

# The many shapes of a VP of Engineering

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Emily Nakashima





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# About my job

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- At a series D startup (~170 people)
- SaaS observability product
- 60 person engineering org
- 3.5 years in VP of Engineering role



There I am! (Honeycomb company offsite, February 2023)

# Thank you to my interviewees

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**David Pan**

**Lynn Wallenstein**

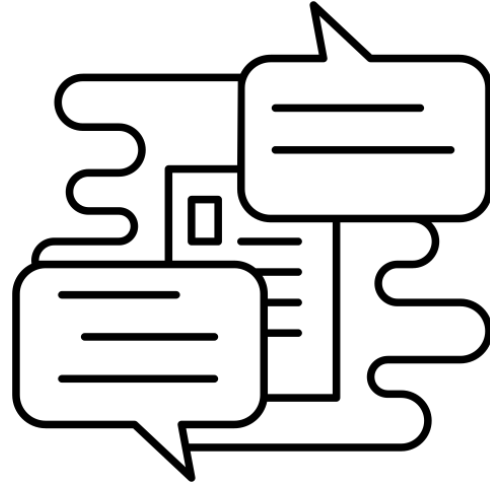
**Jade Rubick**

**Keizan Shaffer**

**Matthew Finlayson**

**Neha Batra**

**Seth Falcon**



# My idea of a VP of Engineering, circa 2014

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1. V-neck sweaters



2. Demographics



3. Weird schedules



Photo sources:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lukasz-dunikowski/4897936977>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mshades/2139977230/>

# My idea of a VP of Engineering, circa 2017

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1. Top people manager



2. Less “technical” than CTO



3. Involved in strategy

Photo sources: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wocintechchat/>

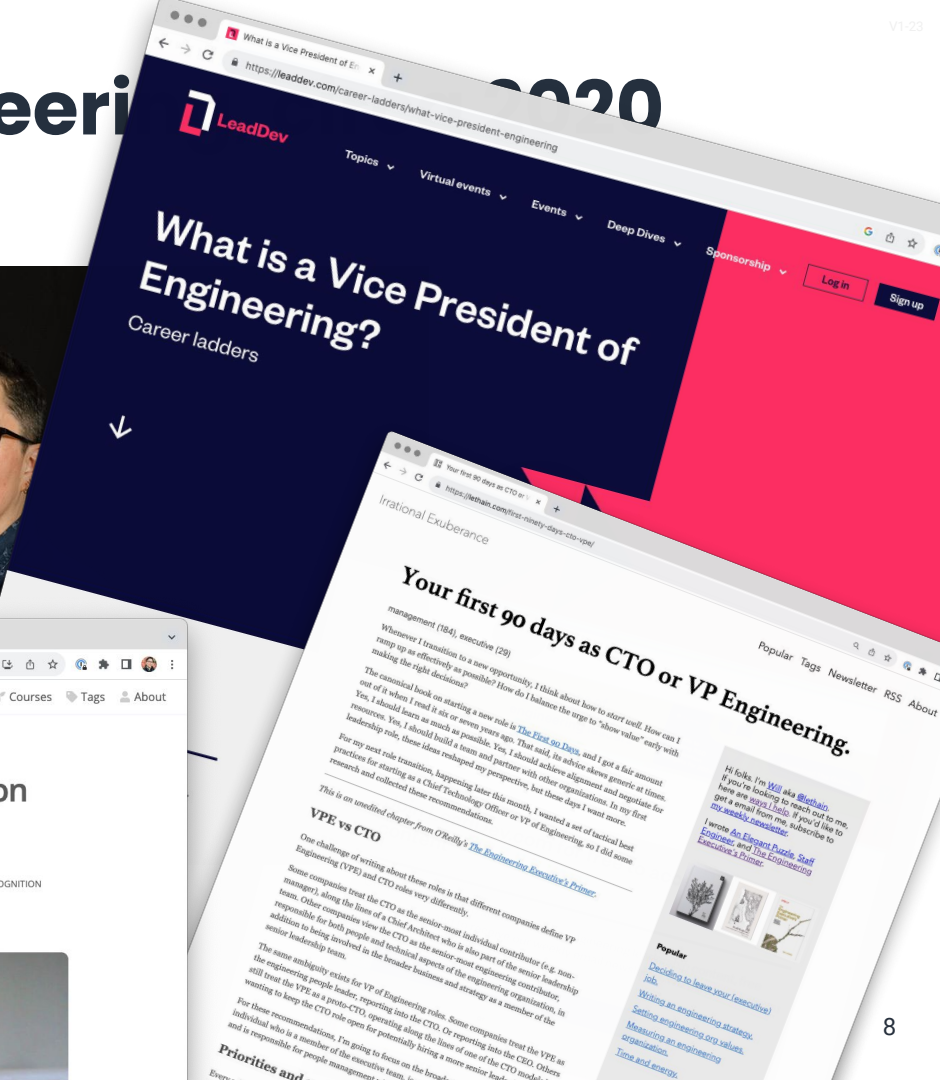
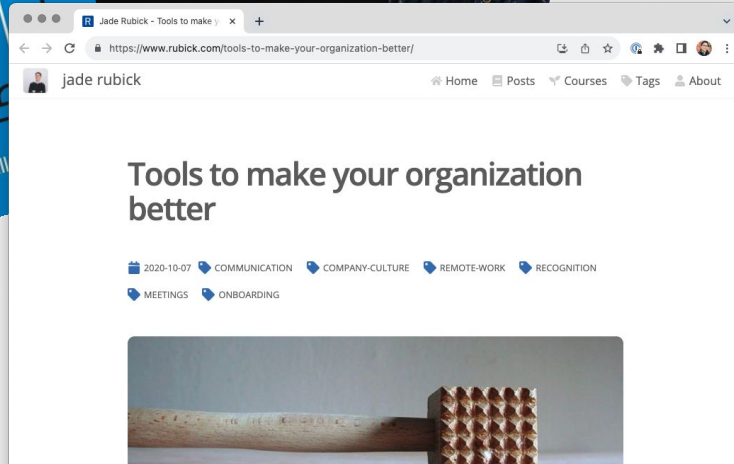
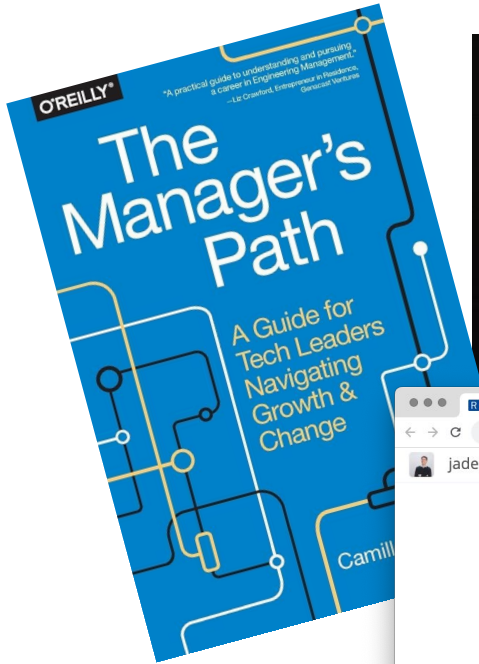
# Wait, don't go! Reasons to watch this talk:

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- If you want to **be** a VP of Engineering
  - Learn about the role
  - Learn how to prepare
- If you **are** VP of Engineering
  - Hear about other approaches
  - Think about how to evolve your role
  - Plan for succession
- If you **work with** a VP of Engineering
  - Build a better mental model of their job
  - Evaluate their performance — and advocate for change if needed

# My idea of a VP of Engineering





# My time at Honeycomb

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Joined as  
Eng IC



Eng  
Manager

Director of  
Engineering

VP of  
Engineering



2017

2018

2019

2020

Panic

This talk

# The right VP of Engineering is *contextual*

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These variables (& more) determine who the right person is:

- Top challenges for the current company size & stage
- Skills and experience represented with Engineering (IC & manager)
- Skills and experience represented on the exec team
- Vibes, intangibles, biases



Really? This person in the bee hat?

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# Joining the exec team

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*“Everything that happens on court, it’s your fault. I don’t care if Asjha Jones makes a bad pass to Swin Cash, it’s your fault.”*

*- Advice from coach Gino Auriemma to Sue Bird*



Photo by Ronald Woan, CC BY 2.0 <https://flickr.com/photos/rwoan/6167705896/>  
Quotation: <https://today.uconn.edu/2016/02/highs-lows-and-weird-moments-for-sue-bird-02/>

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# Building a first team

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The exec team often functions as a “first team,” a group of coworkers that are your first priority.

