

THE MISSING MANUAL FOR MANAGING

AMAZING CTO

Stephan Schmidt



IKIGAI

Amazing CTO

The missing manual for managing

Stephan Schmidt

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Thanks to all the excellent people I was lucky to work with, to some great managers I've learned from and to my coachees to let me participate in their journey. Thanks to all reviewers for their patience, their input and their insights. Thanks to Caren Genthner-Kappesz, the best boss I ever had and who changed my trajectory as a manager.

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Part 1 - Introduction

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140 opinionated rules for engineering managers

This book is opinionated. It contains a large collection of different ideas and insights I have gained over the last decades from experience. Learning from people I have worked with, CEOs and CTOs I have met, from my consulting work and from my CTO coaching practice, I've developed the Amazing CTO rules in this book.

Racing through the book is not the best way.

This book is not intended to be read from start to finish but to be browsed. Each idea and rule is important and deserves to be reflected upon and incorporated in your management style.

And sometimes laughed about.

On Pronouns

I have started this book as a draft with iterating between he/she/them. Several reviewers told me independently of each other, it was confusing to them.

Therefore, I have changed the use to “*she*” throughout the book. One thing went with me through school and my technical career: Only a small number of women are active in technology. In elementary school, there were girls with a better grasp of mathematics than me. As they grew up this thinned out. I am not qualified to speculate about reasons, but I think it is sad as they might enjoy the creativity of coding as much as I do. Not that everyone needs to go into coding, but some might have been prevented from entering the field. In my coding for manager workshops and coding for PhD students, the ratio was balanced, and women enjoyed writing code as much as the men.

I do think role models are important. There are some for women in technology, like the founder of Adafruit Limor Fried, Sophie Wilson, the lead designer of the ARM instruction set, or Stephanie “Steve” Shirley, who founded a remote coding company in the sixties. But still, there are not enough role models to encourage girls to choose the creativity of coding and technology, and change the world in the process. There are even less role models for women to become engineering managers.

For this book, do not envision *me* as that Amazing CTO.

Envision a CTO who made her career in startups and large companies. Let's call her Cathleen, who struggled here and there but in the end, can act as an amazing role model for all of us.

Whenever you stumble across “she” in this book, do not worry, whoever you are or however you identify, it is for you.

Prolog

I'm sitting in his office, and the man is shouting at me *"I don't care!"* I know why he is shouting. I know why he's angry. The man circles me like a shark and keeps shouting at me *"I only want to know, when this is going to be finished!"* It's about a project. I'm the technical manager responsible for the project because I'm responsible for that part of the company site. The company is bringing in millions each week with high margins. But growth is flattening and the company is searching for new avenues of revenue. This project is part of the plan and it is late. Way late. With this project, users could load up sketches, we would send them to East Asia, where people redraw them, and then they are re-uploaded to the user's account.

I made all the mistakes that I could make. I let business push estimates down, I let developers work late into the night, and I didn't manage technical risk. So now we were late. The man was the Head of Product, and he keeps shouting. It was one of the rare times when someone was shouting at me at the office. I kept my mouth shut because I had run out of excuses.

The project had been difficult. The team was motivated but inexperienced. The technical documentation of our partner was weak. The requirements were not clear. And it had a lot of business pressure by top management and a tight deadline, one we had moved several times already. When

we finally released, there was the icing on the cake. Our Scandinavian partners told us we could release every day of the year except one. Because on that day everyone is out in their cabins in the wilderness and is drunk. Guess on what day management insisted on releasing?

What I should have done was keeping our estimations. Not letting developers work at night. Holding people accountable. Saying no to pressure and unrealistic deadlines. Delegate more. But I was inexperienced.

I was not amazing. How did I get there? It all started with me coding as a kid.

My Story

This is amazing.

It's the end of the 1970s, and I am standing in a toy store next to other kids playing video games. The spaceships flying around, the aliens flash, and we stare at the screen. I thought video games were the best thing on earth. Mesmerized by this wonderful, colorful and blinking world, I wanted to write my own video games, with my own stories and my own spaceships.

Wondering what it takes to write a video game, I bought some computer magazines. My parents did not have a computer, and we had no money to buy one, so I went to a department store. Back in the days, they had home computers standing around, no one knew what to do with them, but the department store companies thought they needed to sell them. You could type on them and do whatever you liked.

There were other kids there, and from watching what they did with those computers, I learned programming. And it was amazing.

Typing

```
1 10 PRINT "HELLO STEPHAN"  
2 20 GOTO 10
```

into the computer, running the code and the screen was filled with HELLO STEPHAN. The computer was talking to me. Isn't that amazing? Finally, I wrote some video games.

Computer programming took me through my youth, I was part of the computer demo scene of the 1980s. We wrote small programs with flashing screens, spaceships and flying stars to show off our skills to other coders. We did things people thought would not be possible. We were amazing. Part of that culture was traveling around Europe to demo-parties, battling other coders with your skills, showing off what you can do. Moving around at these gatherings, talking to people, learning about their new tricks. The scene was full of pair programming, decades before the term became a thing. There was always someone better to learn from. Amazing days.

