

Don't Be a Prick

The beauty of writing for the Web is there really is no plan. I have the luxury to mentally fumble about with any topic. Increasingly, those topics have focused on engineering management, and with the publishing of each article, I receive the occasional “Where’s the book?” inquiry. Yeah so, I’ve always wanted to publish a book, but there’s a problem. What’s the pitch? *Be a good manager?* ZZZZZZZZ. There are hints of themes among my articles, but there is no single article that sets the stage for the rest; nothing that hints at a basic truth tying my reposing together.

Flash back to the middle of the dot-com implosion. We, the merry crew of the failing startup, are drinking . . . a lot. There are various bars around corporate headquarters, and each has a distinct purpose. There’s the dive bar that’s great for post-layoff parties. The booze is cheap, and if you’re looking to blow off some I’m-really-not-worthless steam, you can pick a fight with the toothless sailor slung over the bar or the guy who just laid you off.

Down the street is the English pub. The beer is better, they have a selection of whiskey, and they have edible food. This is where we get philosophical about the current organizational seizure we’re experiencing in our three-year slide toward irrelevancy.

We’re there now. We’re drinking heavily because the company has just been sold to a no-name public company who will quickly dismantle the one for which we’ve bled. Everyone knew we’d be here at some point, but no one expected to be the last one standing. And no one expected the CEO to show up.

This isn’t the CEO that built the company. He’s been gone for over a year. This is the guy the board of directors brought in to sell the startup. Sure, he tried to turn us around, but remember, we’re in the middle of a financial nuclear winter here. Money is no longer free.

Those who got a glimpse of the CEO’s resume before he arrived knew the gig was up. His last four jobs ended in the company being finely sliced into nothingness. It’s called “maximizing shareholder value.”

And here we are. Hammered on tequila, the last four from engineering, two guys from tech support . . . and the CEO. Even though we're dizzy with booze, we're fundamentally uncomfortable with the presence of our CEO because we consider him to be an unfeeling prick.

And that's it.

That's the title of my management book.

Don't Be a Prick.

Right, so my editors will probably have an issue with the word "prick" in the title. It falsely implies masculinity to management that is a crock, so we'll call it a working title.

The CEO in question is not a prick. Good guy. Straight talker. Good financial sense. Many failing companies did a lot worse than ours, but that isn't the point. The reason we sat there drunk and uncomfortable was because we had absolutely no connection with this guy. He was the mechanical CEO.

My definition of a great manager is someone with whom you can make a connection no matter where you sit in the organization chart. What exactly I mean by *connection* varies wildly by who you are and what you want and, yes, that means great managers have to work terribly hard to see the subtle differences in each of the people working for them.

See. See the people who work with you. They say repetition improves long-term memory, so let's say it once more. You must see the people who work with you.

If you don't have an inkling of what I'm talking about yet, it might be a good time to set this book down and head over to the programming section of the bookstore because it's time to reconsider that pure engineering career track. Being a manager is a great job (I mean it), but it's your ability to construct an insightful opinion about a person in seconds that will help make you a phenomenal manager. Yes, in a technical management role you need both the left and right sides of the brain, but just because you write great code doesn't mean you're going to have a clue about how to lay off 70 percent of your staff.

Every single person with whom you work has a vastly different set of needs. Fulfilling these needs is one way to make them content and productive. It is your full-time job to listen to these people and mentally document how they are built. This is your most important job. I know the senior VP of engineering is telling you that hitting the date for the project is job number one, but you are not going to write the code, test the product, or document the features. The team is going to do these things, and your job is the team.

Silicon Valley is full of wildly successful dictators. These are the leaders who are successful even though they are world-class pricks. This book is going to push you as far from prickdom as possible, and if that means I'm decreasing the chance you'll end up on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* labeled a "corporate bulldog with vision," well, I've done my job.

You get to choose the type of manager you will be, and if you want to work with your team—if you want to learn from them, if you want them to trust you—well, I've got some advice for you. Lots of it. Keep reading.

Again, the CEO at the startup was not a prick. He just showed up at the company's wake and assumed that we'd be comfortable with his presence because *he was the CEO*. We knew he was CEO. More importantly, we knew he'd spent exactly zero time using our products. We'd never seen him there on the weekends. Come to think of it, he was never there on Fridays either, because he commuted from another state. We had no shared experience with him other than three strange meaningless all-hands meetings filled with slide projectors, spreadsheets, and monotony.

The CEO believed that these spreadsheet-laden all-hands meetings was all the connection he needed to build a relationship and, for the duration of those meetings, he was right. We felt well-informed after his meetings, but our needs were different a week later when rumors of layoffs started up. They were drastically different a month later when that layoff went down and the CEO was nowhere to be seen.

Organizations of people are constantly shifting around. They are incredibly messy. In this mess, judgments of you and your work will be constructed in moments—in the ten-second conversations you have in the hallway, and in the way you choose to describe who you are.

Meanwhile, you need to constantly assess your colleagues, determine what they need, and figure out what motivates them. You need to remember that what worked one day as a motivational technique will backfire in two months because human beings are confusing, erratic, and emotional. In order to manage human beings in the moment, you've got to be one.

And that's why a better title for this book is: *Managing Humans*.