LEAD DEVELOPER

best practices and tips for lead software developers

by

Jeroen Leenarts

AppForce1

Being a lead software developer

Jeroen Leenarts

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Introduction

Welcome to my book on the topic of being a lead software developer.

Definitions of what exactly a lead software developer is are different. In some companies, it is the most competent developer; in others, it is the oldest developer; and in the next company, it might be the person who stumbled into the role just because nobody else volunteered. Or it could be a clearly defined role, and you were hired for this position. Regardless of any circumstance, you want to be the best lead software developer.

In this book, I will provide you with best practices and tools to be your best lead developer. For yourself, your peers, and the business leaders you are working with. While we often work in sprints, the practice of software development or any career is a marathon. So make sure you keep a sustainable pace. I also address the topic of being/feeling overloaded with work. Being in the lead means you do many things, but it does not have to define you. Your goal should be to be too good or great at your craft and have a bird's-eye view, allowing you to give direction and meaningful choices for your peers and business.

Why did I write this book

In my career as a software developer, I worked with great people. Steadily, I grew in my role until I finally ended up at a big insurance company in the Netherlands and was thrown into the lead software developer role. I got the role because I was the most senior developer among my internal colleagues. And thus, at some point, my manager told me, "You're it." Unprepared, bewildered, and with a schedule that was eating massive chunks out of my coding hours, I was thrown into the role.

I was thrown into the deep end of the pool. I was swimming barely, and it did not look too pretty.

I went into "red alert mode" and got to work. Fortunately, I have had my fair share of crisis situations. And for crisis mode, I am prepared. I learned from the best. The best thing you can do in a crisis is stop, step back, think, and evaluate. Pick your first best action and execute that without hesitation.

And that's what I did. I searched for relevant books and documentation. I asked around in my network. I needed to know what was expected of me. I sure got many "I don't know, I guess you just lead." This is good advice, but it lacks actionable qualities. There were some helpful resources, a chapter in a book, a few helpful peers in my network, and a lot of gut feeling.

I did OK. I flapped my arms a bit here and there, but I was learning and getting better, and I was finding my rhythm again and again.

Steadily, more and more different tasks were being put on my plate. Technical challenges but also more planning, more meetings, more everything. I was spending less and less time "doing the actual work" (coding). I was losing my mind because I kept getting interrupted while trying to develop software. Getting interruptions is part of my current role. But I had to overcome these challenges or accept doing my work somewhat out of control.

So, after a lot of reading, talking to my scrum master, hooking up with peers in similar situations, and just learning—over and over, week after week—this book is where I am now. It is a compilation of my lessons as a lead software developer.

It is the book I wish I had before being tasked as the team's Lead Software Developer.

Who this book is for

This book is for:

- Lead software developers looking for tools and practices to improve their workflow, balance, and result.
- Software developers aspiring to become lead developers.
- People looking for material to help them coach and train lead software developers without a software engineering background.

This book is not for:

- People doing work that is in no way related to software development. My outlook is strictly focused on software development and what works in my experience in that field.
- People expecting a how-to guide on being a lead software developer. It is a collection of practices. Becoming a lead software developer requires experience with a wide range of software development challenges.

Who am I?

My name is Jeroen Leenarts. I am a software developer currently specializing in iOS development. However, I have a long and varied history working on all kinds of technically challenging systems. I started working as a software developer in 2002. Currently, I am working as a senior iOS Developer at Dawn Technology[1].

I publish a podcast for iOS app developers with a weekly news and community episode and an interview episode when available. I am also one of the main organizers of the Dutch CocoaHeads, a monthly meetup community for iOS developers.

- https://appforce1.net/podcast/[2]
- https://cocoaheads.nl/[3]
- https://www.linkedin.com/in/leenarts/[4]

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[1] https://dawn.tech

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Changes and updates

Release date	Changes	Credits
2025-10-29	Add conflict resolution section and expand business chapter with metrics, budgeting, product management, and prioritization content	
2025-02-22	Major revision: Rewrite team, business, and you chapters. Add remote teams content	
2024-06-08	Add guidance on encouraging learning	
2024-06-07	Add onboarding best practices for junior developers	
2024-06-06	Add chapter on career paths after lead developer	
2024-06-05	Language improvements throughout	
2022-08-17	Add section about Remote Work	
2022-10-20	Update my job description	

