perform the actual layoff, give your management an assessment on how everyone is handling it. Layoffs will affect your group's performance in a negative way no matter how well the conversation might have gone. Make it a point to take the extra time to reassure the remaining staff of your commitment to them.

### **Handle With Care**

There is no one way to tell someone they are laid off. Some will take it well while others will completely fall apart. It is best to have a checklist of items that you need to discuss, or even a written-out dialogue to help you navigate the conversation. It is also a good idea to rehearse beforehand since the stress and emotion that both of you will be under will be difficult to endure. Coming prepared is the best way to get through it. Some of the things you should prepare for ahead of time include:

1. **What you will say:** It is best to write things out and memorize it so when emotions run high, you can stay focused on the script. It helps if crying or yelling starts.
2. **Prepare the paperwork:** Have all of the paperwork ready to give to the laid-off team member. Review it to make sure that all the paperwork is there and that you understand the deal they will be getting.

3. **Prepare for the “Why Me?”:** Some staff will want to argue or get concrete reasons for why they are being let go. They will want reasons, so they can argue against what is happening to them. Avoid discussing the reasons why. It is not productive and will lead to more arguing. If you have a hard time avoiding the reasons, simply state that it will not be discussed at this meeting – this meeting is to inform them of the layoff.
4. **Keep the meeting short:** These meetings need to be informational only. Keep them short and to the point. Emotions will be running high and the sooner the interaction is over, the better for both parties.
5. **Be available to help:** Depending on your relationship with the laid-off employee, they may want your help in finding another job. Be open to this, do whatever you can to assist them but don't give the person the impression that you will reconsider your decision.

### **It is Never Easy**

Layoffs are difficult for everyone involved, so be prepared, as it helps make the event go a little smoother. You will never forget the emotional meeting as you break the dreadful news to your employee, and dealing with the aftermath is even worse. These memories will pain you a while because it is something that you never hope to do it again.

My first experience with laying staff off was a particularly tough time for me. I had to lay off half my 10-person group because the company was in poor financial shape. The decision-making at my company was particularly political – that made it even harder to stomach.

My team was a diverse set of engineers who had worked together before. May was the most senior and had confident air about her. Tom

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was another veteran who had been through many layoffs and knew that something was going to happen. Bert was a junior staff member and this was his first job. Ann was a little more senior than Bert but not by much. Rounding out the layoff list was Jim, who had about double the experience of Kim but this was still his first company.

May, Tom, Bert, Ann and Jim were all being laid off and it was my job to let them know. This was going to be one of the hardest days of my management life.

### **Do It All At Once**

I was instructed to let everyone know that same day to align with everyone else in the company getting the information. My staff would inevitably take this pretty hard. They all worked diligently and to tell them that they would be without a job soon was going to be a tough one to swallow. I decided to let some of them know the night before. The ones I chose to give the heads up to were staff that I knew would have a difficult time with the news. Giving them the heads up allowed them to internalize the decision and process it before the actual event. In a difficult time, this proved to soften the blow.

### **Take It One Step at a Time**

I did not get much sleep the whole week leading up to that fateful Friday. Handling a layoff is like ripping off a Band-aid. The anticipation is painful, the actual event is painful, but after you do it you feel relief and you know that it was the right decision for the company as a whole.

I had already given some of my staff a heads up the day before, so with organized paperwork in hand, I focused on conversations with the remaining people. It was going to be a long day.

### **Just Be Honest**

Our team had a very positive rapport. They understood that I always tried to do my best to take care of them and, in return, they did fantastic work. Laying them off was incredibly painful because I felt that I let them down.

As with any difficult situation, it is best to face it head on, so I immediately set up meetings with each employee first thing in the morning. The first meeting typically sets the tone, so I decided to pick my most senior staff member, Ann.

### **They Probably Know It is Coming**

Ann had a feeling about what was going to happen. She had been through these experiences before and understood that the company was in a place where it needed to cut costs.

She was calm and collected as I broke the news to her and was actually more concerned about how I was doing. I was very moved by this, and it helped reinforce that how you treat your employees during the good times makes it a lot easier to deal with them in bad times. As I wrapped up the meeting with Ann, I felt the meetings might go better than I originally thought. In fact, they did.

