

EMPOWERMENT ^{vs} DIRECTION

OR: THE THING I SCREWED UP FOR A DECADE
AS AN ENGINEERING MANAGER

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Slides: larahogan.me/balance/

A purple-toned illustration of a forest scene. Several owls are depicted: one in the upper center holding a book, one on the left perched on a branch with a book, and one on the right also with a book. Numerous books are scattered throughout the scene, some floating in the air and others on the ground. The background features stylized trees and foliage. The text is overlaid in the center in a white, hand-drawn font.

THE EARLY 2000'S WERE A
HELLISH LANDSCAPE
FOR ENG MANAGEMENT

We learned from our managers
what to do *AND* what **not** to do

We learned to prioritize the
people side of the work

2015 WAS A GOLDEN ERA OF ENG MANAGEMENT



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I'M PROUD
OF WHAT I DID



BUT IT WAS
ONLY HALF
OF THE JOB





2020

WAS A

NIGHTMARE



2020

WAS A

NIGHTMARE

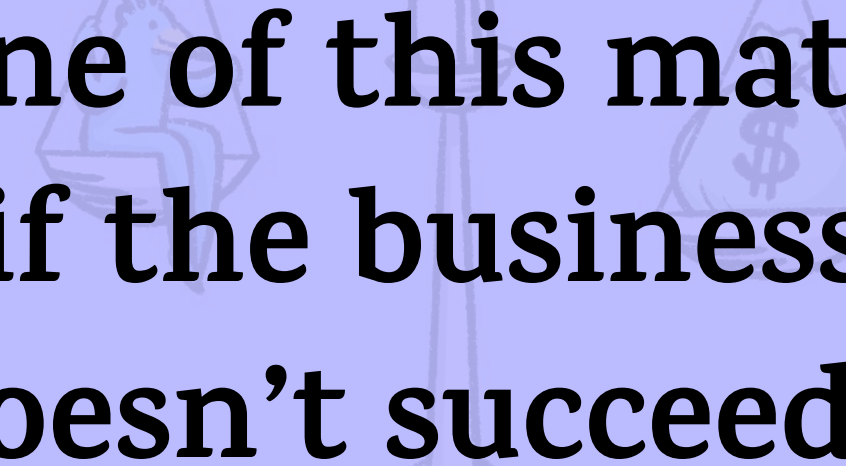
The business had
become the bad guy.

"MARCHING ORDERS DON'T LEAVE ROOM
FOR EMPATHY OR EMPOWERMENT."

The role changed back to
what it always had been.

(WE HAD JUST NEVER TALKED ABOUT IT)





**“None of this matters
if the business
doesn’t succeed.”**

Options

A. STICK WITH EMPATHY AND
EMPOWERMENT TOOLS

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B. SWING TO 100% MARCHING
ORDERS-TYPE LEADERSHIP

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Options

C. ZONE OUT AND LET THE
WAVES WASH OVER YOU

A. STICK WITH EMPATHY AND
EMPOWERMENT TOOLS

B. SWING TO 100% MARCHING
ORDERS-TYPE LEADERSHIP

Options

C. ZONE OUT AND LET THE
WAVES WASH OVER YOU

D. FIND A BALANCE/SWAP THE TOOLS
BASED ON THE CONTEXT

Giving strong direction

WITHOUT BEING A JERK



Identify what you're
optimizing for.

This is your “why.”

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This is your “why.”

E.G. MAKING FORWARD PROGRESS

MAKING FORWARD PROGRESS → DELIVERING ON BUSINESS NEEDS

Identify the **who/what/when/how**.

Identify the **who/what/when/how**.

STOP ASKING "WHAT IFS" IN PLANNING MEETINGS

Identify the **who/what/when/how**.

STOP ASKING "WHAT IF", START MAKING DECISIONS

Identify the **who/what/when/how**.

STOP ASKING "WHAT IF", START MAKING DECISIONS

Couple it with your "**why**."

MAKING FORWARD PROGRESS → DELIVERING ON BUSINESS NEEDS

Bottom-line it.

IT'S CRITICAL THAT WE

START MAKING PROGRESS ON THIS PROJECT.

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I NEED YOU TO **STOP** ASKING "WHAT IF"S,
AND **START** MAKING DECISIONS,
SO THAT WE CAN **DELIVER**.

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Acknowledge concerns.

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I KNOW YOU'RE CONCERNED
WE WILL MISS SOMETHING BIG.

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Stay forward-facing.

Acknowledge concerns.

I KNOW YOU'RE CONCERNED
WE WILL MISS SOMETHING BIG.

Stay forward-facing.

LET'S DECIDE WHAT FIRES WE ARE GOING TO LET BURN.

This will feel uncomfortable.

Empowerment vs Direction

Empowerment

Direction



Empowerment

Direction



Coaching teammates to connect their own dots

Sponsoring teammates for visible/stretch assignments

Group brainstorming to create roadmaps

Empowerment

Direction



Coaching teammates to connect their own dots

Sponsoring teammates for visible/stretch assignments

Group brainstorming to create roadmaps

Choosing project deadlines

Scheduling oncall rotations

Assigning work to each teammate

Writing job descriptions

Empowerment

Direction



Good when:

- Gathering buy-in
- You need more creative ideas
- Teammates are developing new skills/career growth
- There's lots of time

Empowerment

Direction



Good when:

- Gathering buy-in
- You need more creative ideas
- Teammates are developing new skills/career growth
- There's lots of time

Good when:

- People crave clarity
- When someone's new to the team/company
- There's big risks afoot
- There's urgency



! DANGER !

DONT DO IT!

! DANGER AHEAD!

WARNING !



! DANGER !

DONT DO IT!

! DANGER AHEAD!

WARNING !

Moving along the spectrum

More Empowering

More Directive



Draw a star on the spectrum: your default approach.

More Empowering

More Directive





1

Your product manager
isn't doing their job.



2

Your teammate wants to be promoted, but you're not sure if they're ready.



3

Your teammate has come to you with a competing job offer at 2x their current salary.



4

One of your teammates
has yelled at their colleague
when you're not around.



5

When a new request comes in for your team, no one jumps in to triage or address it.



6

A senior leader
routinely interrupts
you in meetings.



Let's debrief

Your approach will be informed by:

- the team's context,
- the needs of your individual teammates,
- who you are as a leader, and
- what the organization needs.

Get comfy with each end
of the spectrum, and the
spots in between.