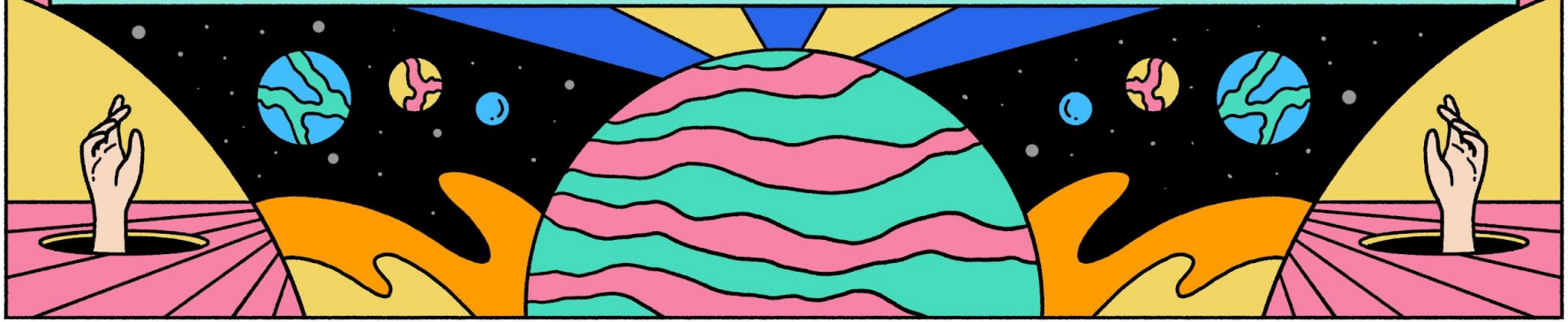
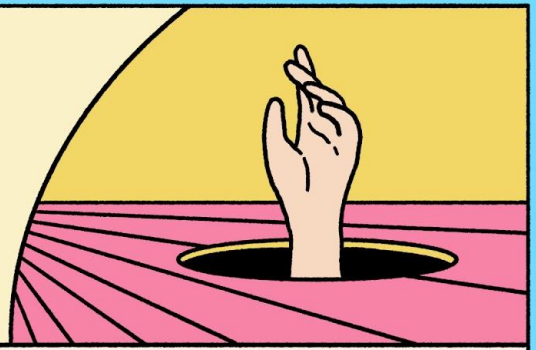
Theory to action: Architecting and implementing your team operating system

Meg Adams
Senior Director of Engineering at the New York Times



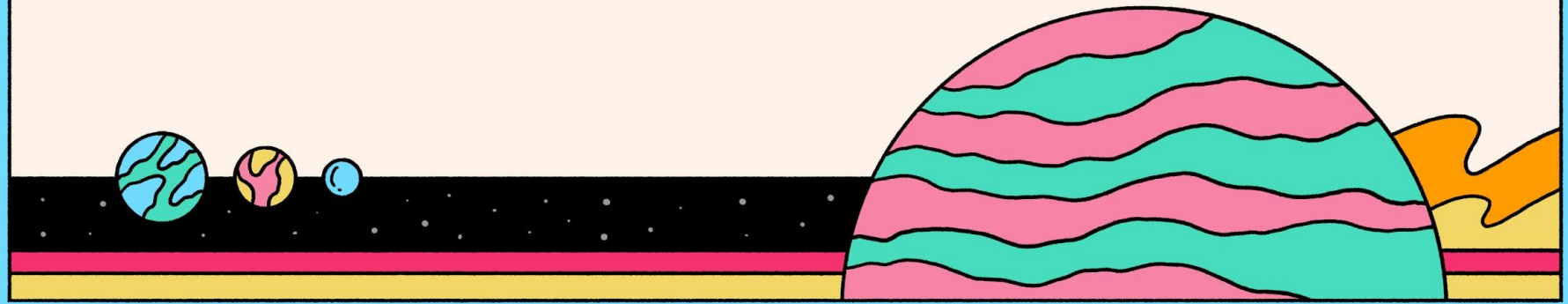
How might I...improve cross-team visibility?

Help me improve cross-team visibility...



Start or do more...

DEMOS



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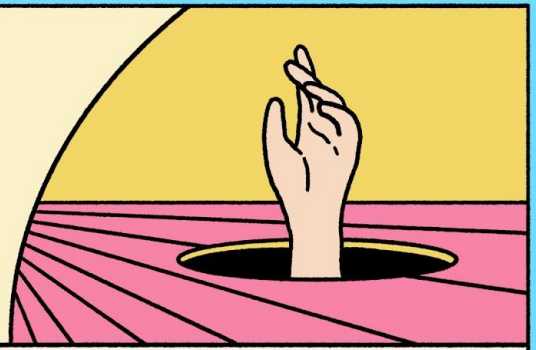

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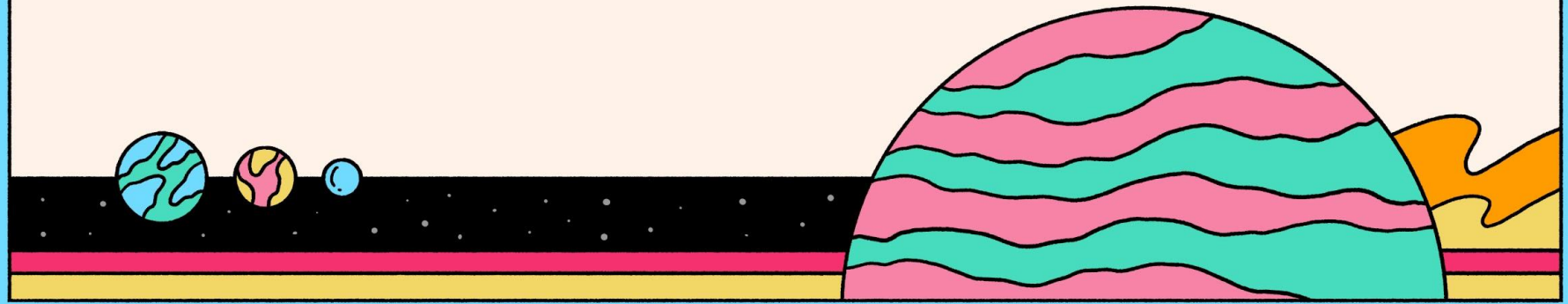