Unavoidably, some of the staff took the news particularly hard but all understood why this change was inevitable. Several people asked, "Why me?" but those discussions faded quickly.

They benefitted from hearing the news from someone who was well-prepared and who treated them with respect. I offered to help them in searching for new jobs.

Although the meetings went well, the first layoff day was still draining. It is still hard to think about because a lot of good people lost

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their jobs. Thankfully, all of them went on to bigger and better things. Most of us still keep in touch and occasionally go out for lunch.

**Additional Solutions**

- Solution #E4A: Understand People's Strengths and Weaknesses
- Solution #E6: Treat Everyone the Same But Different

## **Frustration #E8: Group/Company Shutdown**

### **Symptoms**

- *Company performance is poor*
- *Rumors of layoffs*
- *Rumors of reorganization*
- *More frequent senior executive closed-door meetings*

### **Solution #E8: Dealing With the 30-Foot Crater**

I will remember forever the day that my boss and I locked the door to our office, put the key in a FedEx envelope and said goodbye. Our hardware design group that had been given the axe a year earlier and it took a whole year to wrap everything up and finally shut the door.

Even though we knew it was coming, it was a sad day. Shutting down a company or a group is the final act of a series of unfortunate circumstances that I hope you never have to go through. Even if you are given advance warning, the emotional toll is incredibly high.

### **Have a Plan**

If you find yourself in a situation where dismantling your group is inevitable, it is best to come up with an exit plan. This plan should include all the logistics of properly winding down an operation. Just like any project you do, it should have milestones so that you know when it will be done. Part of your shutdown plan should also include who still needs to be around and when others need to be let go. This staffing level step is important since you want enough help to shut down properly, but you don't want people just sitting around.

### **Try to Stay Together**

If you are shutting down your group, ask other groups within your company if they need your staff. This is the best-case scenario since your group would find new jobs. If you are closing a company, then make every effort to find your staff new jobs or find a company to absorb all of your employees. That way, everyone can stay together.

### **No Matter the Plan, It is Still Painful**

Shutting down your group or company is painful. No one enjoys doing it. Just realize that doing it with compassion, dignity and professionalism is the best approach. Keep your head up and do what's best for everyone involved.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #E4A: Understand People's Strengths and Weaknesses
- Solution #E7: Doing the Same With Less

## **Frustration #E9: Clueless Senior Managers**

### **Symptoms**

- *Ignores facts because the facts don't match their world view*
- *Unrealistically optimistic in the face of a crisis*
- *“Just work harder” approach to systematic problems*
- *Aggressive projections that border on fantasy*
- *Constant “you're not a team player” for respectful dissent*

### **Solution #E9: Telling the Emperor He Has No Clothes**

Dealing with problem staff is difficult. Dealing with problem executives is borderline impossible. The reason is simple – they are the leaders of your company, so they're used to the telling, not being told. Going against senior executives or the CEO can be career suicide. This does not mean that you should not question silly decisions. It just means that you have to do it with care. Remember that despite their executive status, they are human just like you and will make mistakes. At the senior management level, mistakes amplify and can lead to company destruction if unchecked. So how do you tell the emperor that he has no clothes? Very carefully.

### **Approach With Care**

Your approach to senior management should be respectful. The last thing you want to do is come across like a hot shot know-it-all. This will be the surest path to getting yourself escorted out of the building. With any sensitive situation, it is always best to be data-driven rather than emotional. Ensure that you understand the data behind the

decision-making and be ready to respectfully disagree with bad assumptions or incorrect strategies. One thing to remember is that senior management can be out of touch with the daily activities of their company, so some of their assumptions may be incorrect.

### **Approach It Logically**

Once armed with your understanding of the situation, you must logically lay out your case in a way that isn't overly critical of their strategy but clarifies it so that you can help make it successful. This approach is imperative when dealing with senior management.

Good senior managers will respect the fact that you have analyzed their assumptions and decisions for the benefit of the company. These interactions will be productive. If the opposite is true, then the plan of attack is a bit more delicate.

