

Building and Promoting a Strong Engineering Culture

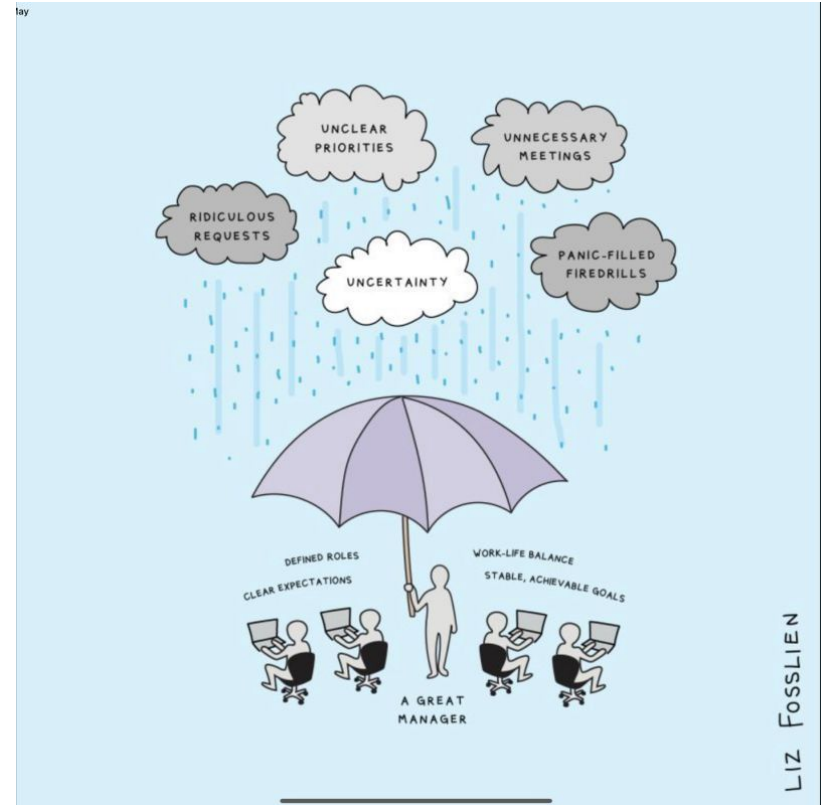
Ellen Wong



Happy and productive team... but I was burning out

Story

- High performing team consistently delivers
- Attrition in leaders were very high



We thought we did everything right

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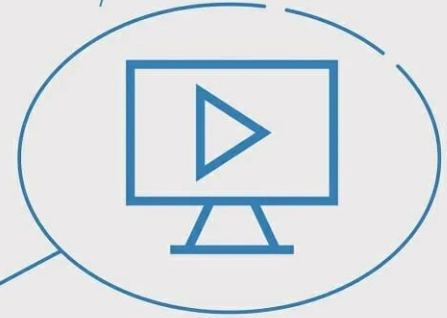
- Cultivate a Positive Work Environment
- Set Clear Goals and Expectations for Projects
- Empower individuals to take ownership and make decisions
- Recognize and Reward Achievements
- We shipped!



Something was missing



SYSTEMS THINKING



Align with your leadership team and understand your constraints

— — —

- Know what your leadership team cares about
- Know the business bottom line
- Example:
 - Tech strategy: Cloud vs OnPrem
 - Business strategy: SMB or Enterprise



Define and evangelize tenets for your team

— — —

Calm:

- (1) Stay curious
- (2) Start from the problem, and use boring technology when possible

Story:

- 4 talented staff engineers that could not work together
- Staff engineer argued about “best storage solution” ultimately we picked the “boring approach”

tenet

noun | TEN-ut

a principle or belief held by a group

Bake it into policies and process whenever possible

— — —

- Interview rubric
- Career ladder & performance review
- Leaders to hold team accountable to the values defined, use it to inform promotions, hiring and firing
- Make it easy to celebrate wins and good behaviors (e.g. shoutout channels)
- Make it easy to communicate company priorities and the why (e.g. AMA, All hands)



Stay curious, Learn and adapt

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Your system won't be perfect at first

- Team retros
- Engineering team wide cultural survey
- AMAs
- 1:1s



Do the hard things

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- Keep the team accountable
- Promote and reward good behaviors
- Remove toxic players, quickly.
- Be transparent about our constraints
- Letting go (identity, initiatives, stars)



Call to action ...

