The Engineer/Manager Pendulum Goes Mainstream
Assumptions about management:

- It is a one-way trip
- It is always a promotion
- You make a lot more money
- They should stop writing code
- It’s more prestigious than engineering
- It’s your only real option for career progression
- It’s the only way to have influence
- All managers want to be directors or VPs
- All managers would rather be writing code
- The best engineers make the best managers

None of these are good things.
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 self-identify as a manager OR as an engineer. Look at your career as that of a:

Technologist

or Technical Leader

who needs both skill sets to reach your fullest potential

The greatest technical leaders I have ever known have ALL had both skill sets.
A few years ago, this was a radical idea.

Now it is not. 😞

But it is still rarely supported by the systems around us.

https://charity.wtf/2017/05/11/the-engineer-manager-pendulum/
https://charity.wtf/2019/01/04/engineering-management-the-pendulum-or-the-ladder/
https://charity.wtf/2020/09/06/if-management-isnt-a-promotion-then-engineering-isnt-a-demotion/
https://charity.wtf/2022/03/24/twin-anxieties-of-the-engineer-manager-pendulum/
The pendulum should not be the exception. **It should be the rule.**

The pendulum is the key to a *long and rewarding* career in technology, where *burnout rates are low* and *creative fulfillment is high.*

Yet institutions are not set up this way. **How can we change them?**
You can’t just “let it happen”.

This will take work. 😊

You need to actively make the case to your leadership, your engineers, your managers, and your HR teams.

Yes, there are policy changes to be made. But it really lives in the hearts and minds of the people you work with.
Is it about retention? Sure. But it’s really about the caliber of your technical leadership.

Every company is now a tech company, and good engineering leaders must be good engineers.
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 done 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 other teams and 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.
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 excel at one at a time. You can only grow in one role at a time.
If you aren’t already solidly an experienced senior engineer, don’t go and become a manager.

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

You don’t need to be the BEST engineer.
But you need experience, confidence, and good judgment, and enough years on the job that your skills won’t immediately atrophy.
If you decide to try management, commit to two years... It takes that long to learn the ropes and develop instincts you can trust... but less than five years.

After two or three years, your skills begin to decay — especially the first time. Swing back to the well, before you become unhirable as an engineer.
Technical skills are a lot like speaking a language. You learn by immersion. If you stop speaking it every day, you will quickly lose fluency.

Management skills are stickier, but localized. Once you’ve gotten the experience, management skills tend to stick with you. But wielding them requires an intimate knowledge of specific people, history and context.
You will hear a lot of well-intentioned but bad advice telling you to “stop writing code and doing technical work” once you become a manager. Instead, stop writing code in the critical path.

But look for ways to contribute in small and supportive ways. This buys you credibility and gives you empathy with your team, and it is much better for your career in the long run.

My favorite: make yourself the on call backup of first resort.

DON’T put yourself in the rotation. But if oncall had a hard night, you pick up the next night. If they want to go watch a movie, or need to go on a long car drive, whatever ... you pick up the pager, 1-3x/week. This is valuable labor, and your team will respect you and love you for it.
You cannot just be an engineering line manager forever…
Not a GOOD one, anyway. 😞 You get worse at it as your tech skills deteriorate.

And you cannot, should not try to occupy the twin roles of tech lead AND manager longterm.
You’ll become less effective as a tech lead the longer you manage. And occupying both leadership slots starves your people of growth opportunities.

https://lethain.com/tech-lead-managers/
Every engineering manager reaches a fork in the road:

Climb the Ladder — OR — Swing Back

become a senior manager, director, or VP

or
go back to the well and refresh your technical skills
Choose the technical leadership track, and go back to building stuff for a while. Or choose the organizational leadership track, and try climbing the ladder (if this opportunity is available to you).

But make your decision with eyes wide open.