### **Build Consensus**

Senior managers who are wrapped up in their own great ideas suffer from huge egos that blind them from their own imperfections. These executives are the dangerous ones and become defensive when critiqued. Going head to head with them will be painful and not productive at all. The best approach is to build a subtle consensus, making your recommendations their idea, or to align the rest of the company against their latest hare-brained idea. Both approaches take a considerable amount of political skill since these senior managers have gotten to where they are by quelling out potential threats.

### **Figure Out Where Others Stand**

It is important to know where other senior executives stand on whatever strategies you disagree with. If there is overwhelming support from all of the executives, then you might want to rethink even bringing it up, or only mention it to a senior manager that you trust.

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If the senior staff is split on it, then you need to build an alliance with the people that will agree with your point of view. Building this alliance will give you credibility when the debate happens. Once the wheels are in motion, continue to build and confirm alliances up until the debate begins.

During the debate, remain respectful and focused on the facts while reinforcing what is good for the company. Once you've shared your findings, you need to stand by them. Second guessing yourself at this point does no one any good. You need to respect whatever decision has been made, execute it or move on to a new company.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #E4A: Understand People's Strengths and Weaknesses
- Solution #M6: Learn the Full Contact Sport

## **Frustration #E10: Contentious Discussions**

### **Symptoms**

- *Discussions dissolve into yelling matches*
- *Facts are ignored and emotions take over*
- *Blaming the person, not the situation*

### **Solution #E10A: Deal with Conflict When it Arises**

Conflict is a constant in any development team. Requirements are unclear, schedules are aggressive and everyone has an opinion. When conflict arises, you need to deal with it as soon as you can. Don't let it fester. It can sometimes be hard to determine the difference between constructive dialog, debate and conflict since the dynamics of a group vary greatly. Your job is to figure out when the debate ends and the conflict begins.

### **The Fine Line**

So, how do you tell when debate morphs into conflict? Debate has the characteristics of give and take and the arguments are laid out logically. The debaters are cordial. They respect each others' views but respectfully disagree. This is healthy and should be encouraged. A good bit of debate also allows you to gain understanding of what the issues and requirements are. This type of debate has to happen or the team will not know where people stand. The tipping point is when the team starts to stall and clear, and then strong opinions start to form. This is when people start to take sides. When this happens, conflict is around the corner, and you need to step in.

### **Start With Common Ground**

Diffusion of conflict requires a clear understanding of the issues. What tends to work for technical teams is straightforward discussion. You need to bring the parties together and have each side explain their concerns. This is the most important part of the process. You need to remain neutral until all sides have spoken, and you need to ask a lot of clarification questions while not passing judgment.

Once both sides have shared their arguments, you need to figure out where they agree. Most differences can be dealt with by finding the common ground. Write down single deviations from the common ground. Work on them one at a time until they are all out on the table.

Next, resolve the easy issues first. Then move on to the tough ones. Once the team sees that they are 95% of the way there, they will tend to solve their own problems.

After going through this process, the team then needs to internalize the outcome. This can take several more meetings, but it is essential for the team to fully commit to the final resolution. In some cases, some team members will continue to lobby for their point of view even after decisions have been made. Respectfully ignore them by telling them that the decision has been made, and that they need to move on.

### **Solution #E10B: Don't Take It Personally, Don't Make It Personal**

Heated discussions can turn into emotion-fueled attacks if the participants are so wrapped up in the outcome that they feel personally attacked for their comments. Focusing on the situation instead of the people involved can be hard to do when emotions are high, but it is essential for swift problem resolution. Strive to understand the positions of all participants even if some appear illogical or ego-based. Knowing everyone's position will make it easier to strike a compromise without making it personal.

### **Be Direct**

If you find yourself the recipient of personal attacks, remain calm. Bring the discussion back to the situation by directly saying, “You are making this personal, and we need to get back to the facts.” This will be a sudden reality check for the individual, as they will not expect being called out for attacking you. They may back pedal and say, “I did not mean it that way” or “You don’t understand what I am saying.” This is what is most effective for this type of situation. Always bring it back to the facts and the current dilemma at hand. Show that you want to solve the problem and not waste your team’s time on unproductive personal attacks.

