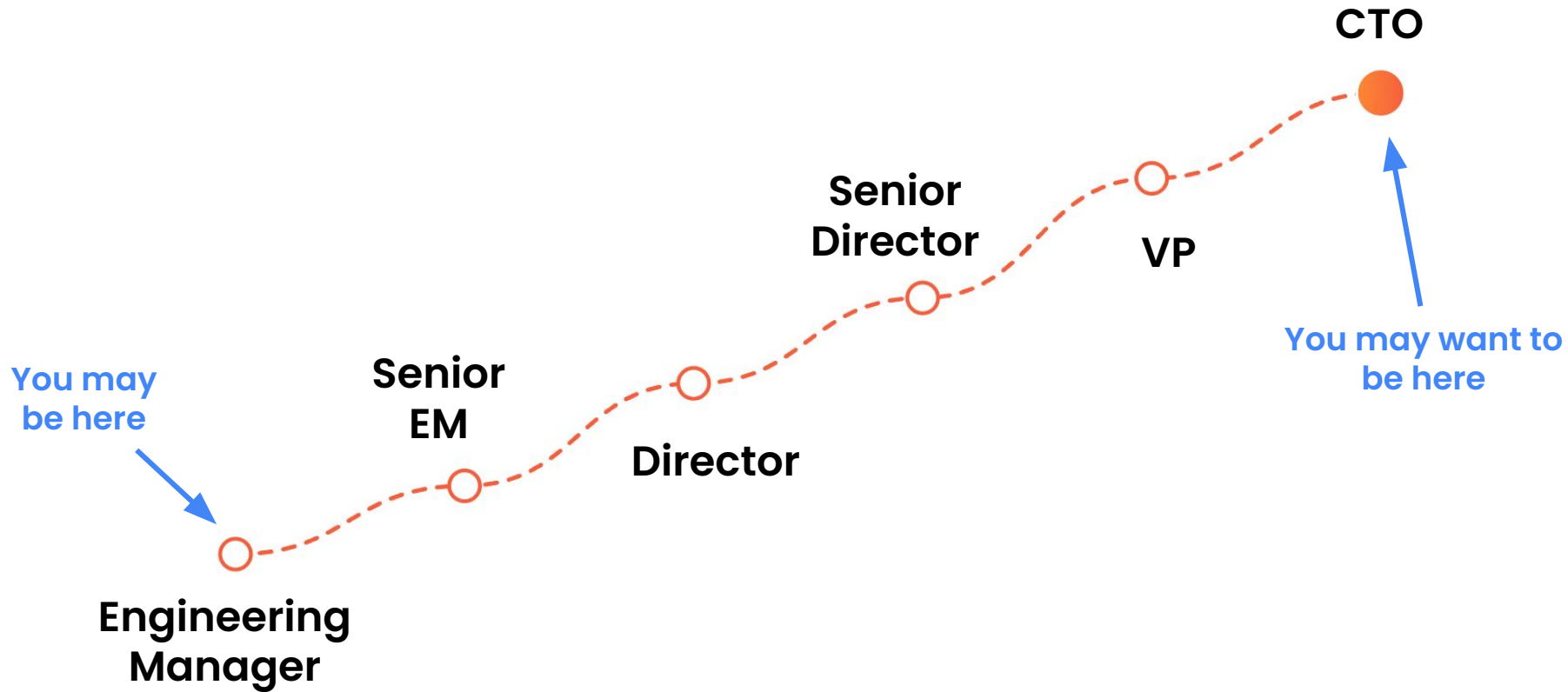


What does a CTO even do?

dee@grafana.com





Role	People in Role	Open Positions (LinkedIn)
Engineering Manager	134,119	92,000
Senior Engineering Manager	106,145	12,000
Director of Engineering	93,012	13,000
Senior Director of Engineering	~38,000 *	4,000
VP of Engineering	69,089	3,000
SVP of Engineering	~12,000 *	540
CTO	26,345	11,000

Engineering Manager → CTO Career Path

People in Role vs. Open Positions (US, April 2026) * Interpolated estimate — no dedicated Zippia demographics page found for these titles.

Sources: People in Role: [Zippia.com](https://www.zippia.com) (30M-profile database cross-referenced with BLS & Census data), Open Positions: [LinkedIn Jobs](https://www.linkedin.com/jobs) (point-in-time snapshot, April 2026)



People in Role

Open Positions



Average tenure at each level (years in the role before moving on):

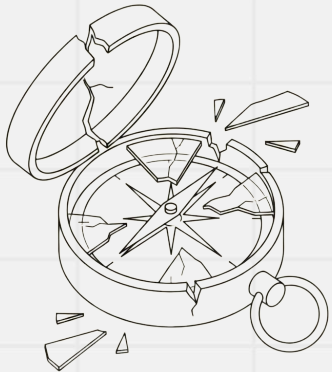
Level	Avg. Tenure	Source / Basis
Engineering Manager	2-4 years	Typical time before promotion to Sr. EM or Director; aligns with Ravigo's 2.9-year engineering average
Senior Engineering Manager	2-3 years	Shorter band — often a transitional level before Director
Director of Engineering	3-5 years	~4 years is a common benchmark; projects at this level take 1-2 years to show results
Senior Director of Engineering	2-4 years	Less standardised; many orgs skip this level entirely
VP of Engineering	4-6 years	Korn Ferry-adjacent; senior enough that tenure stretches but shorter than CEO
SVP of Engineering	3-5 years	Very few data points; often a pre-CTO stepping stone at large orgs
CTO	4.6 years	Korn Ferry study (CIO/CTO combined, top-1000 US companies)

