TECHNICAL
LEADERSHIP

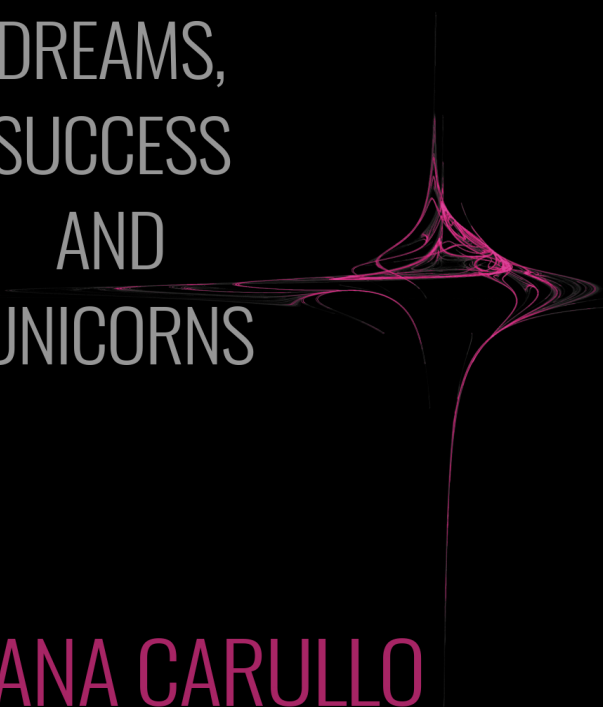## DREAMS,
SUCCESS
AND
UNICORNS

GIULIANA CARULLO

Technical Leadership

Dreams, success and unicorns

Giuliana Carullo

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Also By Giuliana Carullo

Code Reviews 101

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Stop Procrastinating

To my family, who daily supports my life and work.

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Preface

No matter what responsibilities are in place. No matter what your job title is: software architect, senior engineer, principal engineer, project manager or CEO. They are all shades of the same abstraction: the technical leader.

We need leaders, and eventually, we want to become a really good one. Often times it is confusing still. What distinguishes a manager from a leader? What distinguishes a leader from a technical one in today

tech world?

Long story short: a build up of skills and different ways to apply them.

This book is not yet another book on influencing people and on how to communicate properly. These are massively important skills, and plenty of amazing books have been already written on these topics. This book is born as a vision – often times really personal – on who a technical leader is, how he/she acts and what it takes to be a good one.

As previously said, leadership is not in the title. Leadership is talent and attitude (for the blessed) and hard work in honing a plethora of skills. This holds really true for technical leaders. Hence, in this book, we are going to focus on skills, not on job title.

This is not a teaching book. What you will get out from this book, in summary, is a - very opinionated –

discussion on what makes or breaks a good technical leader. Short chapters, one step at the time.

As we walk through them you will notice a sort of role playing in place:

- myself as a technical leader;
- myself as a follower: what I look for in technical leaders that I decide to follow.

It is meant to give you some guidance, often starting from struggles that I first had to overcome myself. Furthermore, having a little of an entrepreneur soul, I spoke with myself for a fairly long time: how would it be my dream company? By which rules would I play? Hence this was book born. Think about it as a pocket guide that acts as a reminder to ourselves on how to behave in a lot of common scenarios that we face on a daily basis at work. Not because of our role: but because it is the right thing to do.

The ideas presented are backed up by easy to grasp examples showing common situations where technical leaders simply 'act differently'. Being aware of ourselves and what has been proven to work – or not to work – is the first step towards success.

Last, but not least: thank you for choosing this book. I really hope that the ideas presented will help you as much as they are helping me. Indeed, I hope that at the end of it you will be a better – or at least more conscious - leader.

Disclaimer

All opinions and concepts are my own, and by no means represent the position of any of my employers past or present.

Leadership

Leadership

"Remember the difference between a boss and a leader: a boss says go – a leader says: Let's go."
-E.M.Kelly

Managers matters. A lot. If you wondered whether or not, they are needed at all. They are. It is a pretty common belief of a lot of tech people that managers only add up to increased bureaucracy and intricate communications.

Google - back in 2008 - performed an experiment to prove – or disprove – the assumption:

'Managers are Evil.'

The outcome of their research found that managers are far away from being the evil force tearing down employees. They are a critical asset to the company. So the tech giant started to dig deeper and found that good managers are not only necessary, but they do increase job satisfaction, retention and overall performances – if done correctly.

But more than managers we need leaders. Good Leaders. Great Leaders are even better. The two of them are not necessarily the same thing. There are many shades of managers out there. Some of the types overlap, whilst blurring roles are:

1. **People manager** – who often times is mainly responsible for team performances and relative interactions with the Human Resources department.

2. **Project manager** – who mainly decide schedule, risk, resources, with a touch of people management especially for smaller companies.