### **Explain Your Thinking**

Another good way to diffuse personal attacks is to explain your position, not defend it. Resist debating your decision – just explain why you came to that conclusion. This method can usually separate the person from the decision. Doing this shows that you are open to rational dialogue about how decisions are made. It also engages the opinion of your attacker. Once engaged, they will have a vested interest in finding a resolution with you because you’ve explained your thinking, and it signifies to them it’s time to reciprocate. If they don’t have developed arguments ready and backed with data, then it will be really hard to debate your point of view, and you will find yourself rapidly nearing the resolution.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #E4A: Understand People’s Strengths and Weaknesses
- Solution #E6: Treat Everyone the Same But Differently

## **Frustration #E11: Life Balance**

### **Symptoms**

- *Always the last to leave*
- *Never takes a vacation*
- *“Can’t live without me” attitude*
- *Working on the weekends*
- *Constant smartphone scanning*

### **Solution #E11: Understand That People are Messy**

The minute someone accepts your job offer, you get more than just the new hire. You get their spouse, children, hopes, fears, dreams and anxieties. These add-ons don't check themselves at the door when your new star employee comes to work. Your employees' non-work lives will shape them at work, while conversely their work experience influences their home lives. Realizing this will help you manage the situation when your team's outside lives get in the way of work.

### **Balance Is Everything**

Workplace stresses and home life stresses amplify each other. This can lead to difficult workplace situations if your employees don't balance both of their lives effectively. Work-life balance needs to be achieved.

Too often, the source of home life stresses are the long hours technical people spend at work. Couple that with common homeplace problems, and pretty soon you have an employee who is on the edge of a mental breakdown. Creating the proper work-life balance requires you to set

realistic expectations. Realistic expectations set the tone for how your staff perceives your value for work-life balance. Set your expectations too high, and the team's morale will deflate quickly. Set them too low and you end up with an under-performing team. Getting the balance right is tricky. You can't rely solely on personal judgment since you play a different role in the team. The best way to figure out the formula for success is to simply ask the team.

A good team wants to be challenged but understands their limitations enough to balance themselves. This does not mean that you don't push them when they need to be pushed. Rather, it means you must know where your staff's bar is, so you know when to push and when to pull back.

### **Be Flexible**

Flexibility is essential for any high-performance team. Allowing your staff to work at home when they need to will give them the much-needed flexibility when unexpected things happen. For some people, working from home can be far more productive than working at the office. Be careful not to overextend this opportunity, since it is always ideal for the team to work together in the same space.

Allowing your team to set their own hours also gives them the flexibility to take care of personal issues. If you choose to let them define their own hours, remember that teamwork is key, so make it a point to have at least one day a week where the whole team is together at the same time. This best day for this is when you have your weekly status meeting.

### **Sometimes, Life Gets in the Way**

Inevitably, one of your staff members will come to you with a distressing personal issue. He or she may discuss it with you in a one-on-one, or you might notice that they are distracted. Make the time to

discuss whatever issue is bothering them so that you know what is going on and can offer help.

When you manage people, you will get to learn things about them that you wouldn't normally know. If you are uncomfortable with discussing a person's internal ruminations, then you need to respectfully let them know and give them space. This space could involve taking off early to pick up their kids, allowing them to work from home or taking personal time off. Whatever it may be, it is important to let them know that you support them and aid them in dealing with their issue in a productive way.

### **Work Is Work. Home Is Home.**

On rare occasion, some problematic personal issues will impact your entire group. These issues are usually extremely sensitive and will distract your entire group if your team member is given special treatment. You need to be firm that work is work and personal is personal.

No single team member's personal life should affect the group – it is unfair and unprofessional. When this happens, you need to pull the offender aside and explain to them that they need to deal with their issues outside of work. If they can't do that, then you need to give them time off to deal with their issues.

### **Take Care**

A few years ago, a team member named Bill who was in a neighboring company group, was suffering from cancer. He was constantly leaving work early to get blood transfusions, taking personal calls at work, talking incessantly about his issues and falling asleep at his desk.

It got to the point where the staff was getting fed up with Bill's excuses for not carrying his weight in the project. People would avoid him because they just did not want to hear about yet another personal

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health issue. Finally Bill's boss stepped in and gave him a leave of absence to resolve his health issues. The team's morale was able to bounce back quickly and when Bill returned, he was healthy and productive. Although it may have seemed harsh to have to take action, if an employee is sick, they need the time to take care of themselves. It is better for them and for your team.