Churn / turnover rates:

Segment	Annual Attrition	Source
Engineering (all levels, tech)	~12%	Ravio 2025 — lowest of any function, unchanged from 2024
Broader tech industry (Europe)	~17.4%	Ravio 2025
US voluntary turnover (all industries)	~13%	Mercer 2024-25 US Turnover Survey
C-suite (all roles)	~12.5% succession rate	Conference Board 2025 — up from 9.8% in 2024
CTO specifically	Higher than avg C-suite	FTSE100 C-Suite Churn Report — tenure shrinking, external hire rate climbing

Time to traverse the full ladder (EM → CTO):

The typical total is 15-20 years from first EM role to CTO, though this compresses dramatically at high-growth startups (can be as short as 5-8 years) and stretches at large enterprises.



Part 1

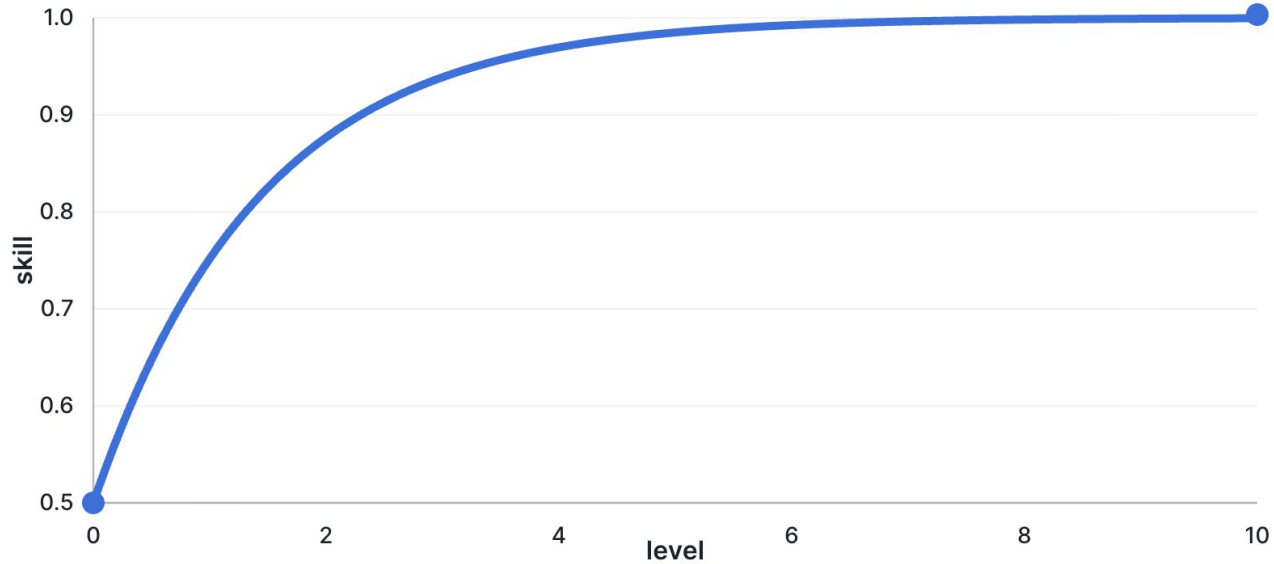
The broken compass



**What got you here,
won't get you there**



Coding ability by level



Level 7 **Set strategy, inspire, mobilise**



Level 6 **Initiate, influence**



Level 5 **Ensure, advise**



Level 4 **Enable**



Level 3 **Apply**



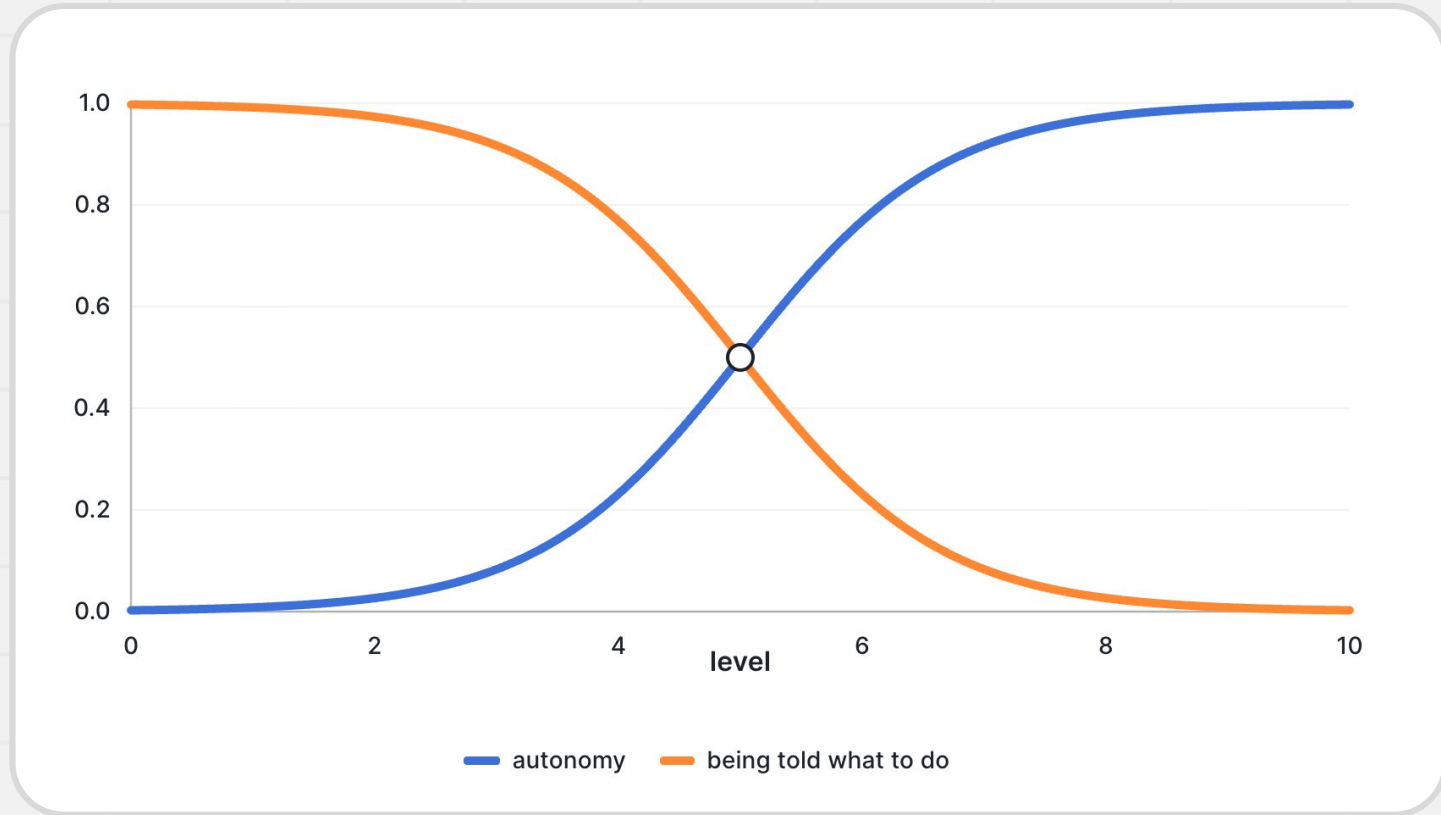
Level 2 **Assist**



Level 1 **Follow**



Autonomy through a career

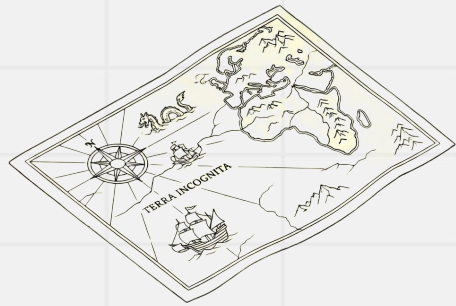


**Progression Frameworks
are a broken compass**



**A broken compass
gets you lost**





Part 2

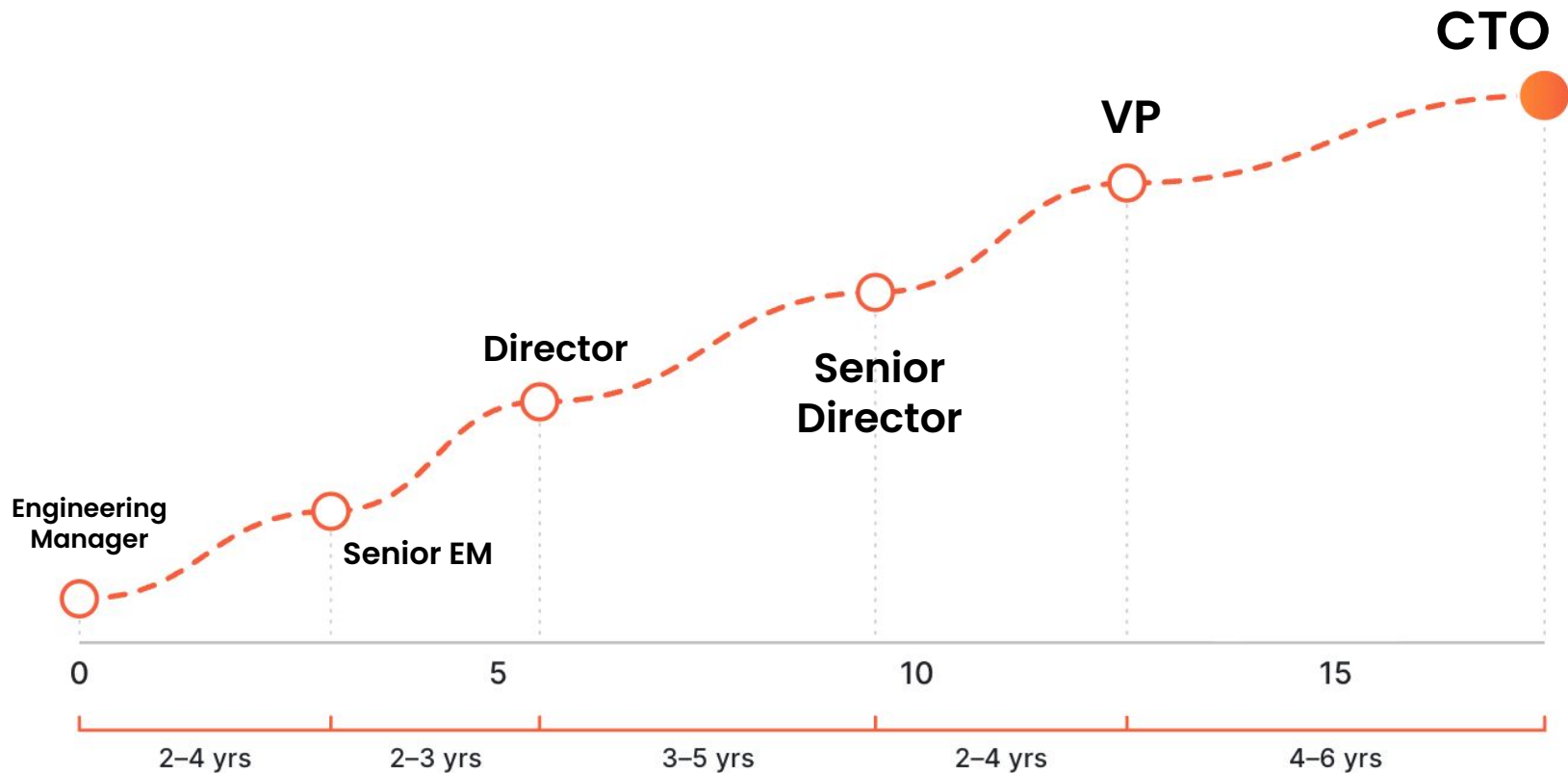
**Finding the right path
when you are lost**



Wikipedia: Reverse engineering

*Reverse engineering is a process or method through which one attempts to understand through **deductive reasoning** how a previously made device, process, system, or piece of software accomplishes a task **with very little (if any) insight into exactly how it does so.***





What does a CTO even do?



What does a CTO even do?

1. Do we have the right team?



What does a CTO even do?

2. Do we have the right technology?



What does a CTO even do?

3. Do we have the right product vision?



What does a CTO even do?

4. Do we have the right balance between innovation and liability?



What does a CTO even do?

5. Do we have the right enablement and sales motion?

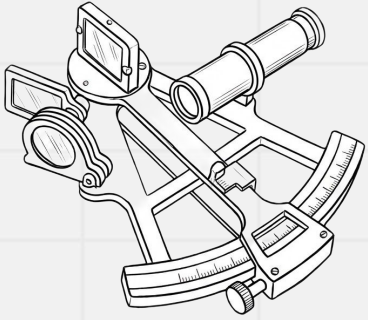


Is there more?