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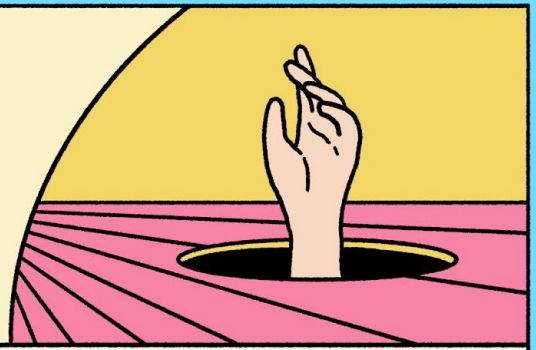

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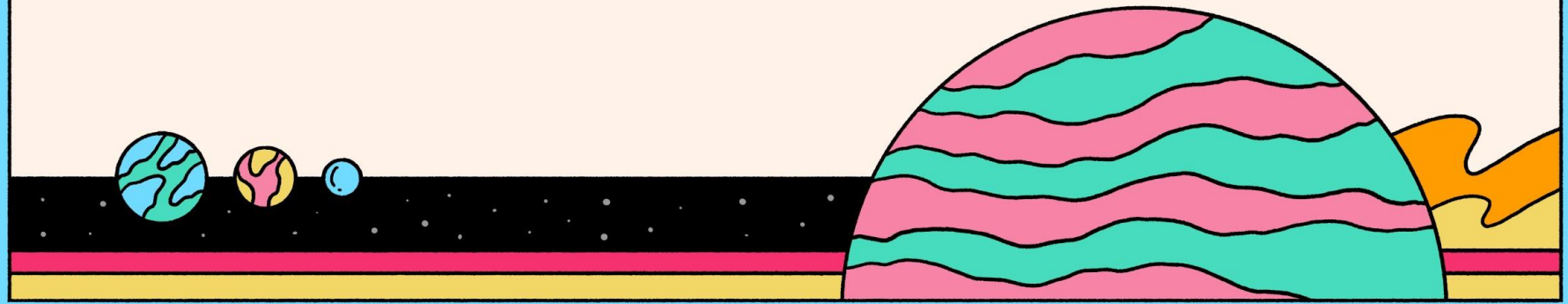

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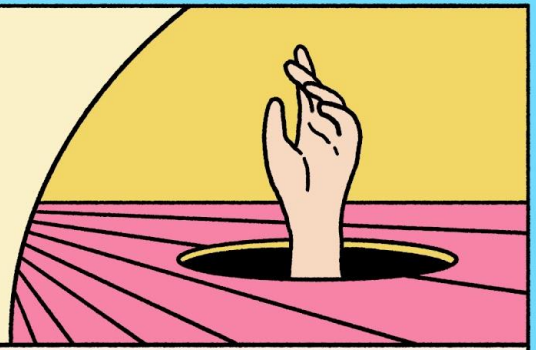

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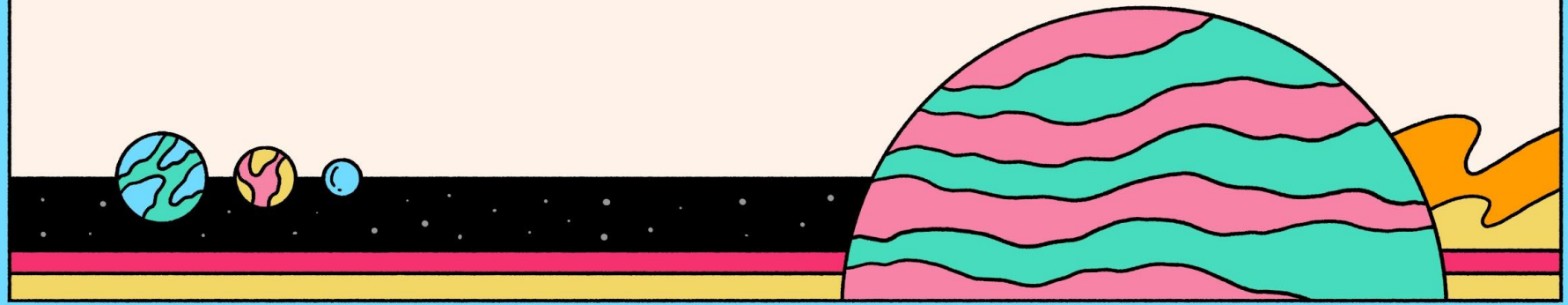

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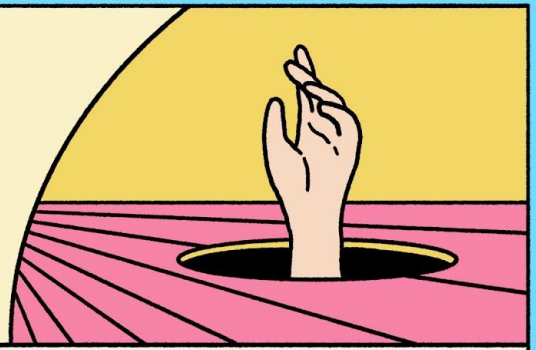

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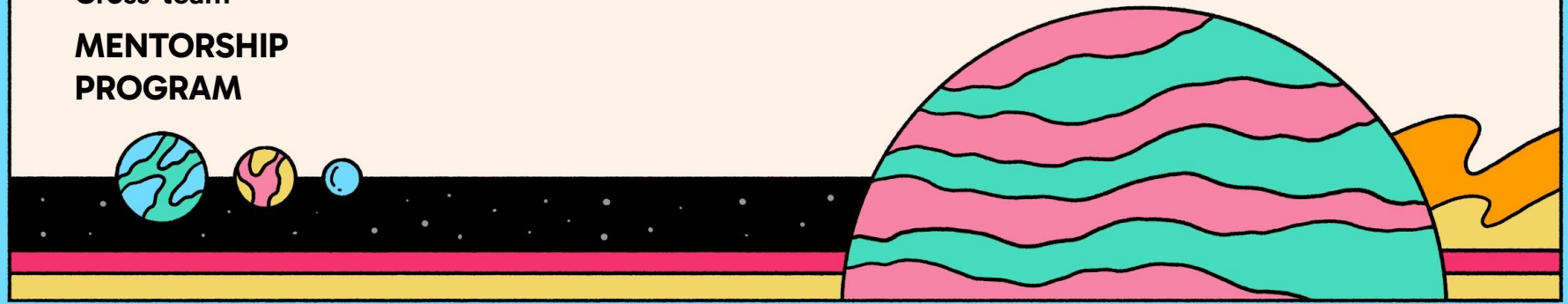

