The Engineer/Manager Pendulum

And You

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Traditional Paths to Management

The tech lead who would rather be writing code

…and everyone knows it. They jump into code reviews, lead architecture talks, skip 1x1s because they’re busy debugging, and are visibly grumpy about having to spend so much time in meetings instead of writing code.

The career manager

They became a manager and stopped writing code 20 years ago. They haven’t expressed a technical opinion in over a decade, and privately feel anxious and threatened by highly technical managers.

Stuff we usually associate with management:

- It’s a is a one-way trip
- It is a promotion
- Big bump in salary and equity
- The “best” engineers do it
- Stop writing code, stop being technical
- It’s the only real option for career progression

- Congratulations, prestige, scarcity
- Wanting to further climb the ladder
- A seat at the table for decision-making
- Resentment

None of these are great.

The team deserves:

- A manager who wants to be managing people and developing that skill set
- A manager who is (mostly 🙃) not bitter about going to meetings instead of writing code
- A manager who is genuinely interested in process, sociotechnical systems, and nurturing the careers of their teammates
- A manager whose technical skills are strong enough, fresh enough and modern enough to independently evaluate their work and resolve technical conflicts

You deserve:

- Career advancement
- A role that is challenging, interesting, and not a one-way street
- To keep your technical skills relevant
- To preserve optionality—esp if you aren't sure what you want to do when you grow up
- A long and varied career, where you become more and more employable with time (not less and less).

A better way…

Don’t identify yourself as a manager or as an engineer. Think of yourself as a:

Technologist

or **Technical Leader**

who needs both skill sets to reach your fullest potential

Let’s talk…about the immense breadth and strength that accrues to engineers who make a practice of this.

The best technologists I have ever met are all people who have done both.

You don’t have to choose one or the other

but you do have to choose one at a time.

Being a good engineer involves blocking out interruptions, focusing on learning and solving hard problems.

Being a good manager involves being available for your team and interruptible… even interrupt-driven.

You can only do a good job at one at a time. You can only grow in one role at a time.

The best line managers …

Are never more than a few years removed from writing code and building system themselves, hands on. They are solidly senior engineers with good judgment, who can afford to step away for a few years without risking terminal decay, but they return to the well to refresh their skills from time to time.

This gives you credibility with engineers, the kind you cannot fake. It helps you empathize with your team. It enables you to evaluate their work, debug sociotechnical systems, and resolve conflicts.

It also preserves your optionality and keeps you maximally employable over the long run.

The best staff+ engineers and tech leads…

Have spent time as an engineering manager, doing full time people management. This helps you level up at skills like connecting business problems to technical outcomes, understanding what motivates people, planning, running meetings and owning the room, making hard choices and having hard conversations, etc.

You earn credibility in the eyes of senior leadership and learn to speak their language. It gives you way more empathy for other functions. Ironically, you also get much better at wielding influence without authority.

If you are not yet solidly an experienced senior engineer,

don’t become a manager.

You need a *minimum* of 7-8 years as an engineer. 10 is better.

You don’t need to be the BEST engineer.
But you need experience, confidence, and a reservoir of both.

If you decide to try management, commit to two years.

It takes that long to begin to trust your own instincts.

The minimum tour of duty as an engineering manager is about two years. But it only takes about 3-5 years for your skills to begin to seriously decay.

No more than five years.

Go back to the well, while you are still hirable.

**You cannot be a tech lead/manager forever.
You will get worse at it as your IC skills deteriorate.
You will starve your people of the opportunities they need.**

You can choose the technical leadership track — and go back to writing code for a while — or the organizational leadership track — and start climbing the ladder.