- Understand your constraints
- Define your team tenets
 - that aligns with the business
- Create a system that promotes desired behaviors through policy and process
- Continuously monitor, learn and adapt
- Do the hard things





Talented team, overwhelming tech debt

What happened?

- A new process routed 80% of tech debt & bugs to 1 team.
- Pause development, invest in high ROI fixes
- Effective triage, and load balance
- Find the thing preventing them from **doing their best work** and fixing it



Technical decision paralysis

Story #2

- Strong, opinionated engineers, unable to resolve differences
- The loudest voice wins rather than the merit of ideas.
- Decision paralysis slows down team progress



PROTIP: IF YOU EVER NEED TO DEFEAT ME, JUST GIVE ME TWO VERY SIMILAR OPTIONS AND UNLIMITED INTERNET ACCESS.

Technical decision paralysis

What happened?

- Introduced tech spec review process (anyone can join, learn, give feedback)
- Tech spec owner responsible to decide, expected to give transparency into final decision and why
- **Cultivate Growth mindset** with a facilitator role. Encourage learning mindset, breaks the loop of arguments

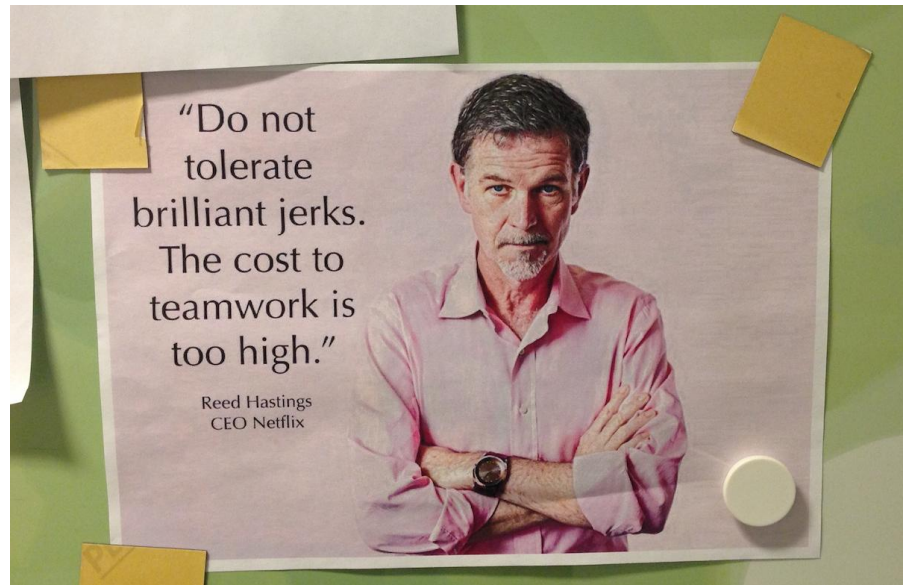


PROTIP: IF YOU EVER NEED TO DEFEAT ME, JUST GIVE ME TWO VERY SIMILAR OPTIONS AND UNLIMITED INTERNET ACCESS.

Brilliant asshole on the team

Story #3

- High performing team that consistently delivered
- Incoming “the brilliant asshole”
- Challenged any and everything in each project
- Escalated, but was also a good friend of the founders, no action taken
- Frustrated engineers led to attrition