Release date	Changes	Credits
2021-10-12	Two typos	Laurent Brusa[5]
2021-07-03	Add paragraph on Minimum supported platform versions, Process your notes each day, and How to run a knowledge sharing session?	Some suggestions by Lucas Fara[6]
2021-03-21	Several grammar corrections and typos	Eric Lippmann[7]
2021-03-18	Initial Release	

[5] https://twitter.com/wrmultitudes
[6] https://twitter.com/7farah7
[7] https://twitter.com/objective_cesar

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Should you want to be a Lead Software Developer

When the day comes that you are asked to become the lead software developer, think about it. Do you want to do this? Are you a fit for such a role? Do you want to take a step, even small, back from filling your day with as much software development as possible?

As a lead developer, you are in a critical position between your developer peers and the business (represented by your manager or other business person). You will spend less time coding and more time working with soft skills. It all depends on the exact requirements laid out or demanded by your environment. You will have to focus your efforts on what your team needs to deliver on the business requirements. You may need to spend time developing

your team's technical skills or working with business representatives to nail down the requirements for your team. You might also have to stand tall in creating a sustainable culture and pace for your team.

An interesting aspect is that you will not be hierarchically superior to your peers; that's the task of the individual managing your team. Do note that, depending on how your manager operates, you could significantly impact the direction your team gets from your manager and significantly influence their performance appraisal.

The most crucial part will be that you will need to have or develop some soft skills depending on the exact requirements of your environment. But you will also be required to perform a delicate balancing act. What is essential for the team, and what for the business? How do you balance your time between coding and other lead role-related activities? How do you hang on to precious blocks of uninterrupted coding time without being unavailable to your team when it counts? Delegating, coaching, sponsoring—what are those?

So, when asked, "Do you want to be the lead developer?" Make sure to take some time. Consider your weaknesses. Ask why they want to appoint you. Indicate your expectations. And ask for support in developing your soft skills.

Make sure you feel comfortable spending more time discussing, documenting, and negotiating. By providing a good technical sounding board, you can prevent everyone from being disappointed. But this is not easy. Also, note that there can be politics involved. The best way to deal with any situation is to be honest and document choices, assignments, and agreements.

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Closing notes

Please review my book:

- Gumroad: https://gumroad.com/l/leaddeveloper[8]
- LeanPub: https://leanpub.com/leaddeveloper[9]
- Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08ZDRR1VZ/[10]
- Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/57471067-lead-developer[11]

Thank you so much for purchasing and reading my book.

I wish you well on your journey as a lead software developer. I am sure it will be an exciting and challenging road. But if you do it right, it's a massive opportunity for personal growth. So, take care of yourself, your team, and your business. Whatever happens, ensure you know you and your team are growing, having fun, and doing some of your best work thus far.

Send me feedback and share what you think

This book will be a living book for the near future. Since you purchased my book, you are entitled to an opinion on its content. Tell me what you liked and disliked and where you would like more information. I will see what I can do for you.

[8] https://gumroad.com/l/leaddeveloper
[9] https://leanpub.com/leaddeveloper
[10] https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08ZDRR1VZ/
[11] https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/57471067-lead-developer

I will read any feedback, take you up on it, and add it as additional content to this book.

Writing this book gave me many opportunities to reflect on my practices as a lead software developer. I gained so much by thinking about what I do to help my peers, business, and myself. So yes, I am happy with the effect it has already had on my development as a lead software developer. I hope it has a similar impact on you.

So, what do you think?

Let me know:

- On Twitter: https://twitter.com/AppForce1/[12]. Please send me a DM or @-mention.
- On Mastodon: https://mastodon.cloud/@appforce1[13]
- By email leaddeveloper@appforce1.net

The most significant areas where I will improve the book

The business chapter. In my work, the business aspects are still the areas where I need to learn the most; this book does indicate that fact. There is much more for me to understand. If you are knowledgeable in this area, let me know. I'd love to hear your thoughts and learn.

Get coached by AppForce1

Furthermore, I am available as a coach if you like. I will work with you on your goals and provide myself as an accountability partner. This can be a subscription or based on an hourly rate.

Topics I can coach you on:

[12] https://twitter.com/AppForce1/
[13] https://mastodon.cloud/@appforce1

- General iOS development.
- Growth as a lead software developer.

I am also open to your suggestions if you see a fit with my personality.