3. **Principal Engineer** – who, in more heavily R&D focused companies, holds the broader view of what needs to be accomplished and helps the team to reach the goals.

The separation line between *people manager* and the broad *technical manager* is often blurred. Can you be a people manager without a good technical background? Can you be a technical manager without skills like strong communication – which is often times seen as an essential characteristic of a good people manager?

My personal answer is: not really. Since I have a strong background on software engineering, my view might be slightly biased by my preferences (we are all – eventually unconsciously – biased towards some-

thing). My main reasoning around it is that: the higher you go in the classical career ladder, the more the skills you have need to grow up in order to do good for yourself, your company and your team. Some of the questions I asked myself before giving you this response are:

1. What happens if you can't mentor a team member that is looking for technical guidance and mentorship?

2. Can you help someone achieve their goals towards a technical path if you don't have a grasp of the work and skills that person already has or that he/she needs to work on?

3. What happens if you can't understand someone's verbal and non-verbal communication? Would you understand that:
   * your way of communicating something might be not well received;

* you are missing the main objective of the communication, which is mutual understanding;
* the other person is walking away unsatisfied from the chat you had?

4. Can you build trust with a person directly reporting to you if they think you have little clue or interest in what they are trying to achieve? Do they think you understand how big or complex the issue they are trying to solve is?

5. Will a direct report trust you for making decisions on his/her career if you two relate so little on a such impactful skill – i.e., technical?

6. Can you influence and inspire people to follow you if you lack any major skill?

7. What happens if you do not have a grasp of the latest technology trends in the world?

8. What happens if you have little business knowledge?

9. What happens if you have little knowledge about

customers and the competition?

10. What happens if you are too focused on the nitty-gritty technical aspects that you loose your focus on helping out team members to succeed?

11. What happens if you do not have classical project management skills? Will your projects be on track?

If you received any of my questions and comments on the personal side, please jump to the *Don't make it personal unless it is in the praise you give* Chapter.

As regards the technical aspects, a broader study performed in 2016 by HBR [HBR] has actually shown that we all like managers that can do our job and that we can learn from. They are domain experts. And it holds true for engineers.

Point 6 also needs a word of caution: often times, the un-inspiring behavior is not that much on to do with

the 'lack of skills' side. We are all human, not perfect and different. Someone has a natural talent towards certain things that someone else might compensate with other skills. And it is totally acceptable, nonetheless the beauty of the world. Point 6 is an issue when it comes with a *'lack of desire (or ability?) to constantly improve and grow ourselves'*. I believe it is fairly easy to fall in the trap of feeling comfortable with our own role and skills that we do not pay attention to how this behavior is perceived by people who surround us.

Work on your skills for yourself. The impact on others will follow. And if nothing else happens, you will be a more self-confidence and self-conscious person anyway.

Takeaway

1. Managers are not Evil.
2. A Technical Leader has skills from classical views of technical manager, people manager and principal engineer.
3. Always work on improving yourself.
4. Don't be lazy.

Why do you want to be a leader?

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Leadership principles of tech giants

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The Technical Leader Diagram

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The Technical Leader Diagram

It's all about trust

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It's all about trust

And loyalty

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And loyalty

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Humble and caring

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If you can't manage your time, how will you manage your team?

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Have a vision and know how to communicate it

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Listen, observe and act upon it

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Expectations

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Micromanaging

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The happy technical leader

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Six Degrees Of Separation

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On limits

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Conclusion: putting it all together

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More from Giuliana Carullo

Code Reviews 101: The Wisdom of Good Coding

Given her strong background on Software Engineering, Giuliana Carullo shows readers how to perform Code Reviews. What you will get away with from this book is knowledge covering a wide scope of challenges and practices on good coding from code, design and architectural smells to measures, processed and methodologies to perform reviews– the right way. If you want to have some fun, check it out.

[Code Reviews 101[4]](https://leanpub.com/codereviews101thewisdomofgoodcoding)

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[4]https://leanpub.com/codereviews101thewisdomofgoodcoding

About the author

Giuliana Carullo, CCSK certified, has computer science in her DNA and has been programming for more than a decade. She holds a Master Degree in Computer Science and she's been doing research for the last six years, whilst wearing another hat: the project manager. Giuliana is in love with the intersection point between science and human behavior. She believes that there is more than one way to good, much more to do bad, but she ends up being really opinionated on what good is.

In her spare time, she loves to write and to help others in doing their best at their jobs and with their careers.

Feedback and Errata

Feedback from readers is always more than welcome and highly valued. Let me know what you think about this book. What you liked? What you disliked? What you would like to read in a future version on the topic?

Even if care is taken to ensure accuracy of this book, some errors can happen.

Anything that can go wrong will go wrong - Murphy

If you find a mistake, a typo, something missing, please report it, so I can improve the book.