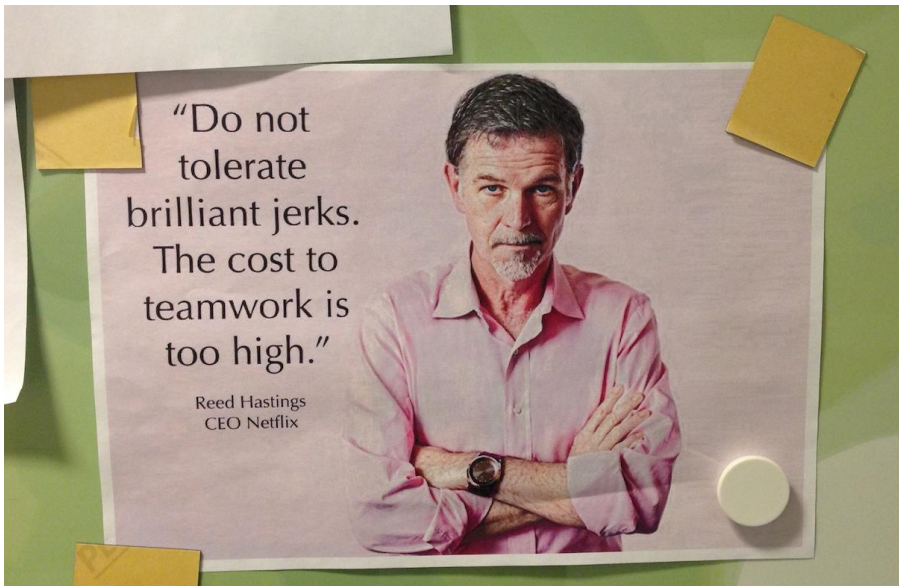


Brilliant asshole on the team

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What happened?

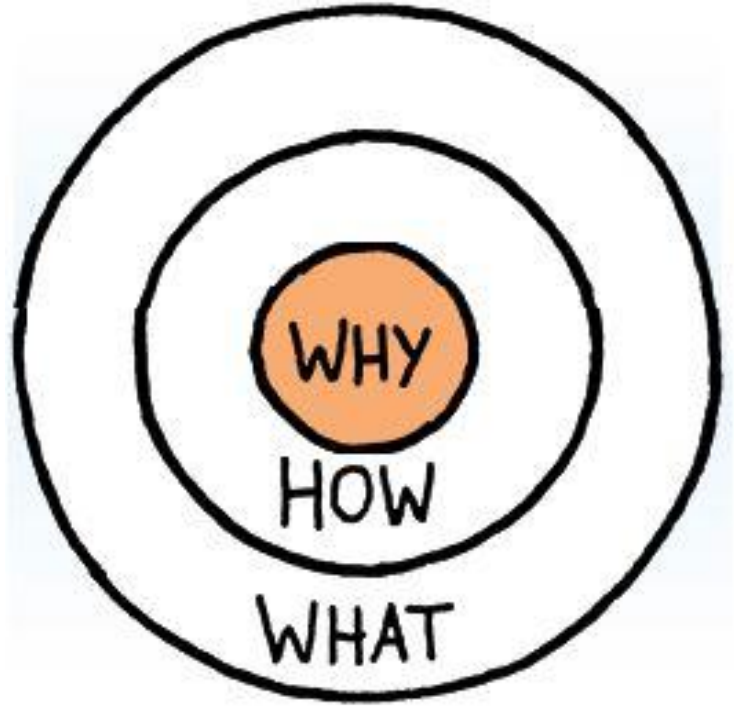
- Lack effective mitigation.
Trust eroded over time.
- Attrition started around month 6, by 1 year most high performers left, others lost motivation
- High performing team turned mediocre team