### **Different Cultures**

It is imperative to be aware of the cultures that your various team members come from. Our industry is comprised of a lot of diverse individuals, so miscommunication because of language or cultural differences occurs on occasion and can impact the office environment. Non-native speakers may not fully understand what is appropriate to say or may have trouble expressing themselves and, in return, others may not be armed with the sensitivities to deal with people of other cultures. The cultural dynamic between your team members is something to monitor.

Pay particular attention to the dynamic of your group, and if it has a diverse make-up then familiarize yourself with the cultures within it. You can discuss culture in your one-on-ones or host a cultural day for your entire team. Learning more about your team's cultures will not only allow you to understand your employees in a more in-depth way, but it will also show them that you care about them personally.

Cultural differences can also lead to gender stereotypes that need to be handled firmly and with sensitivity. It is not okay to brush aside inappropriate stereotypes because of cultural norms. Each and every one of your staff needs to be treated with respect independent of race, religion, creed or sexual orientation.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #M7: Take Your Time But Hurry Up

## **Frustration #E12: Jealous Boss and/or Co-workers**

### **Symptoms**

- *Awkward interactions for no apparent reason*
- *Treating you differently than others*
- *They constantly “put you in your place”*
- *Gossiping behind your back*

### **Solution #E12A: Ask How You Can Help**

Despite who we are at the core, there could be a sprinkling of people who perceive us as aloof, out of touch, difficult or arrogant because of the way we may have acted in the past. Others may dislike us because we garner more praise from our bosses or were more popular among our co-workers. And then you have others who may see us as a threat to their position. Whatever the reasons, jealous bosses and co-workers make your work life unpleasant. This jealousy can potentially be eliminated if you do a little digging and figure out what’s really going on.

### **Figuring Out the Why**

People are messy, and their motivations, fears and desires are complex. Even for those people who are regularly positive and even-keeled, a simple trigger can bring about some deep-seated demons. The important things to remember when trying to dig into the why of jealousy are captured below:

- **What behavior or situation makes them jealous?**  
Notice what sets them off, even if it is something trivial

to you. Keep notes, so you can see if any patterns develop.

- **Are they jealous of others?** The person you may be dealing with could be jealous by nature, and it may have nothing to do with you. If that's the case, then it may be a little easier to accept and deal with.
- **When they are jealous, what do they do?** Noticing the behavior of the jealous person will make it easier to recognize other circumstances or people that the jealousy may be directed at.
- **How does the jealousy subside?** Is there a particular trigger that turns the jealousy around or does it just diminish over time? Make a note of these situations and see if any patterns develop.

### **Be Humble and a Little Vulnerable**

While it is hard for us to point the finger back at ourselves, in the case of a jealous co-worker or boss, it doesn't hurt to reflect on our own behavior.

A jealous co-worker or boss may feel that you're a little too cocky or are a know-it-all. If this is the case, trying to be a little more humble and vulnerable will reduce or eliminate the jealousy. In a non-condescending way, ask them if you can help or take the heat once in a while for failures, and you may find that those simple, harmless acts will reduce their jealousy.

### **Share the Spotlight**

Sometimes people get jealous if they feel that they have not been given the proper credit for shared accomplishments. Your boss can even feel

this way, if they contributed to the project, but you're the one lauded for it.

If you sense jealousy directed at you because of this, try harder to share as much of the spotlight as you can at a completion of a successful project. This shows everyone that you value their contributions, and the team is key in success, and not the individual. Sharing the spotlight also includes recognizing others' contributions publicly. It is amazing what a little recognition can do to reduce jealousy.

### **Watch Out for Backstabbing**

Be warned that not everyone will respond positively to the techniques discussed above. If they are simply a jealous person, they may feel even more threatened because they now feel you are now being too nice or too inclusive, and it makes them paranoid of your potential ulterior motives.

Backstabbing can come in many forms, so be cautious if you notice the jealousy intensify and your original assessment of their jealousy changing. If that's the case, then back off a bit and try a different approach.