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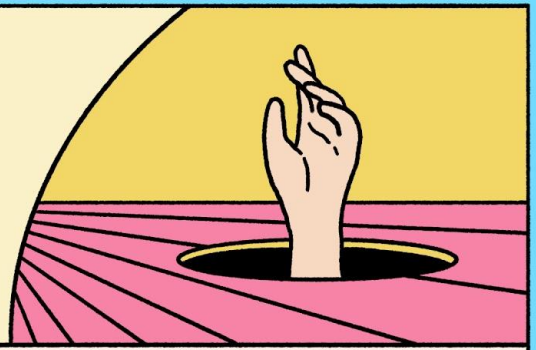

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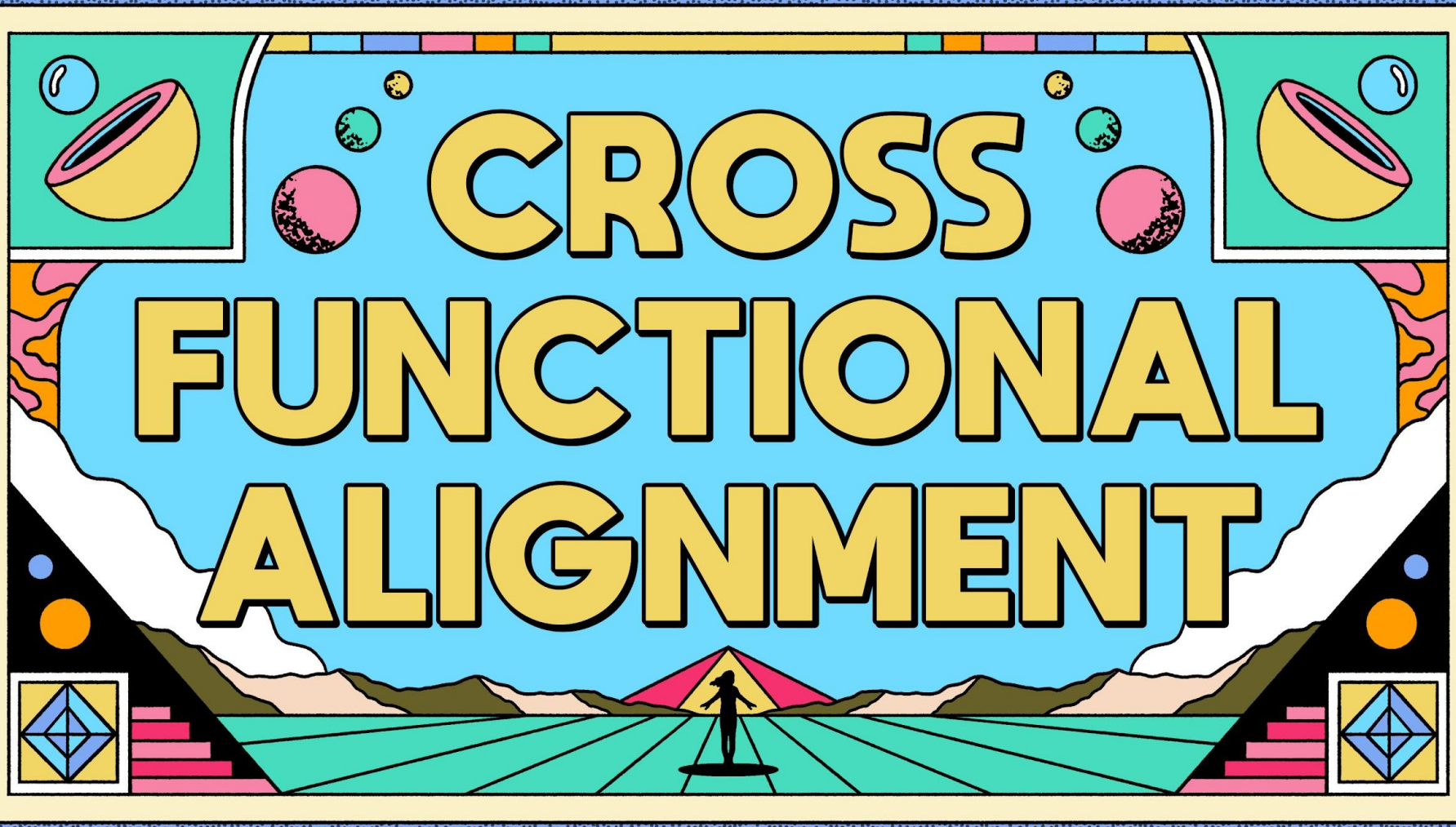
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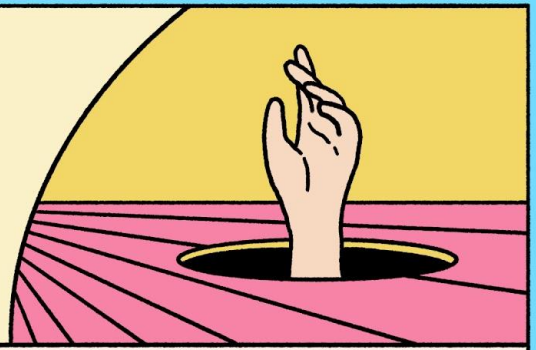