The internet era arrived, and I became a web coder. There were very few of us back then, so naturally I was promoted to an early management position, because there were even fewer engineering managers to choose from. I got my title of Head of Development because I needed a business card, and I had asked my boss what title to write on it. He said do whatever you want, so I became Head of Development—

hadn't heard of CTO back then, or I would have been a CTO right there right then.

As a manager, I was struggling. No one told me what to do, or how to do things. Doing my best to keep everything floating, I wasn't very happy. I wasn't amazing.

Not until I joined larger companies, this became a problem. There still were no managers around, peers or otherwise, to learn from—the way I learned coding as a kid. I did my best but made many mistakes. I was still an excellent coder and nerd, but management was learning by doing. Without role models, without people to learn from and without proper training, learning was learning by mistake.

Technology was – for the first time – not amazing to me.

Suddenly everything changed. eBay bought the company I was working for as CTO. eBay brought in its own managers, and most people in the top management team were replaced or did leave. I wanted to stay, and you don't replace the CTO. With the acquisition, I no longer was reporting to the CEO. I was layered. What sounds like demotivating was actually the best thing that could have happened.

Caren became my boss. She was amazing. She was the best manager I ever had.

Why was she amazing? She was kind, empathic and supportive (and brilliant, Ph.D. in Mathematics). She turned my career around and gave me a management role model to strive for. She told me what I had to change as a manager

for my career to succeed further. She was different from every manager I had met until then. As her direct report, I didn't think of her being amazing because of her output. But because of how she managed me.

Meeting her put me on the quest to define what makes a manager amazing.

Be An Amazing CTO

What does it mean to be an Amazing CTO?

Is it that you know architecture, and processes, team topologies, coding, and system design? All of these are important. Outstanding knowledge makes you an excellent engineering manager. I have met many engineering managers excelling in these topics. Being the alpha nerd brings you respect from developers. It makes management easier when you are king of the technology hill.

Some years ago, The Guardian reported that Ernst and Young (EY) stopped hiring people based on their university degree and grades. The reason for this is, they found no correlation between success at the consultancy and a university degree. You need more to be successful at your job.

Haven't you experienced this on your own? Most experienced CTOs know that when they hired the wrong person, it was not about hard skills. But it was because of attitude, team fit and soft skills. Nevertheless, CTOs buy hard skill books and want to become an ever better techie and process nerd themselves – but do not correlate that with success when hiring.

Hard skills get you a position. Soft skills make you succeed.

Therefore, this is not another hard skill book.

Developers will remember you for being an outstanding techie, and how you solved deep technical challenges. People outside technology will not remember you. Developers, leads and heads reporting to me often had excellent technical skills. Those I remember as amazing added something on top of those skills.

Every CTO has the potential to be amazing. Amazing means the CTO makes people wow. They remember her. They say *"The CTO is amazing."* Too many CTOs do what they are told to do. They might be good developers, they excel at hard skills. But they are not amazing.

An amazing manager is inspiring, friendly but tough, leads and gives guidance, develops and invests in your future. Amazing managers look like management is easy. An amazing manager makes your life easier. An amazing manager makes your job fulfilling.

The Amazing CTO amazes people by her work. From how she brings people to shine to how she innovates for the company. People recognize her for how well technology contributes to the success of the business. The Amazing CTO is recognized across departments. The CEO does not want to miss her because she is amazing. The Amazing CTO is someone you cannot live without after you have met one.

Hard skills brought me into the CTO position. I was made an engineering manager because I was an excellent coder. Then the rules in this book made me succeed as an engineering manager and CTO. They make your job easier and you more

successful. The rules are helpful for new or experienced CTOs and engineering managers aspiring to become amazing CTOs.

As there are many rules, I have mixtapes squeezed in that act as intermissions to give you time to relax, pause and reflect about what you have read and what you are going to read.

The appendix contains lists and models. Most are referenced from the rules but can be browsed and be useful on their own. The checklists, lists and models have helped me understand software engineering and management better, and I often use them in my coaching practice.

This book is different. This book talks about topics other CTO books do not. If you want to become an Amazing CTO or engineering manager, this book is for you.

Part 2 - Rules

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“Relax”



Yeah, you are off the ground! Pause and relax. You are flying with a walkman on your ears. Take one minute and reflect about your job and role. Then let the mixtape take you to the rules. Relax!

Rule #1

Starts with a yes

As techies we say “no” too often. Someone, marketing, the CEO, come to us with an idea. We only see the problems, the holes in the plot, the missing-edge cases. The full magnitude of the task. And because if things do not work, the CTO is the one who needs to deliver despite the holes in the plot, the missing requirements and the complexity of the task. So she finds all the problems and says “no.” The CEO does not like to talk to the CTO, because the only thing he hears is “no” to new ideas.

The Amazing CTO says “yes” to new ideas. She is open to ideas, visions and projects. She sees how they help business moving forward. The first thing to say is “yes” and embrace ideas others have. Listen to those ideas.

There is a time to point out the problems. A time to insist on fixing the holes in the plot. To make sure everything is thought of. Proper estimations are made. But the experienced CTO starts with a “yes.”

Rule #2

Asks for help

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Does ruthlessly 1:1s

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Gives purpose

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Does not take shortcuts

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Loves technology

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Actively promotes

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Knows technology is a fashion industry

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Knows processes are swimming wings

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Is a professional

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Is transparent and open

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