### **Solution #E12B: Confront the Issue Head On**

There comes a point when the situation gets so dire that the best approach is to confront the issue head on. Confrontation can take many forms, but the more direct and to the point the interactions are, the better the chance you have for some sort of resolution. If you are uncomfortable doing this alone, then your best bet is to enlist a trusted person you both respect or your Human Resources (HR) person to mediate the discussion.

### **Clarify the Issues**

Clarifying the main issues is vital. It may take several meetings to get to the root of the issue. Your approach should be to clarify things and strive for a resolution. Try hard to not judge the other person even if they are clearly being irrational.

### **Be Respectful Yet Stand Up**

Any kind of confrontation like this is emotional. Most people don't like discussing the issues that they have with others, and it is even more uncomfortable when the person is right in front of them. If you have a hard time dealing with conflict, then consider some of the techniques below:

- **Have a calming tone:** Calm people put others at ease and make it easier to communicate in difficult situations. The calmer the better.
- **Express your desire for resolution if required:** Make it known that you want to resolve whatever issue(s) is making the other person jealous, and that you're willing to compromise to make that happen.
- **Listen before you talk:** Listening to what the person has to say before making a comment shows that you care about the emotions that are creating the jealousy. It also a good idea to not try and defend yourself – just listen and absorb.
- **Repeat key points for clarity:** Always strive for clarity on the issues by summarizing them back to the person in your own words. That will demonstrate that you have internalized their points.

- **Try not to take it personally:** I know it may sound impossible to not take this kind of situation personally, but acknowledge internally that it is not what you are doing but how the other person is reacting to it. That way, you can get past the emotions and on to potential resolutions.
- **Attempt to be fact-driven:** Facts are a great way to ground a discussion so that emotions don't get the best of you. In most tense situations, facts may be the only way to prevent a full-on yelling match, but don't just rely on them. Facts don't matter when emotions are running high because logic and reason will take a back seat. In these cases, bring the discussion back to common ground that you can both agree on.

### **Get Agreement on Being Professional**

If all the above techniques don't reduce the jealousy, then the next best thing is to put together an agreement that states that all of your interactions shall remain on a professional level. While it may seem unnecessary, this reaffirms that everyone should act professionally. It is important to reiterate the commitment to a professional work environment since jealousy can turn the most professional person's behavior into something downright childish.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #P4: Have One-on-Ones
- Solution #E1: Tell the Whole Truth
- Skill #S12: Be Confident not Cocky

### **Frustration #E13: My Boss is a "Rubber Chicken"**

#### **Symptoms**

- *You can never get a straight answer*
- *The answer changes depending on who they are with*
- *Decisions constantly change for no good reason*
- *"Just because" is given for why decisions are made*

#### **Solution #E13: Just Do the Right Thing**

A "rubber chicken" is one of those comedic gag props that always gets a laugh. One of the main reasons is that the rubber chicken effortlessly flops around at the slightest touch.

Bosses can be an unfunny version of the "rubber chickens" when they flop around so much it is amazing they don't hurt their neck. A "rubber chicken" boss can make your work environment frustrating when their priorities are always changing based on how the corporate climate is changing.

#### **Documentation is Critical**

Bosses that flip-flop easily are trying to sail with the most current political winds. "Rubber chicken" managers have moved up in their careers partially because they know exactly when to flip-flop on an issue. This can be very frustrating for us who want to stay on one track.

The way to reduce the amount of ambivalence that a “rubber chicken” boss can inflict is to document the actions that they make. It may seem like extra babysitting work, but it is critical to have a solid paper trail of the indecision to allow you to have a successful outcome.

### **Build Reliable Alliances**

Flip-flopping bosses are frustrating because they can lead a project in a myriad of directions instead of forward. You and some of your team members will want to band together to reduce the amount of direction change that “rubber chicken” bosses force on a group.

As with any alliance, make sure the goal is clear and that it focuses on building an alliance to make everyone’s job easier – including your “rubber chicken” boss’s.