- 1** People
- 2** Tech
- 3** Product
- 4** Risk
- 5** GTM / Sales



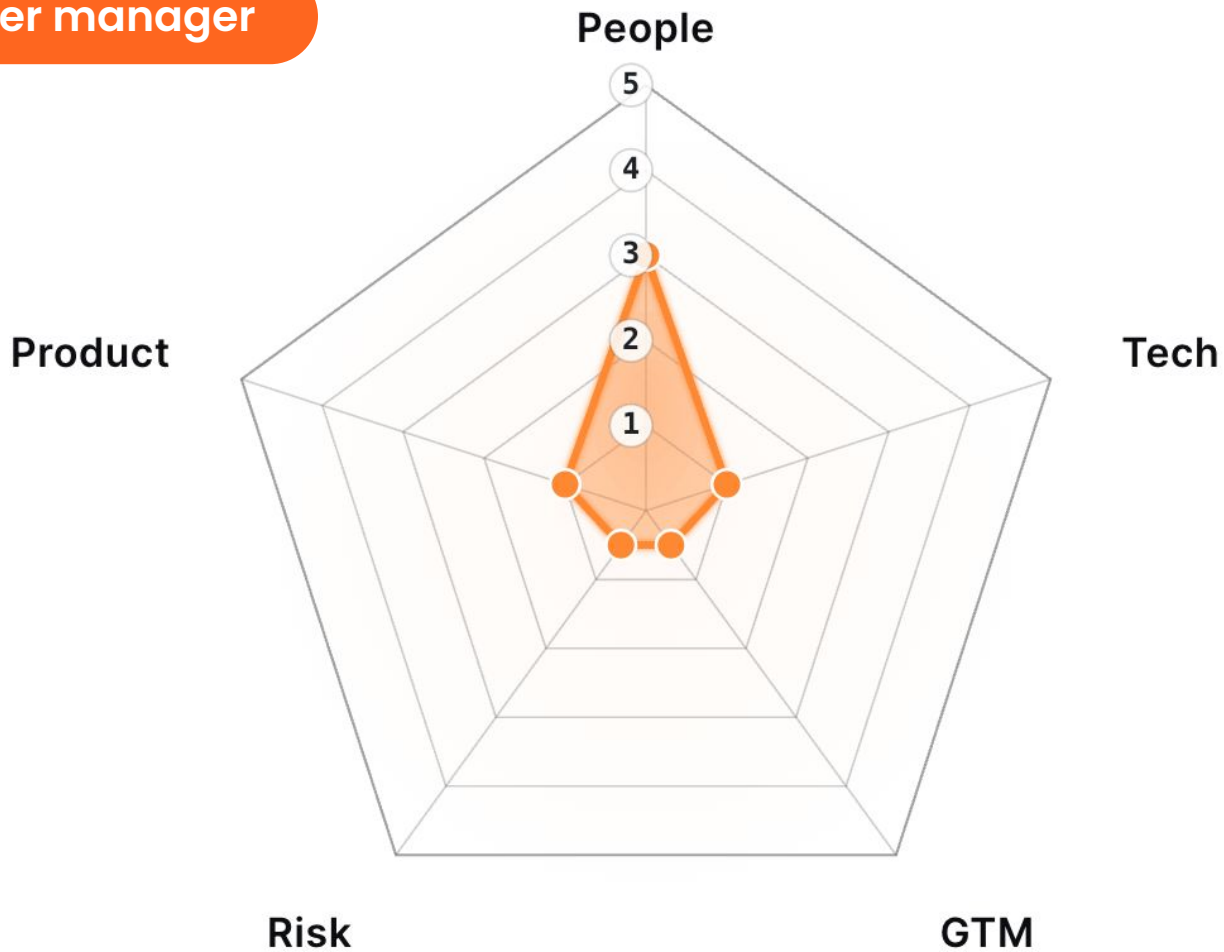


Part 3

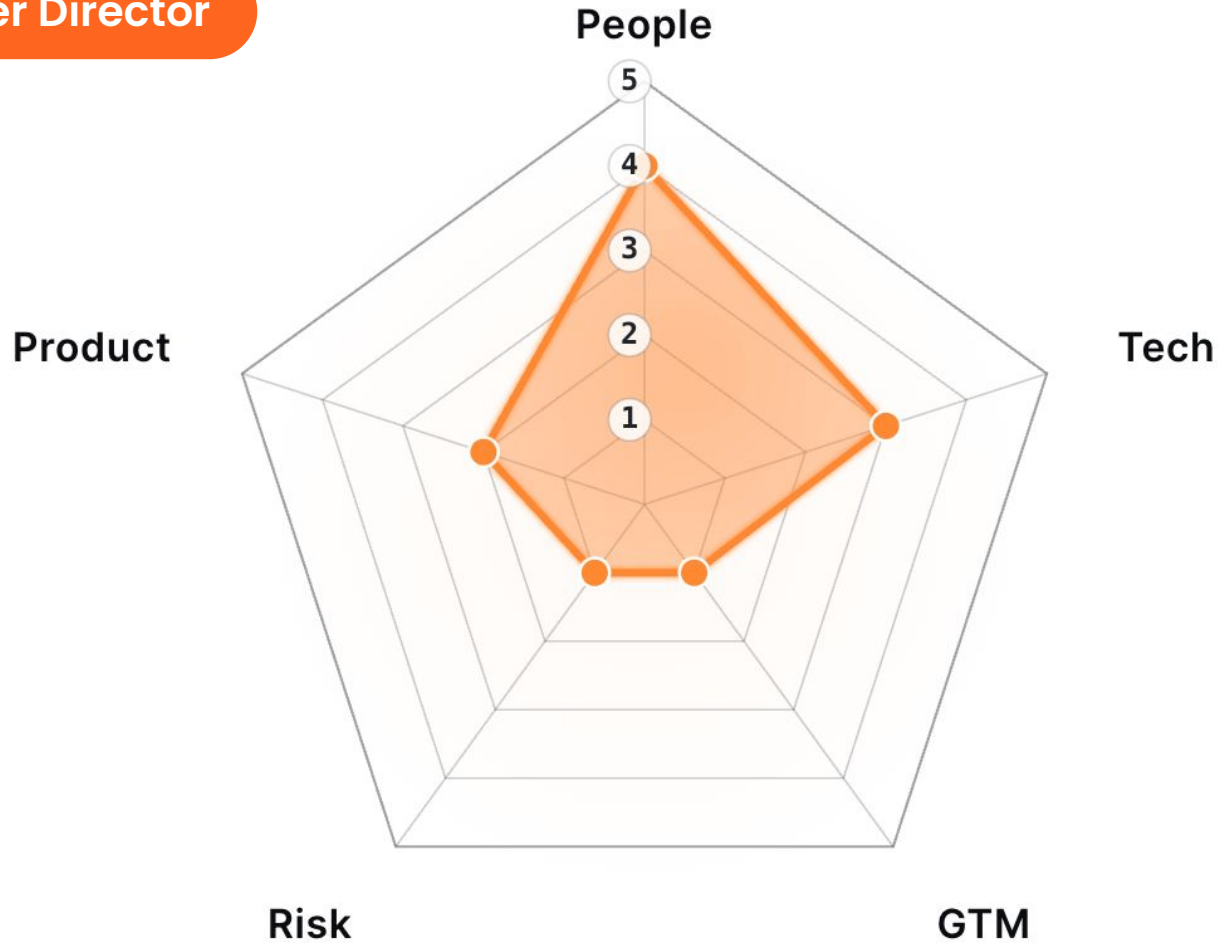
Navigating using a sextant



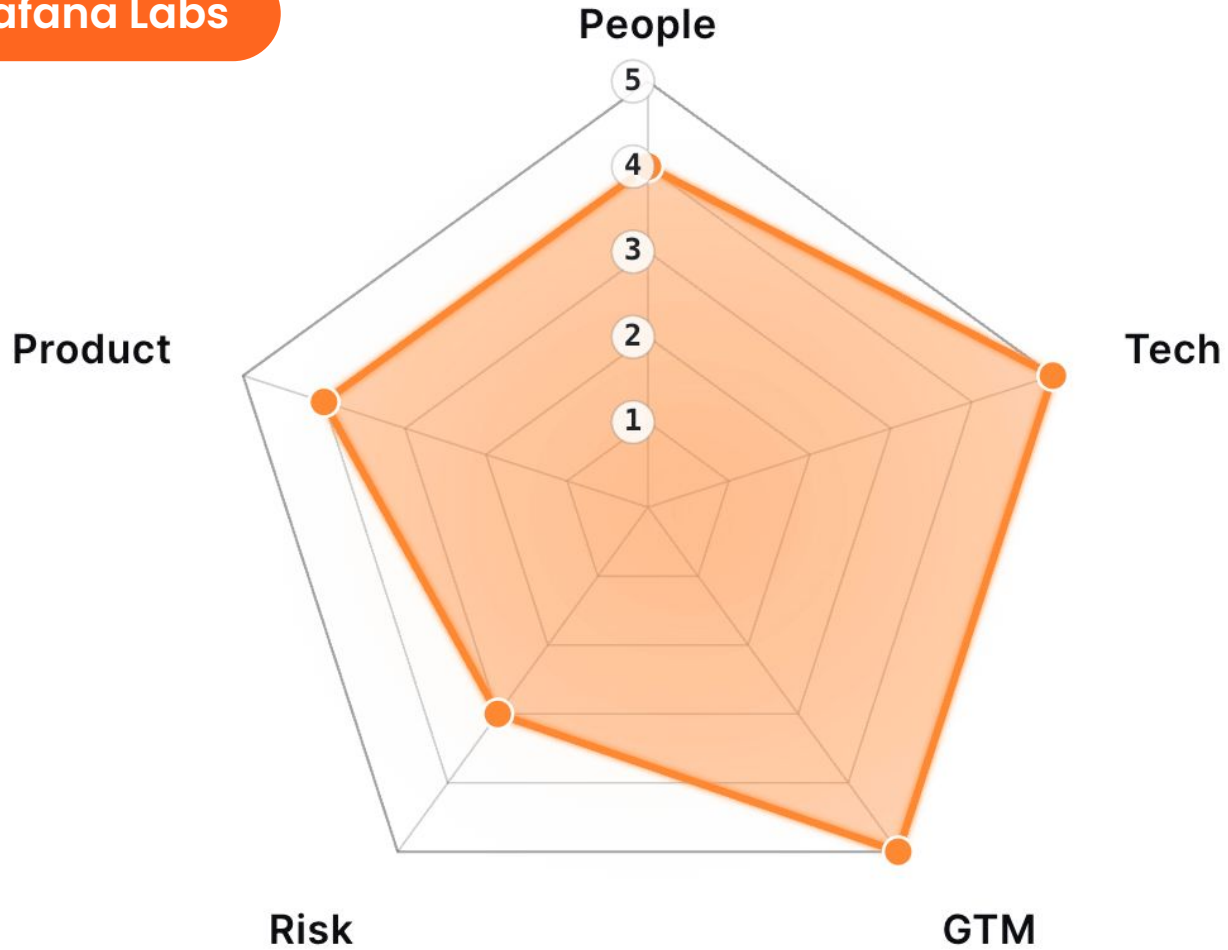
Early career manager