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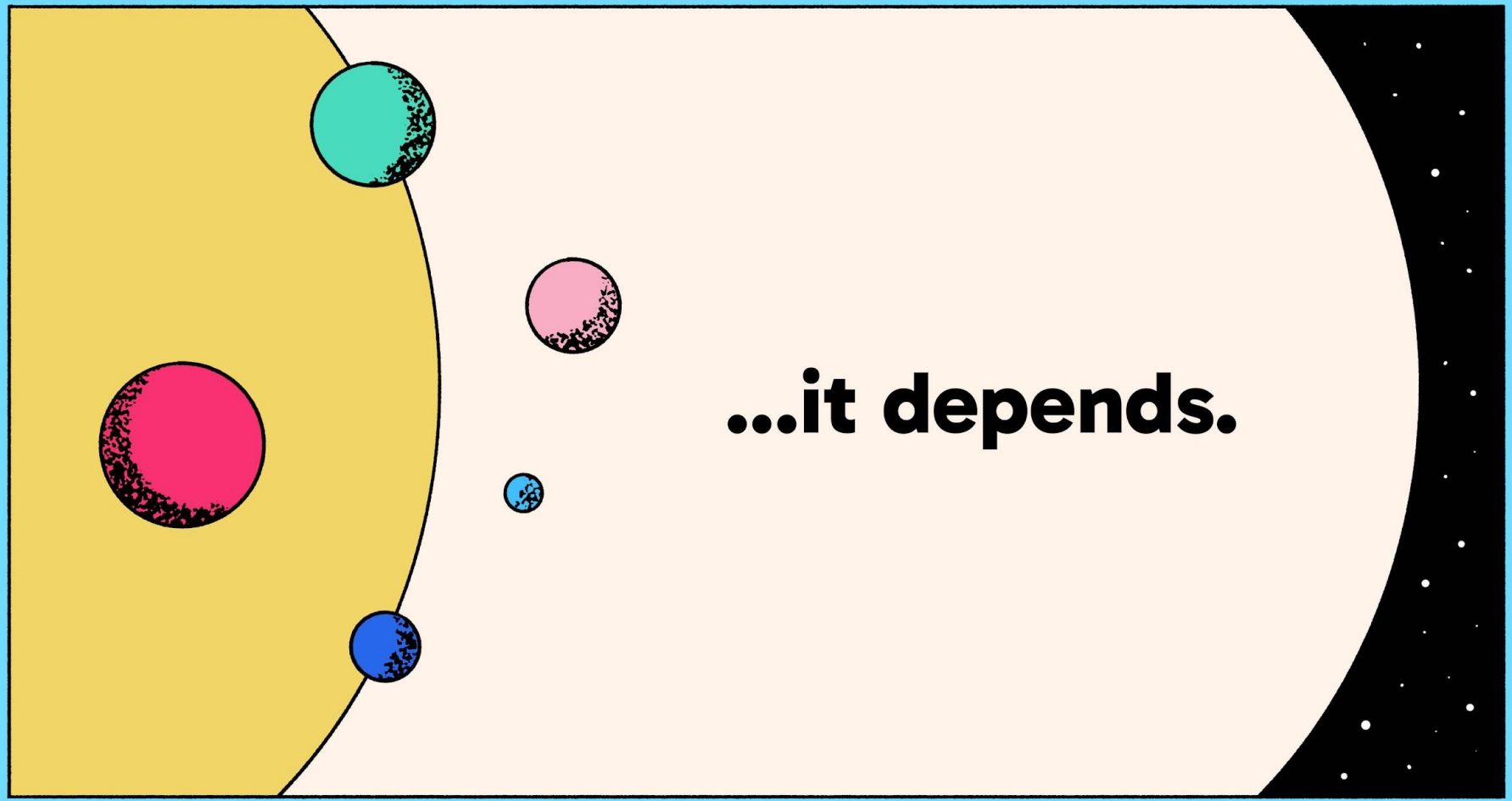
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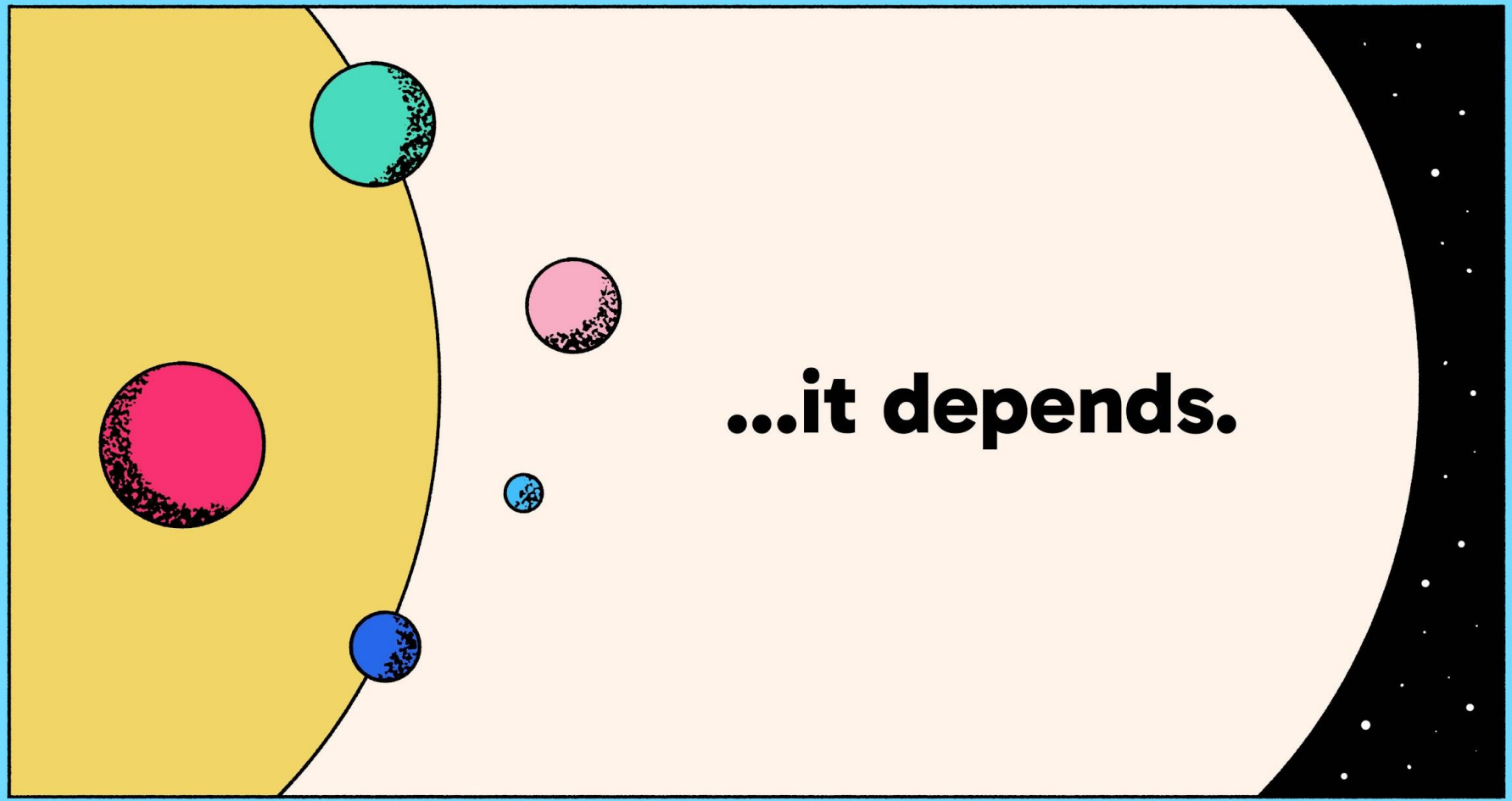
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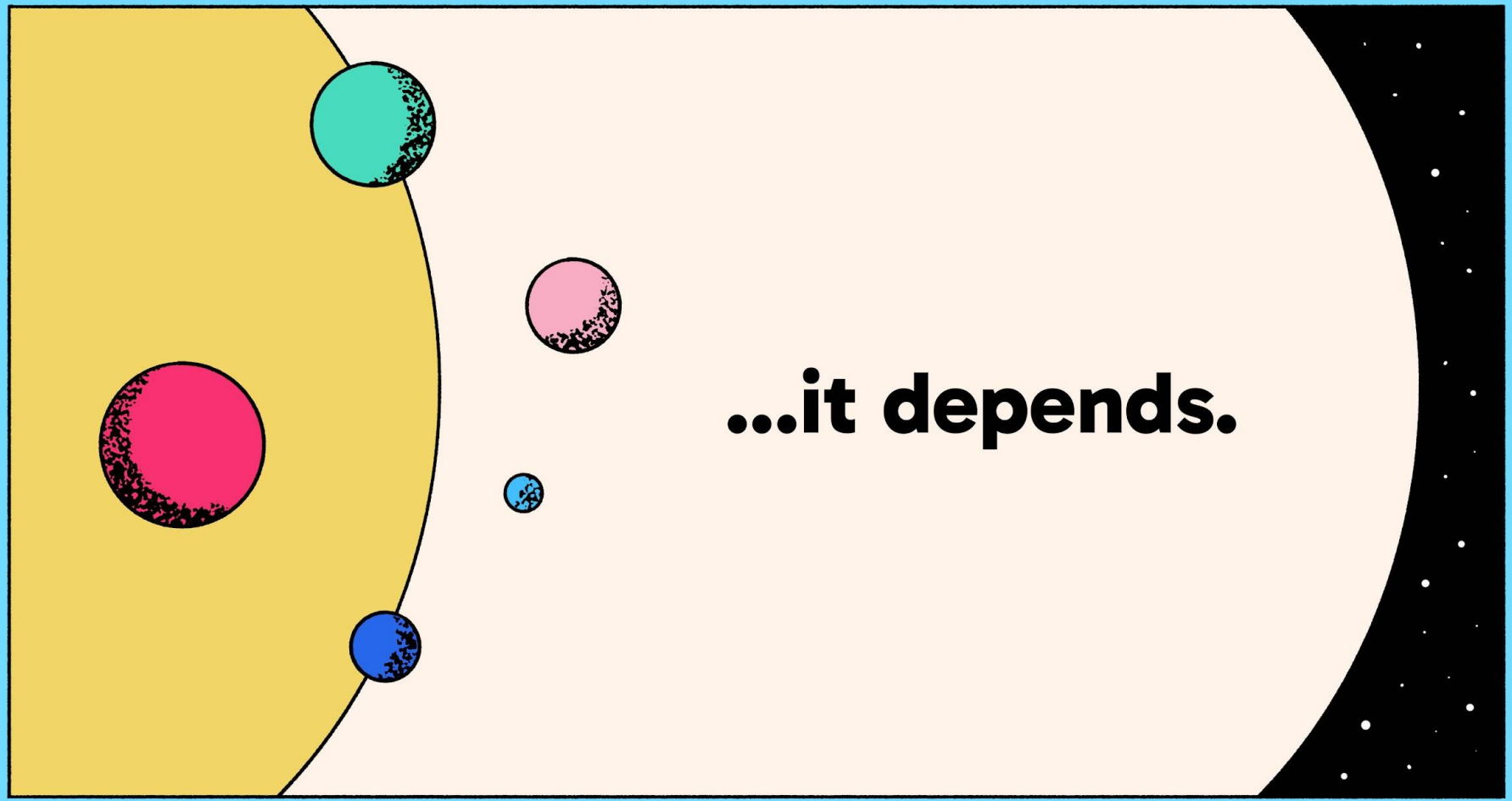