### **Ways to Work Around the Spineless**

Doing the right thing seems simple, but in some circumstances the right thing may be in direct conflict with the latest direction change. In these cases, you’ll have to be a little more cautious when working around your “rubber chicken” boss. Some of the techniques you may want to consider are:

- **Delay changing directions:** If at all possible, don’t change your direction until you have confirmed or heard it from others a minimum of three times. Getting three confirmations from your boss is about equal to the “rubber chicken” boss attention span, so if the direction or idea can last that long, then you’ll have to consider doing it.
- **Ask for clarification:** Ask clarifying questions to turn a situation around will allow your “rubber chicken” boss to “save face.” The tone of how you ask these

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questions should be respectful yet probing and can make it easier for your “rubber chicken” boss to back down, especially if it is within a group.

- **Offer up alternatives that align with doing the right thing:** Come up with alternative approaches that give your “rubber chicken” boss what they want while still working toward a successful product. It is the best way to mitigate a spineless boss since it minimizes disruptions.
- **Demand good reasons for the change in direction:** If all else fails, then you can forcefully demand the reason for the change in direction. Most spineless bosses will recoil and attempt to justify their change in direction, but it is usually to no avail since they have no data to back it up. Be wary with this one because some bosses may feel threatened and lash out.

The most important thing to remember about the “rubber chicken” boss is that they have a grandiose desire to look good in front of their bosses. That’s the main reason they jump on every latest management fad.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #P9: Ask for Forgiveness Instead of Permission
- Solution #P11: Get Inside Your Manager’s Head
- Solution #M6: Learn the Full Contact Sport

## **Frustration #E14: My Boss Focuses on Their Own Work**

### **Symptoms**

- *Your boss is always busy*
- *“Just do it this way” is the answer to most of your issues/problems*
- *Distracted or truncated interactions*
- *Cancelled staff meetings or no staff meetings at all*
- *Can't be bothered because “I'm too busy”*

### **Solutions #E14: Manage Your Boss for Success**

Technical managers have a fatal flaw that we have talked about before – deep down, they really want to do technical work. This tension makes it hard for a technical manager to manage their staff effectively and can lead to tasks falling off the radar.

Managing your boss for success can be tricky because most technical managers think they are successful in both technical work and management of direct reports, even when nothing could be further than the truth. When you observe critical management tasks not getting done and staff getting frustrated about delayed decisions, your boss's technical tasks are getting in the way.

You can turn your group around if you manage your boss for success so he or she can realize what they are doing. If your boss remains in denial, then the task will be a lot more difficult and your approach will need to change.

## **Managing Up Means Telling the Whole Truth**

The first step in managing your boss is to frame the situation in the most concise way. Then your boss will know the real situation but in a positive way. Be warned that too much negativity will just make them recoil from the situation and deny any wrongdoing.

Your best approach is to tell the whole truth and put the situation in the proper context. To get truthful dialogue started, try the following techniques:

- **Review all the tasks and projects:** It is valuable to remind your boss of how much is going on. Sometimes, they are just too involved with what they are doing to take a step back and see everything.
- **Discuss priorities and critical issues:** If your boss is in the critical path, then thoughtfully remind them of that. It will encourage them to give up some of their tasks.
- **Approach the subject of what's on their plate carefully:** Some technical managers actually don't like to manage and will forgo management tasks in favor of doing technical work. If you lay out the importance of their management tasks, then they might realize that there are actually some technical tasks that they can give up.
- **Get agreement on the effort involved:** A manager usually has a hard time calculating the effort that goes into accomplishing a task. It is especially difficult if he or she is actually doing the work because they usually feel they get tasks done faster than most. Discussing the true effort required per task will bring the busy

technical manager back to reality, and to the realization that they are doing too much.

- **Discuss skill set fit:** Managers can have a distorted view of the skill sets of their group members. Although it seems like knowing this information should be a high priority for them, they tend to only remember what someone has done in the recent past.

The techniques above are meant to plant the seed in your boss's mind that they need to reduce the amount of technical work they do. It is best not to directly confront the issue unless you have a good relationship with your boss.

### **Offer to Take Tasks Off Their Plate**

Some technical managers take on too much work because they feel that they are the only ones who can do certain tasks. This stems from the curse of knowledge. They know exactly what they want accomplished yet find it hard to verbalize it to their staff. You can tell when this is the case when your boss says, "It is just easier for me to do it." This is a sure sign that a technical manager is too focused on getting things done rather than managing their group.