Mid-career Director



CTO of Grafana Labs

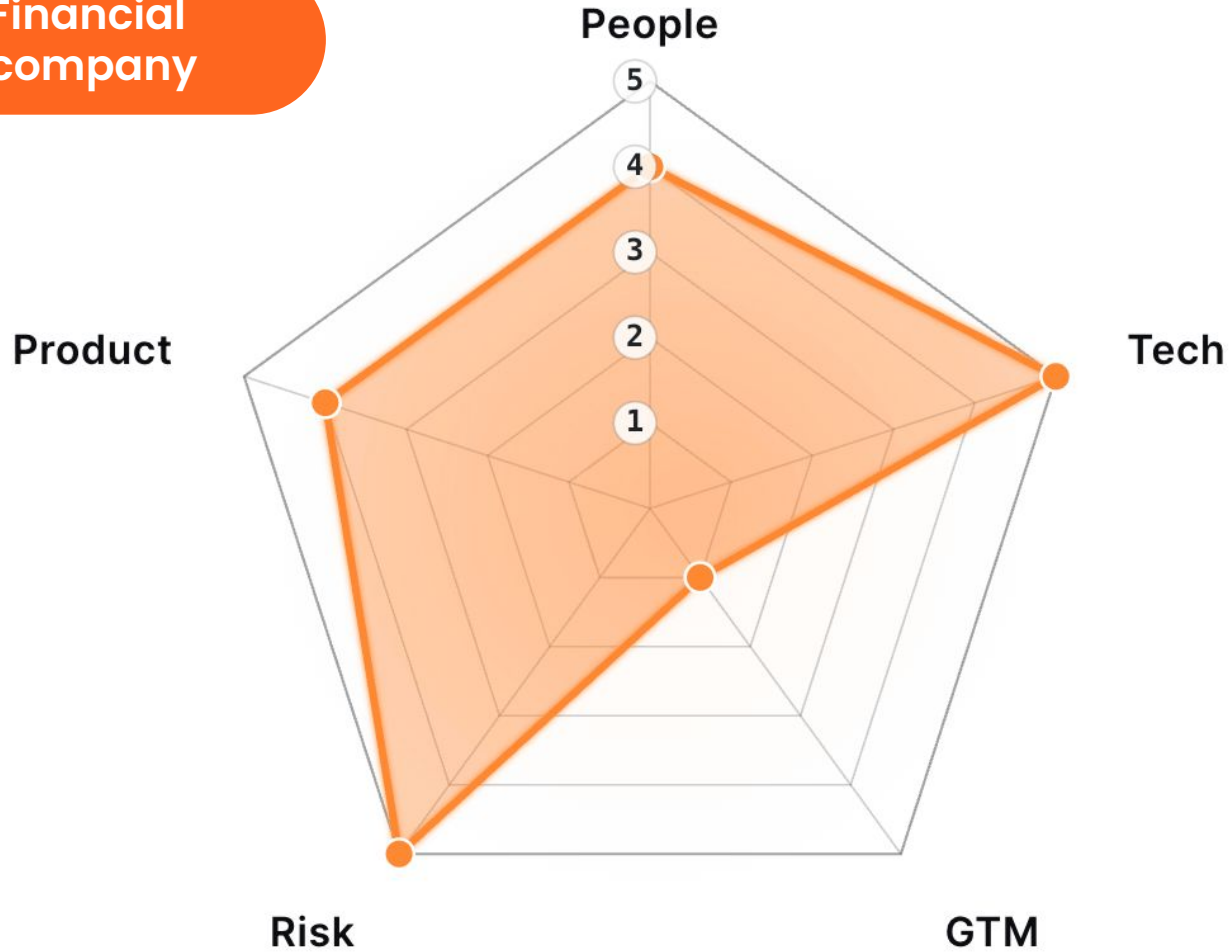


**A career path is not a
straight line**

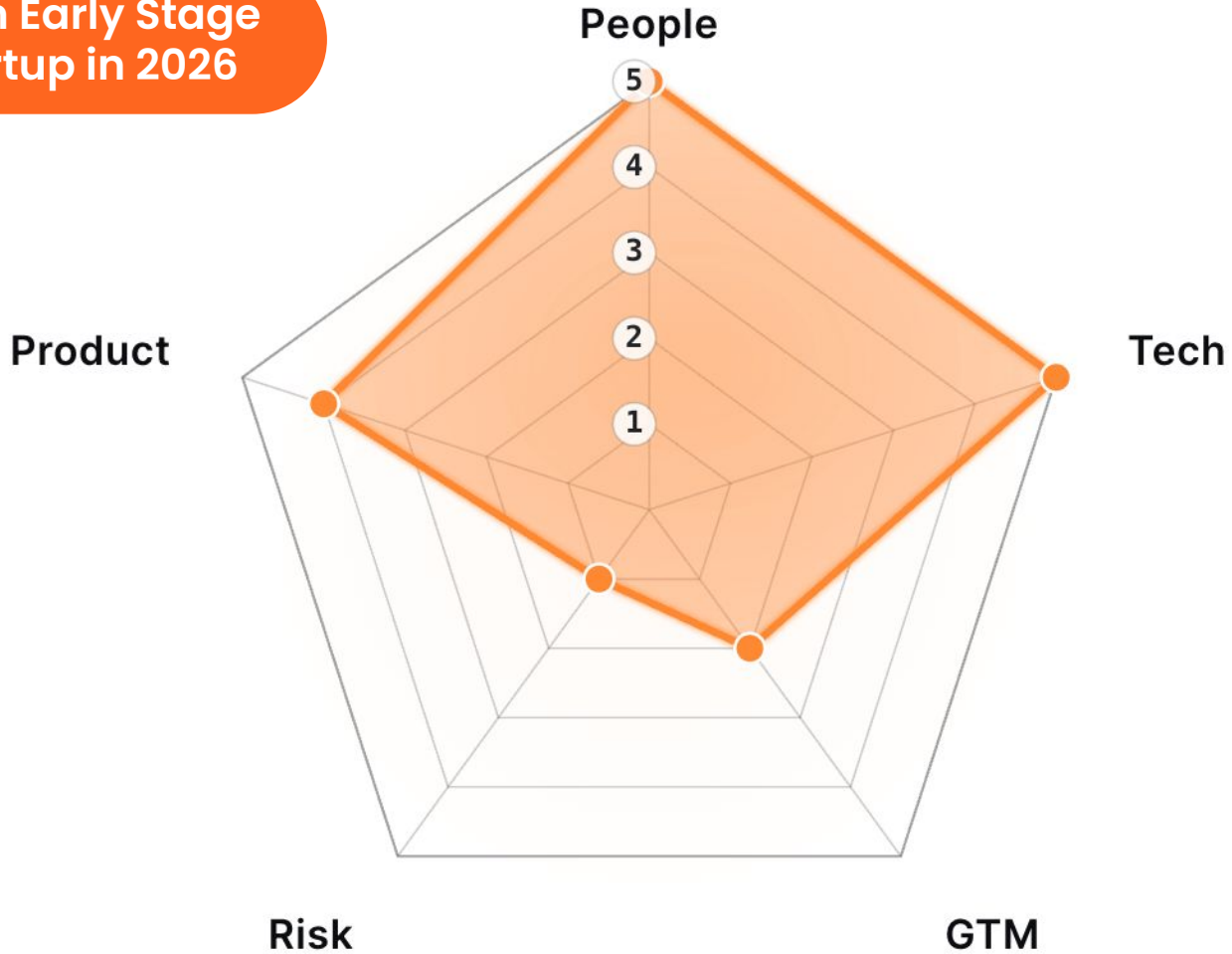
**A.k.a. Your next career move is
probably not your boss's job**