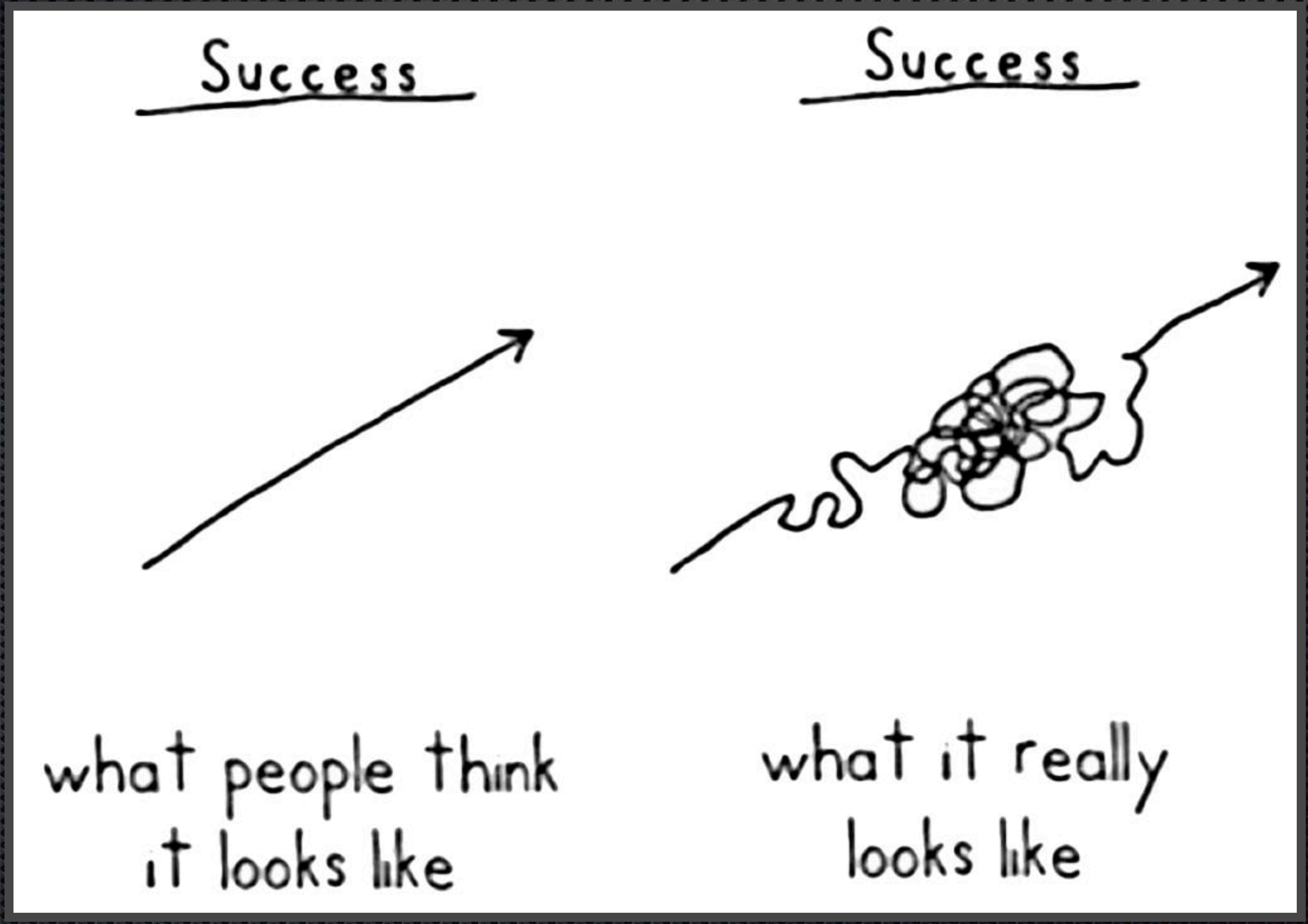
**Do you have an opportunity to climb the ladder?
Do you understand the risks?
Do you still want to?**

If you get a chance to climb the ladder:

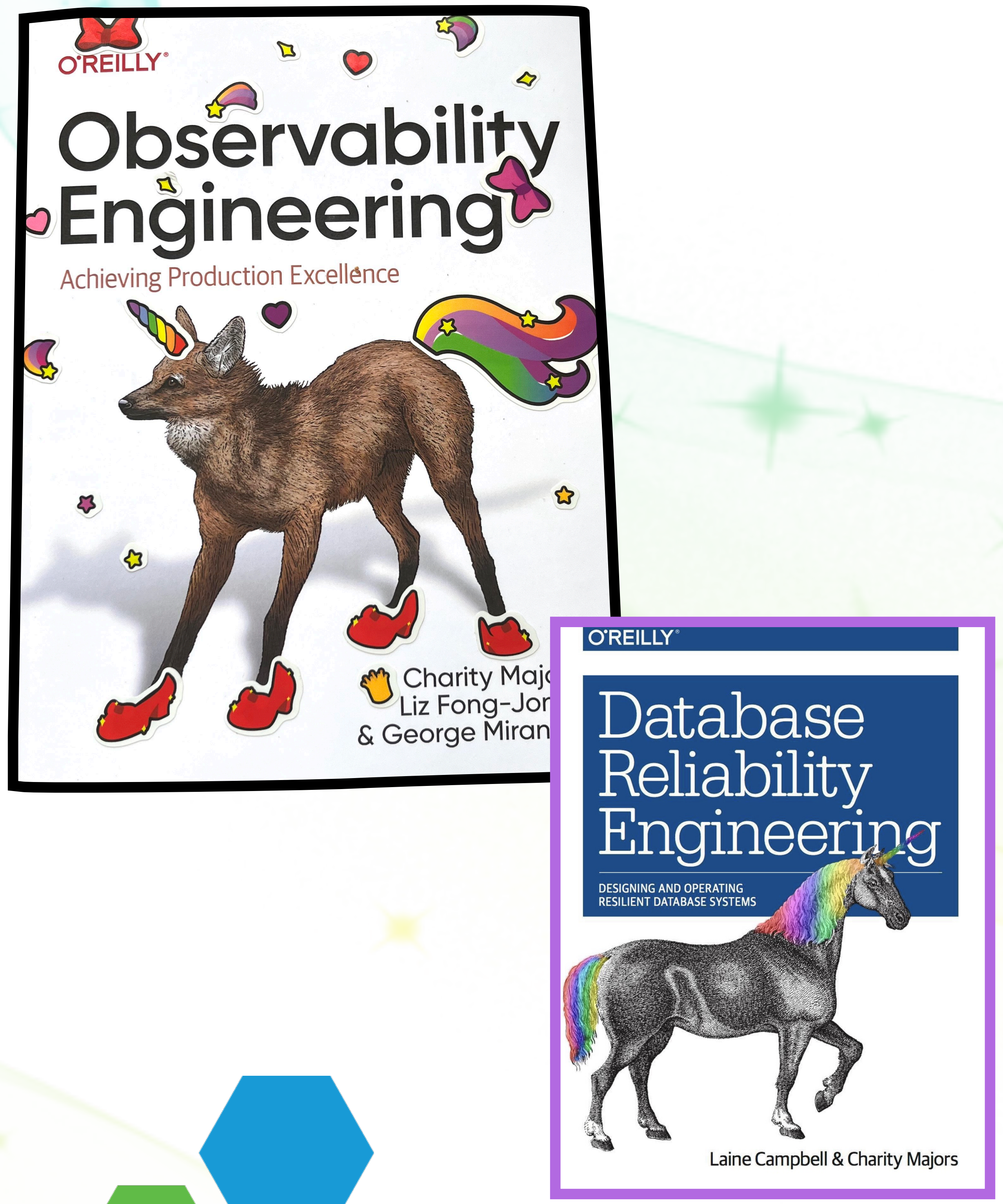
How technical do you want to stay, and how much do you care?

“A fork in the road”

Only you get to say what success looks like for you.



source: Dmitri Martin, “this is a book”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