Disconnected from the why and impact

Story #4

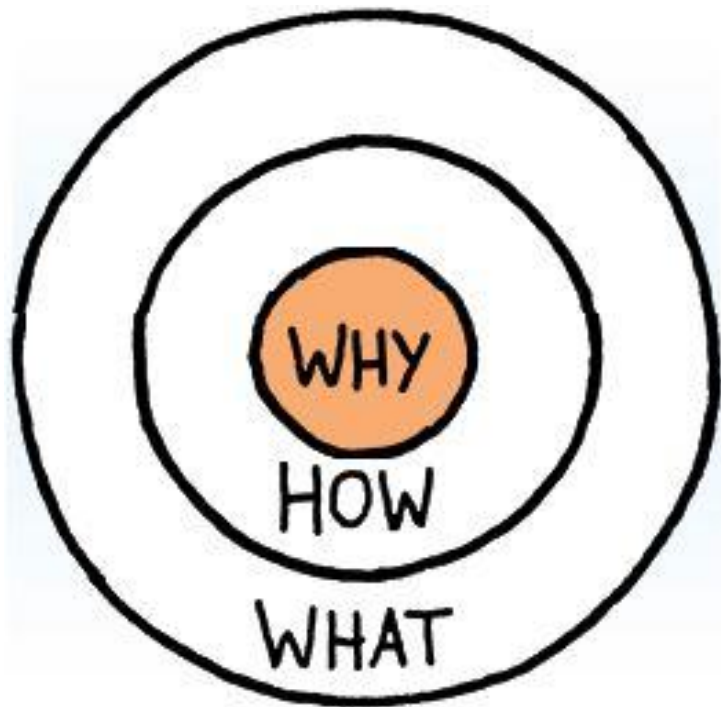
- Start up of 80 grow to 200+
- Engineers did everything in early days (prototyping, measuring, shipping, etc.)
- Streamlined the process to scale team with growth lost the opportunity to see how their work impact customers



Disconnected from the why and impact

What happened?

- Weekly Team retro, **promotes learning culture.**
- Timely mitigations to get ahead of engineers engagement
- Rotate engineers into early design to reconnect to the business & customers.
- All hands, announcements and shoutouts to **reiterate the why and impact.**
- Engagement came back.





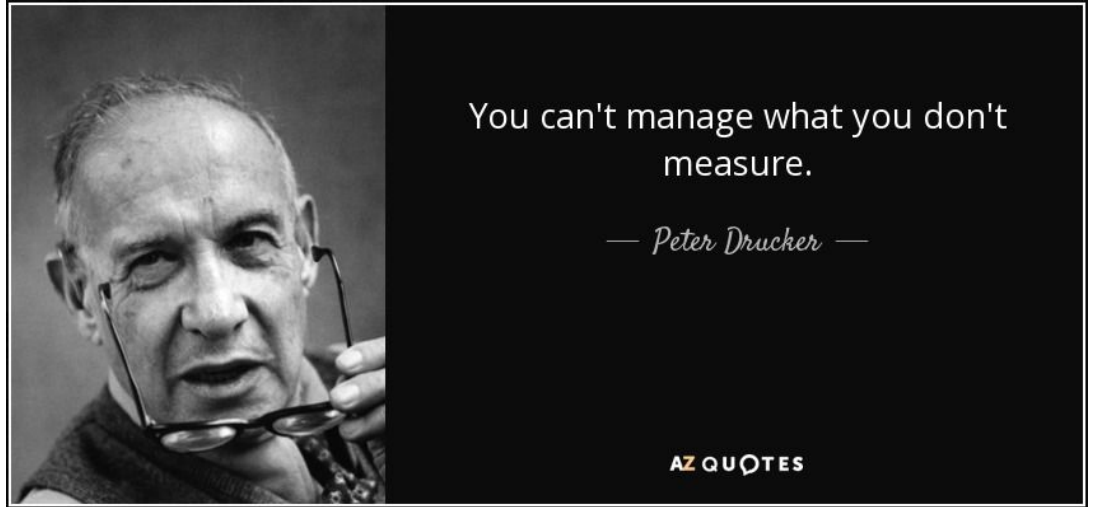
GREAT INFO

HOW DOES THIS HELP ME?!?

memegenerator.net

A friend asked me:

“How do you
measure high
performing
teams?”



Performance metrics (do they tell the full story?)

- Number of pull requests per engineer?
- # lines of code change?
- Hours worked?
- Revenue?
- %On time delivery?
- # of releases?
- # of incidents?
- # of bugs?
- # of shoutouts from execs?



Signs of high performing teams

- Do you see signals of high **trust** within the team?
- Do they have **fun** together?
- Are people setup to do their best work?
- Is there a **learning culture** in the team?
- Are they solving **new** problems?
- Do they know their **why and impact**?
- Is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?