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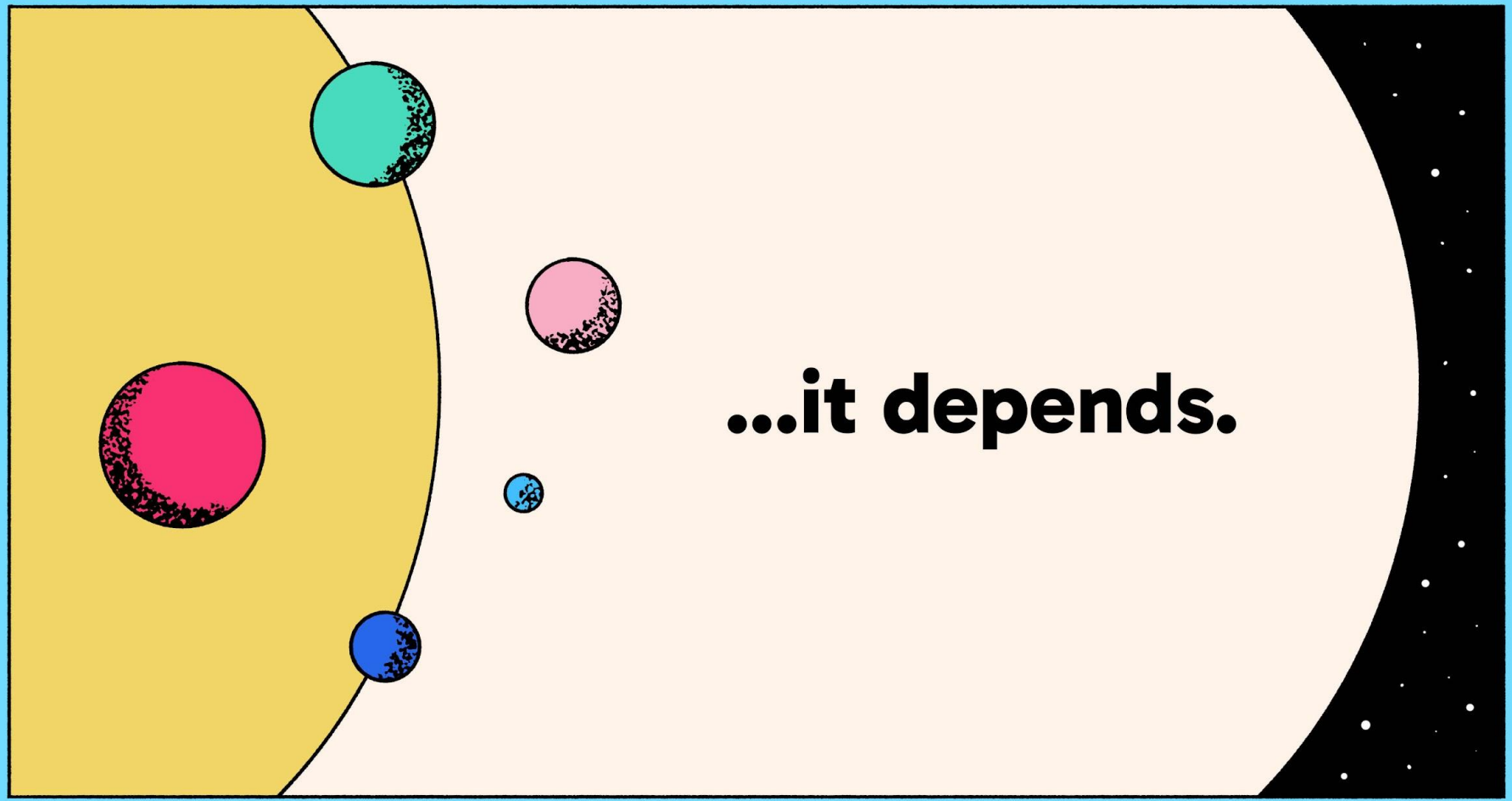
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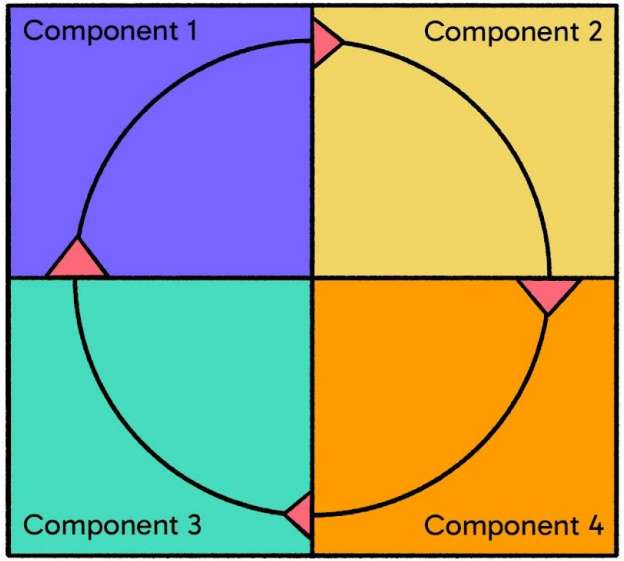
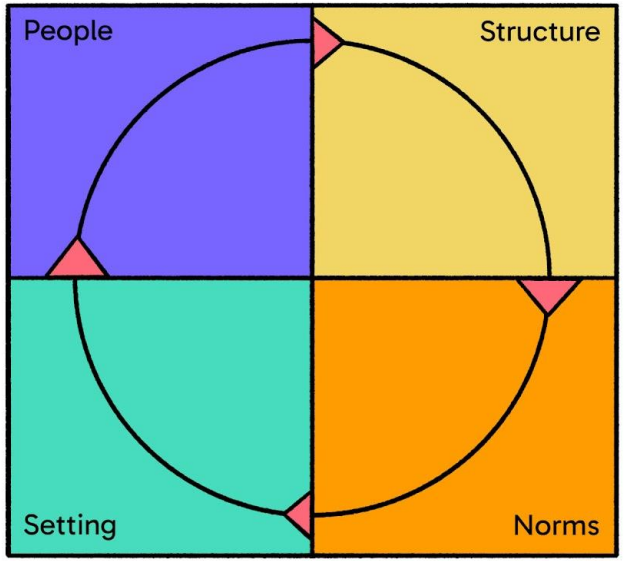
SYSTEM