Asking to take tasks off your manager's plate can go one of two ways: 1) they embrace that you are actively wanting to help out or 2) they make excuses as to why they are the only one who can do it. Obviously, the first response will be the easier for you to manage while the second response will require deploying the techniques below:

- **Discuss the big picture:** Busy technical managers can sometimes lose sight of the big picture. This is especially true if they are doing way too much technical work. Bringing up the big picture can allow them to

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reset their frame of reference and hopefully realize the bottleneck they are causing.

- **Offer several recommendations for helping:** Your first offer to help may get rejected, so have several other ones ready to go and make sure they vary in approach or scope.
- **Take a boring piece:** Like most technical people, the technical boss is not fond of the mundane. Offer to take some of those mundane tasks off their plate so that they see how helpful you can be.
- **Organize and prioritize their tasks for them:** Sometimes your technical boss may not be able to organize or prioritize what they are doing because they are too close to it.
- **Ask others to talk to them:** Encourage other people to offer help, and your technical boss might finally cave in.

The process of managing your boss to success takes consistency. Most technical bosses will resist initially, but as time goes on they will appreciate the efforts you are making to help them and your group be successful.

You might be thinking, “This sounds like what my boss’s boss should be doing,” and you would be right, but remember that your success depends on your boss being successful, so anything you can do to make that happen benefits you.

*JARIE BOLANDER*

**Additional Solutions**

- Solution #P4: Have One-On-Ones
- Solution #P11: Get Inside Your Manager(s)' Head
- Solution #P9: Ask for Forgiveness Instead of Permission

### **Frustration #E15: Only Spend "X" Minutes on This**

#### **Symptoms**

- *Your boss tells you how long things should take*
- *Your boss expects you to drop everything to “just do this one quick thing”*
- *Too many random things to do*
- *Everything seems to be “hot” or “urgent” or “your #1 priority”*

#### **Solutions #E15: Ignore Time Constraints and Do a Good Job**

This solution may seem like an impossible one to achieve since everything has some sort of time constraint, but hear me out.

I suggest ignoring your boss’s time constraints on simple tasks because they don’t really understand how long a particular task will take. This stems from them incorrectly factoring in the multitude of other projects you have on your plate. The reason they put a time constraint on a project in the first place is either because it is a lower priority or they feel that spending an unnecessary amount of time on it is just not worth it. This “time delusion” occurs because all managers live in the management time warp.

#### **Management Time Warp Redux**

Recall that we discussed the management time warp in Solution #O13. To recap, managers have a warped sense of time. For them, as soon as a task is assigned, it is completed. You may get frustrated because nothing will ever be completed fast enough for them.

The management time warp can be rectified if you clearly define the tasks given, estimate the time required and communicate this information to your boss. The wrinkle with this frustration is that your boss has a preconceived notion of the exact amount of time he or she wants you to spend, which usually is totally off.

### **How Important is This, Really?**

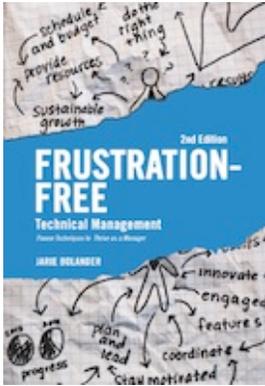
Your boss assigns tasks that are time-constrained because these tasks have marginal value or are truly urgent. The challenge is to figure out which one it really is. You can do that by asking clarifying questions and asking what other tasks you should drop. Once you determine how important the task is, challenge your boss's time constraint accordingly, so that you can produce a quality result.

### **Tell Them the Whole Truth**

It is also useful to express the reality of how long things actually take. Telling your boss the whole truth will get them to understand that the time-constrained task will take longer than they anticipated. This will prompt them to give you some flexibility on other tasks if it turns out to be really important.

### **Additional Solutions**

- Solution #O13: Assign Every Task Only One Owner
- Solution #E14: Manage Your Boss for Success
- Solution #M2: Don't Micromanage
- Solution #M12A: Invoke the 24-Hour Rule



*Frustration Free Technical Management* details the POEMS (Personal, Organizational, Emotional, Managerial and Sustaining) process. POEMS allows the technical manager to eliminate their frustrations by detailing common frustrations facing technical managers. POEMS then provides solutions to those frustrations.

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