ALRIGHT PEOPLE



LET'S DO THIS!

Call to action ...

- Build **trust**

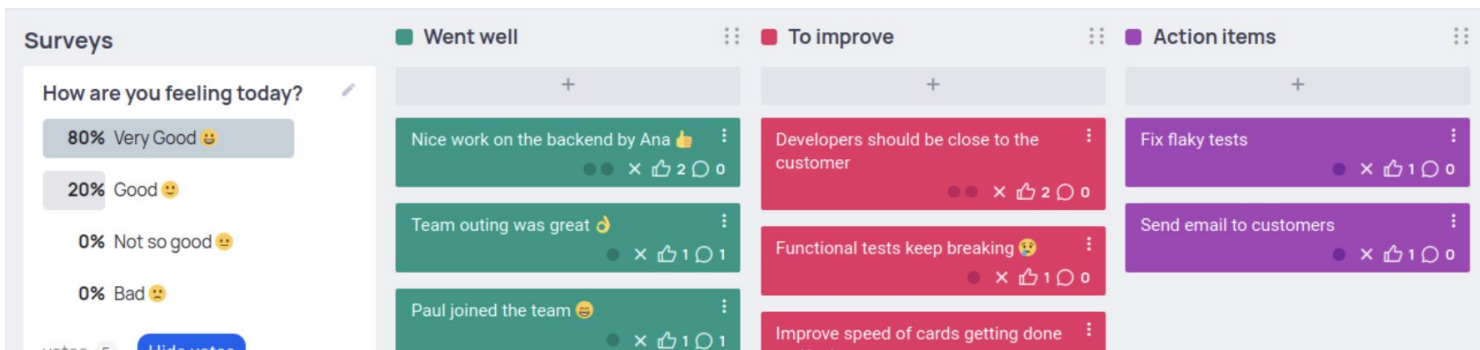
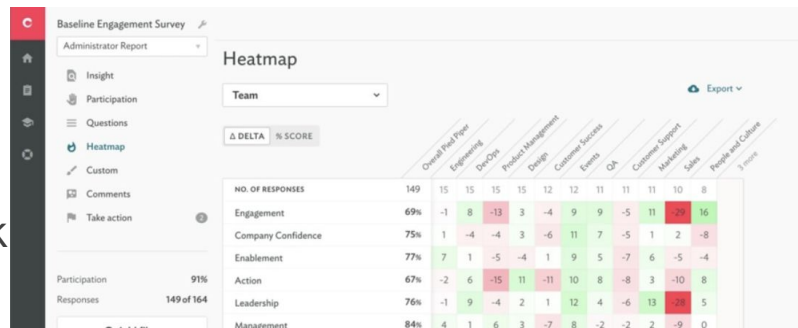


THIS COMIC MADE POSSIBLE THANKS TO CARL OWEN

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Call to action ...

- Setup team to do their best work
- Cultivate a **learning culture**
- Mitigate problems timely and effectively



Call to action ...

- Help teams understand their why and impact



Call to action ...

- have **fun**



Common Characteristics

- High **Trust**
- Know their **why**
- Each person set up to **do their best work**
- Inclusive and **growth** mindset
- Have **fun** together
- The whole is greater than the sum of its parts

Call to action ...

- Look beyond performance metrics
- Build **trust**
- have **fun**
- setup team to do their best work
- Cultivate a **learning culture**
- Mitigate problems timely and effectively
- Help teams understand their why and





Recap

- Look beyond performance metrics
- Build **trust**
- Have **fun**
- Setup team to do their best work
- Cultivate a **learning culture**
- Mitigate problems timely and effectively
- Help teams understand their **why and**