a bounded set of interrelated components that work together to achieve some outcome



OPERATING SYSTEM

a purposeful construct of people, structure, setting, and norms, bounded by time



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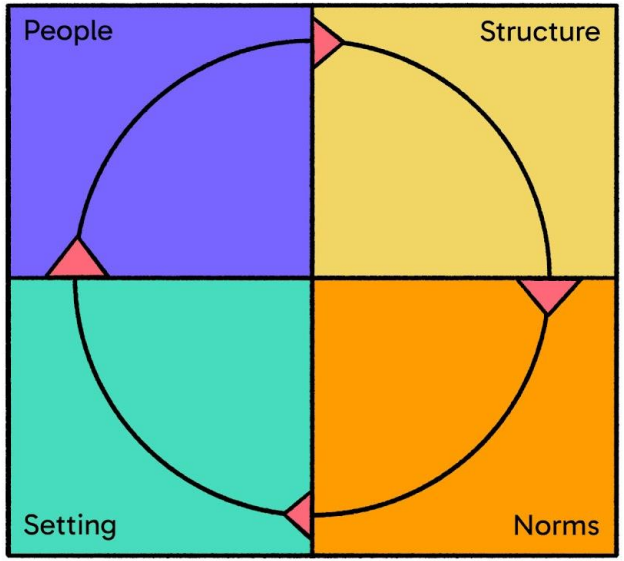

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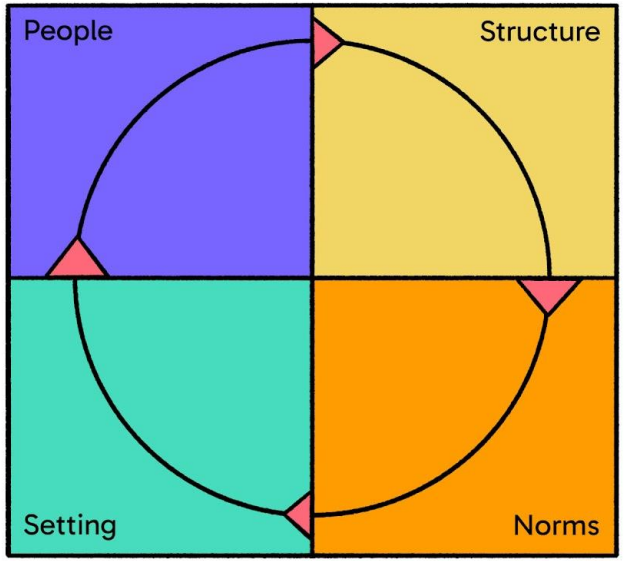