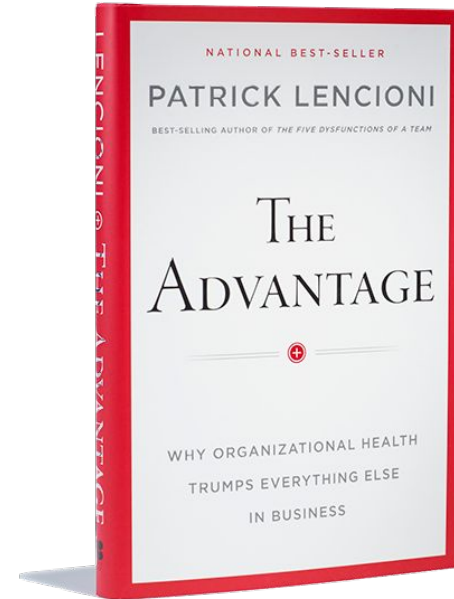


Photo credit: <https://www.tablegroup.com/product/the-advantage/>



# Finding peers and mentors — outside

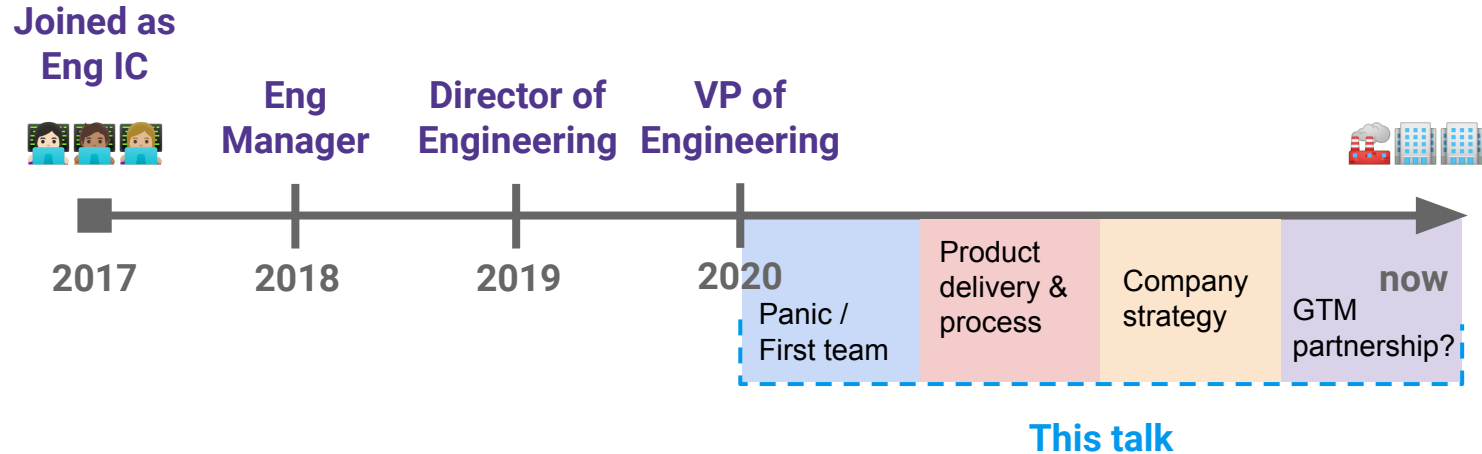
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My peers on the exec team didn't understand my job. Building a peer network was essential:

- Join a technical executive meetup/club
- Join a slack group for technical executives (these are typically small communities)
- Find a coach
- Find group coaching
- Go to exec leadership conferences (hi!)



# My time at Honeycomb

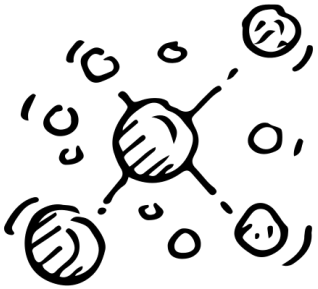


# **Shapes of a VP of Engineering**

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# The VP vs. CTO split

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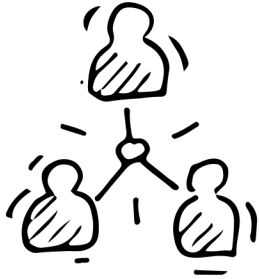


Different ways CTOs and VPEs split their responsibilities:



# The VP vs. a VP

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Smaller organizations typically have one VP of Engineering; large companies often have multiple layers of VPs with some VPs reporting to a Senior Vice President (SVP).

# Rare VP of Engineering trading cards

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What are some less common archetypes?