CTO of a Financial Services company



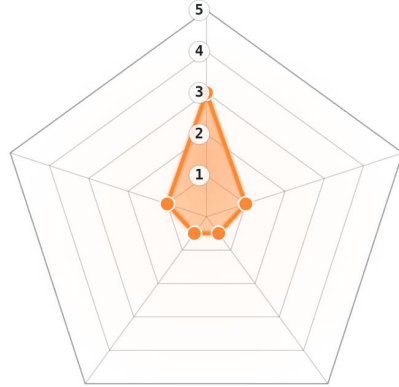
CTO of an Early Stage Tech Startup in 2026



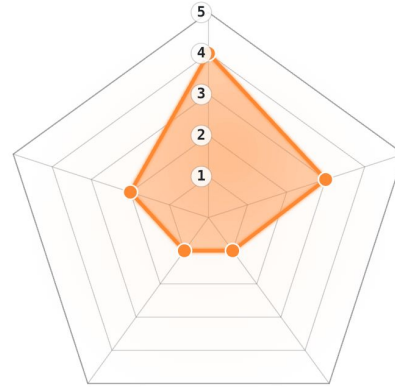
The shape of the CTO varies according to the challenges of the Engineering organisation that they lead, at the time that they lead it.



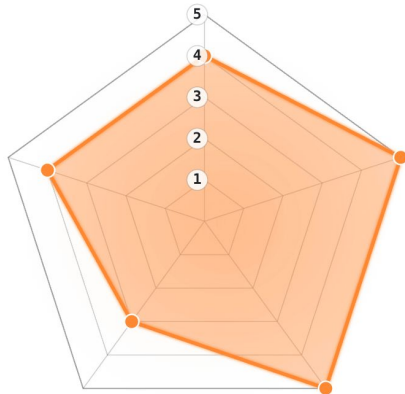
EM



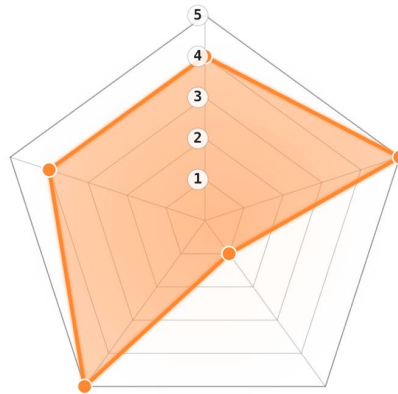
Director



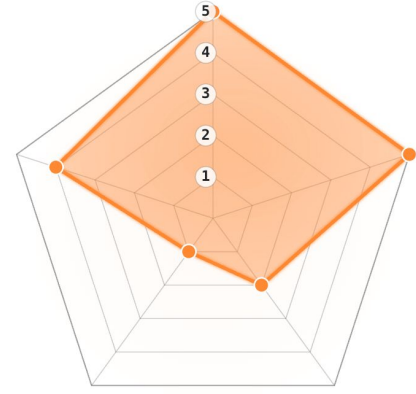
CTO (Tech)



CTO (Finance)



CTO (StartUp)



Final thought

Advocate for yourself