Delivering together, have fun together

Don't take it too seriously

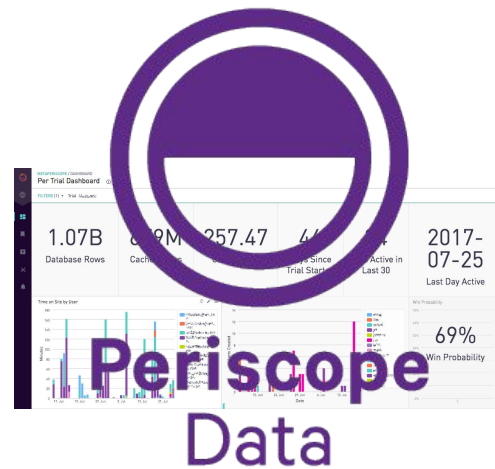
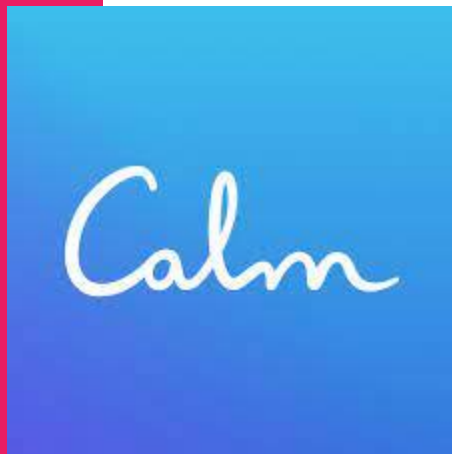
Costumes as a play on feature name “first ship”

Hanging out at a bar after work, live site, laptop, fix together, back to drinks!
Lots of trust, ceo was with us, everyone pitched in and then back to drinks after.

Board games, taco pizza, etc.

Why does fun matter? More willing to support each other, more tolerant of conflict,
time goes by faster. Stronger bonds through adversity

Ellen Wong



Or like this?



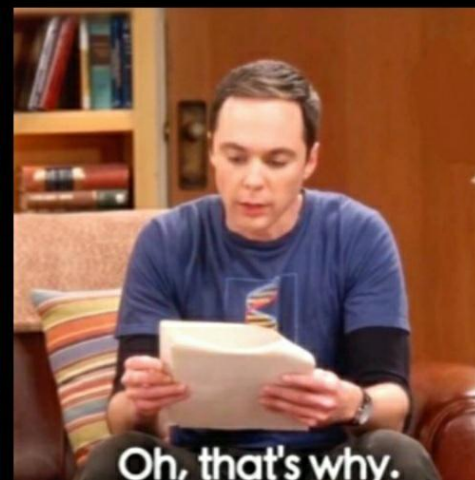
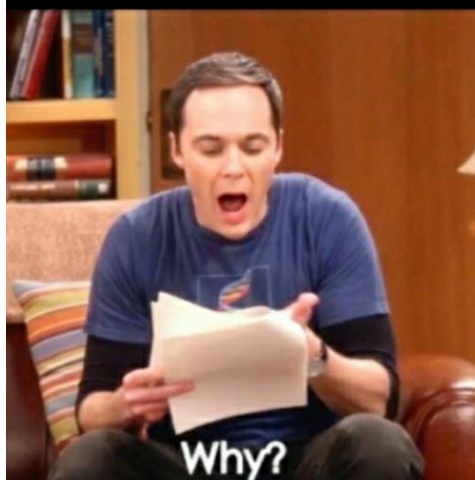
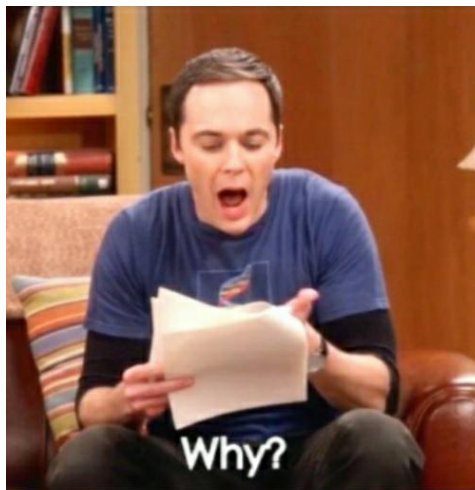
Like this?



Taking a step back ... what are some well known high performing teams?



But why ?



COMING SOON...



STORY TIME!!!