# The VP Eng / CTO combo

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- Stays very technical and has deep understanding of major projects
- Involved in all major architecture decisions
- Top people Eng manager, may weigh these duties more or less heavily
- Typically at organizations with no CTO or purely external-facing CTO

# The Proto-CTO

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- Very technical; focused on technology leadership above all
- Often a great technical mentor
- Typically at small organizations with no CTO
- May be hired over when the company is large enough to need a CTO
- “People & processes” work is delegated or sometimes neglected

Credit to Will Larson for the name of the “Proto-CTO” archetype



# The Megaphone

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- Primarily focused on relationships/engagements outside company walls
- Spends time on speaking, networking, business development, etc. in forums where an executive's presence is needed or valued
- More common as a CTO role, but happens occasionally to VPEs

# The Product Partner

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- Focused on product framing, discovery, and delivery
- Expert in engineering, product, and design collaboration
- Either joined at the hip with the VP of Product or does their job (de facto or officially)
- Deep knowledge of competitive space

# The Pseudo Chief of Staff / Super Exec

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- Considers the exec team to be their “first team” even if nobody else does
- Drives alignment across the company
- Often operates as an extension of a C-level
- Goes to the COO’s birthday party
- Engineer ICs don’t know much about them/see them once a quarter

# **What does *your company* need**

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from a VP of Engineering?

# What does *your company* need from a VPE?

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How does a company decide what shape of VP of Engineering is right?

How can you be that shape?



# How's your VP of Engineering doing?

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What do you look at to judge VPE performance?

Health, happiness, performance of Engineering

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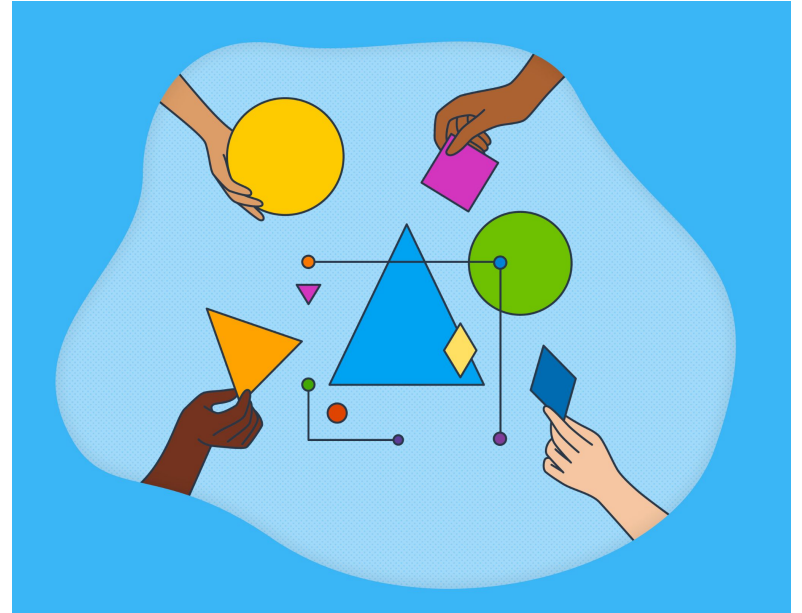
- Engineering's reputation
- Alignment: are adjacent functions aligned on goals & priorities?
- Clear strategy and vision for both Engineering and the larger company
- Ability to focus and say "no"
- Ability to manage risk
- Ability to manage tech debt / balance today against tomorrow



# How is the VP of Engineering evolving?

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The role isn't static from one year to the next – it evolves with the needs of the organization.



**How can you prepare for the job?**

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# How to prepare

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A lot of luck goes into being the right VPE for a company at the right time. How can you prepare if you aren't right for the job today?

- Tell your manager you want to work toward a VP role someday
- Take on cross-org management projects
- Cultivate a whole business view
- Learn to write, evaluate, and evolve strategy



# Managing managers managing managers

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Essential skills when managing managers (and managers of managers)

- Work on seeing the organization from multiple vantage points
- Remember you can ask for artifacts you need
- Work on making sense of the work via secondary sources



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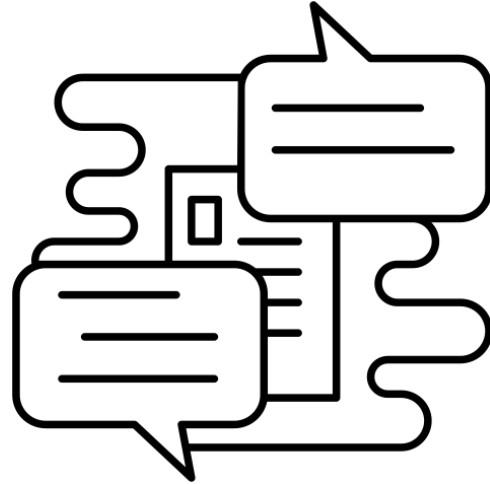
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Find me after the talk if you want to chat!