Managers in particular have a tendency to look up ten years later and realize that their choices have made them a) less employable and b) deeply unhappy.
Everybody starts out thinking they want to climb the ladder

Everybody starts out thinking they want to be a manager

The best (the only??) way for many (most??) people to realize they don’t actually want to be a manager, is for them to actually do the job. 😐
This is one reason why it matters so much that management is not a promotion, it’s a change of career because if management is not a promotion then engineering is not a demotion.

You want people doing the job that makes them feel the most excited and fulfilled, not the job that gives them the most money and prestige; because that is when they’ll do their best work.
Much of your career path will ultimately come down to luck and opportunism. The best thing you can do is be prepared to exploit or lean into opportunities that cross your path, rather than getting your heart set on a particular outcome.

If you aren’t sure what to do, act to maximize optionality.
You can’t **force** opportunities to happen.

The more you get your heart set on achieving any *one* particular outcome, the more you wall yourself off from other opportunities.

But this industry is fast-moving and chaotic. **Opportunities abound.**

“I will be a VP by age 30”
Acting to preserve optionality looks like:

- Keeping your technical skills fresh.
- Making friends. Developing a network of professional contacts outside work.
- Writing and speaking about your work. Becoming known (or at least googleable) for “your name” + “technology you care about”.
- Changing your role, if not your job, every 2-3 years.
- “Become a T-shaped engineer” is still good advice!
Developing a public profile can be especially valuable for women and underrepresented groups. Social proof can counterbalance people's tendency to discount your technical expertise.
Downsides of climbing the ladder:

• There are an order of magnitude fewer job openings at every rung you climb

• Your skill set becomes much more specific and customized. It is harder to find a place you fit.

• It becomes harder and harder to go back to engineering

• You become farther removed from the work that brings most of us meaning & satisfaction (creating things, direct impact on users)

• Your job tenure lengthens; you can’t leave as easily, and each choice becomes riskier

• More and more of your ability to succeed is actually out of your hands. Your reputation is defined by the company’s success.
The landscape looks very different today than in 2017.

LOTS of people go back and forth between engineering and management. ✨Yay!✨

But there is rarely ★institutional★ support for the pendulum so it remains something done primarily by contrarians and burnouts
Institutionalizing the pendulum

Excs tend to see it as a “wasted investment” or a loss of leadership when managers go back to engineering. 😞💔 You have to reframe this in a way that helps them understand:

• This is how to cultivate great engineering leadership
• This is how you retain top talent — otherwise they will get restless and leave
• This is how you preserve institutional memory
• Management is NOT synonymous with leadership — the technical leadership matters just as much! It is not a loss!
• The pendulum contributes both to more excellent management and better technical execution.
On Leveling, and High-Level Transitions…

• Align your levels between management and engineering tracks, to facilitate moving between them. Align compensation, too.

• Yes, it gets harder to transfer between tracks at the highest levels, like director or VP.

• Yes, every case is to some extent sui generis. It’s still worth doing. It carries immense signaling power — AND they can often show immense value.

• This is a reason to encourage everyone to swing back and forth earlier and more often, not to not do it.
Demystify Management

• Ask everyone about their career goals. Demystify the process of becoming a manager.

• Decompose management into its constituent skills (planning, running meetings, etc) and encourage everyone to learn and develop those skills.

• Practice real transparency — access to information about the business is not a privilege, it’s a right.

• Don’t let anyone use information as leverage.
Don’t build a system where people have to be a manager if they want to be in the loop or have a seat at the table.

Drain authoritarianism out of your hierarchy. Command-and-control management is toxic to any kind of creative flourishing.

Management is overhead; management is a support function. Visualize your hierarchy upside down; support system, not dominance.

If you’re not happy as a manager, don’t do it. Your “sacrifice” will only hurt yourself and those around you.

Build a long, healthy, flourishing career by leaning in to curiosity, love of learning, and surrounding yourself with amazing people. :)
Only you get to say what success looks like for you.

source: Dmitri Martin, “this is a book”