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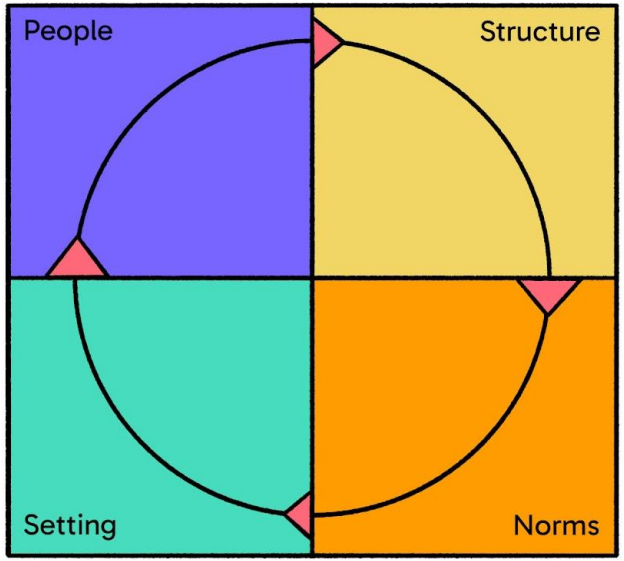

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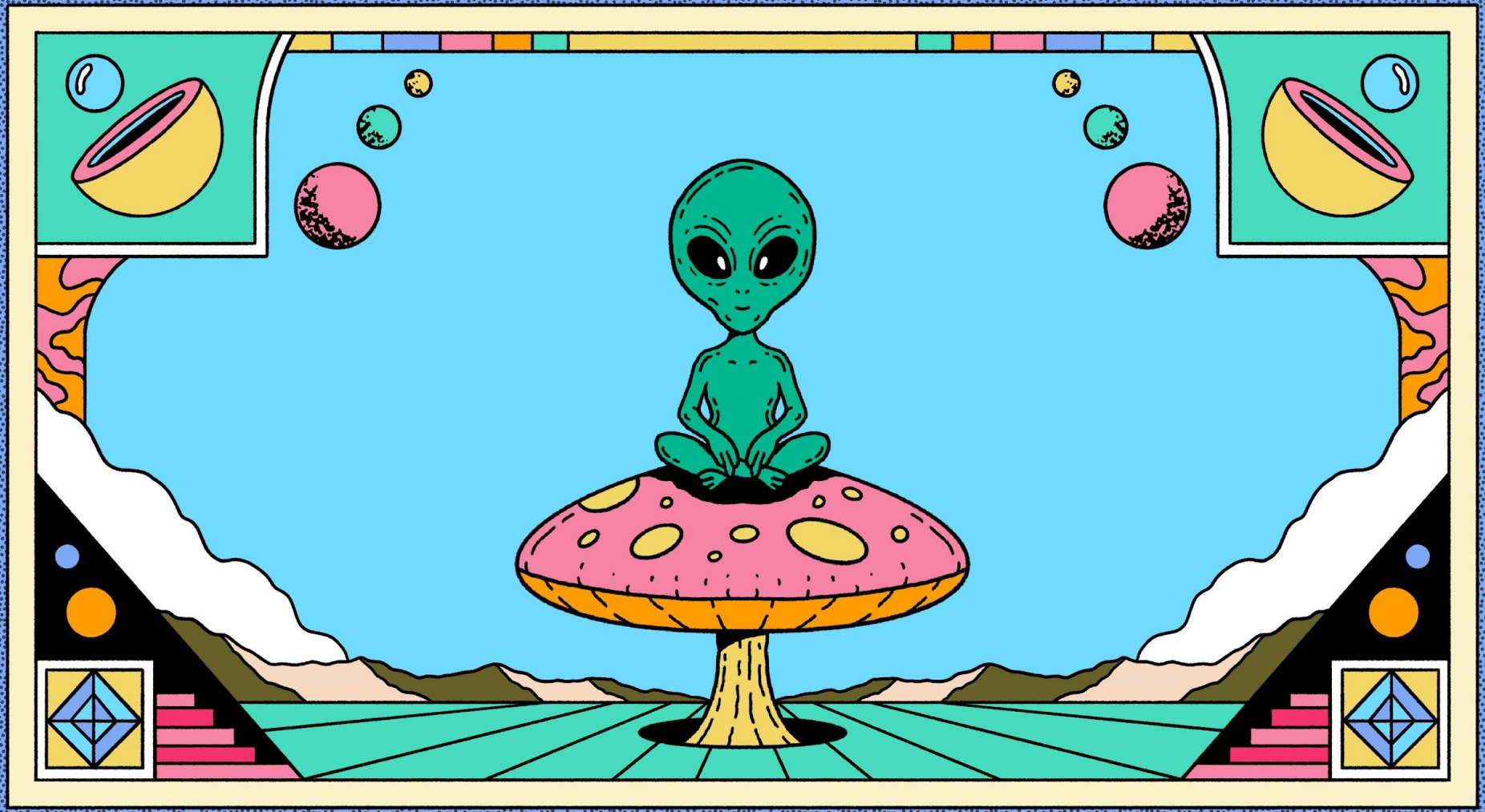
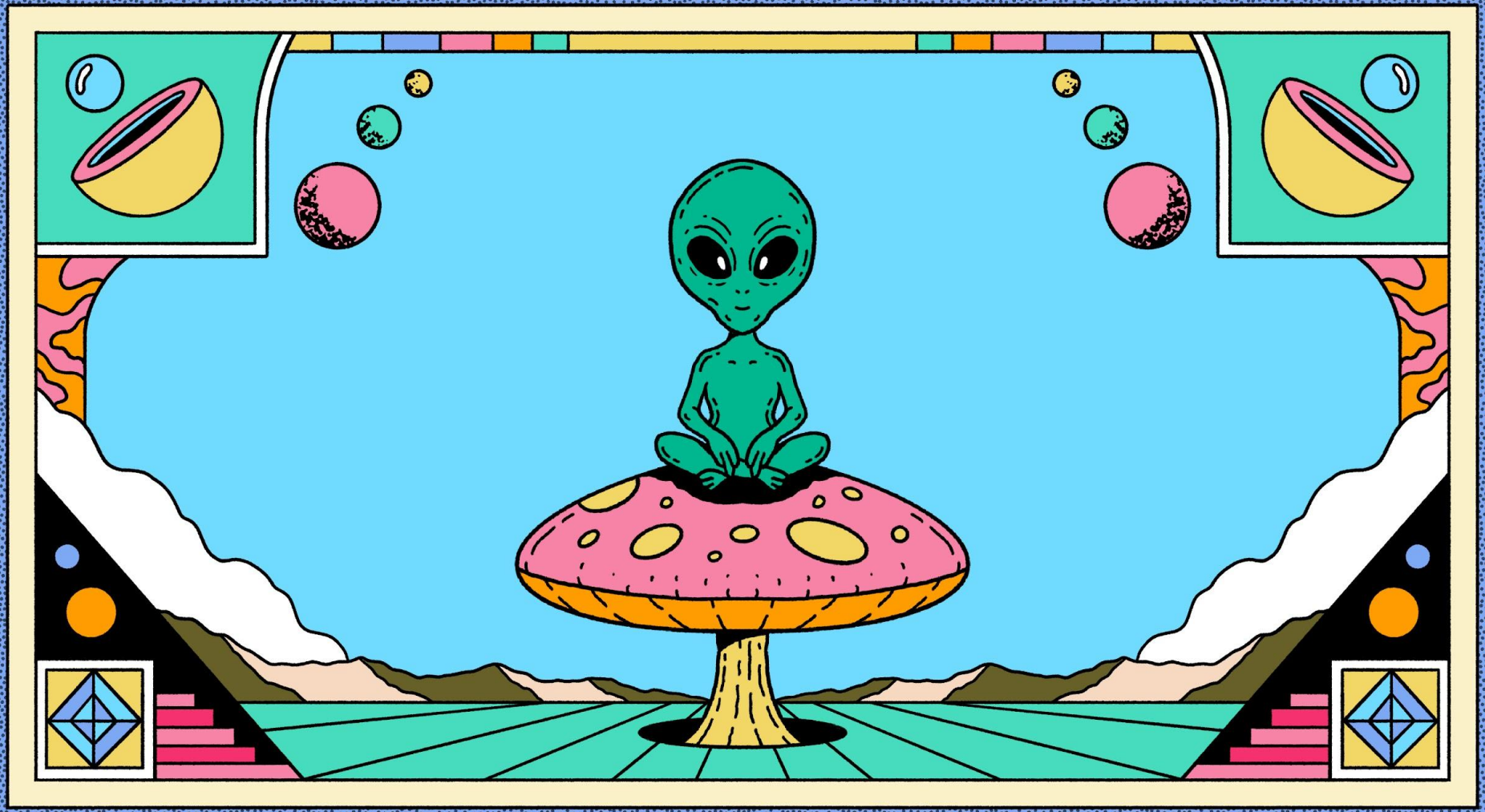
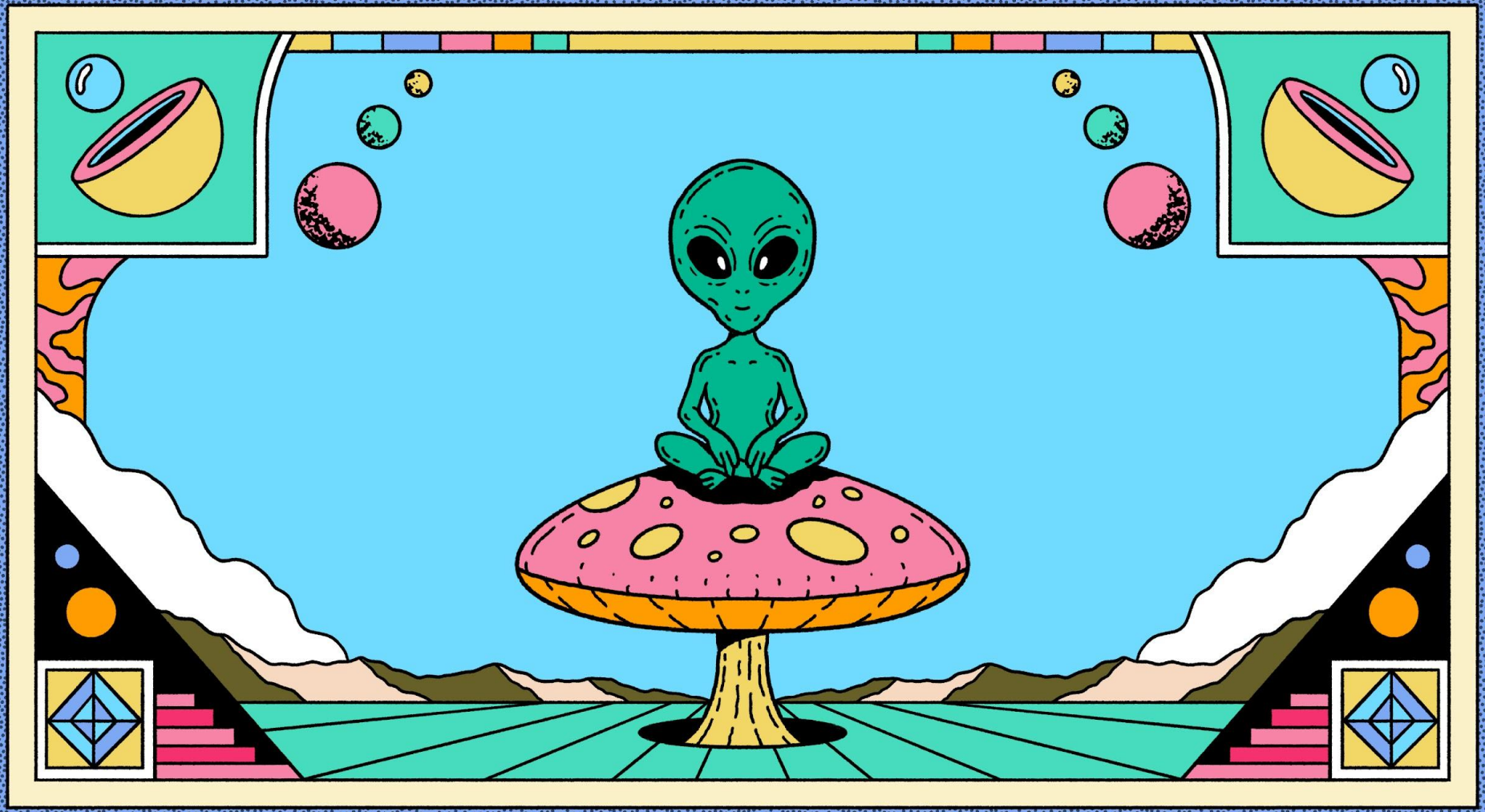




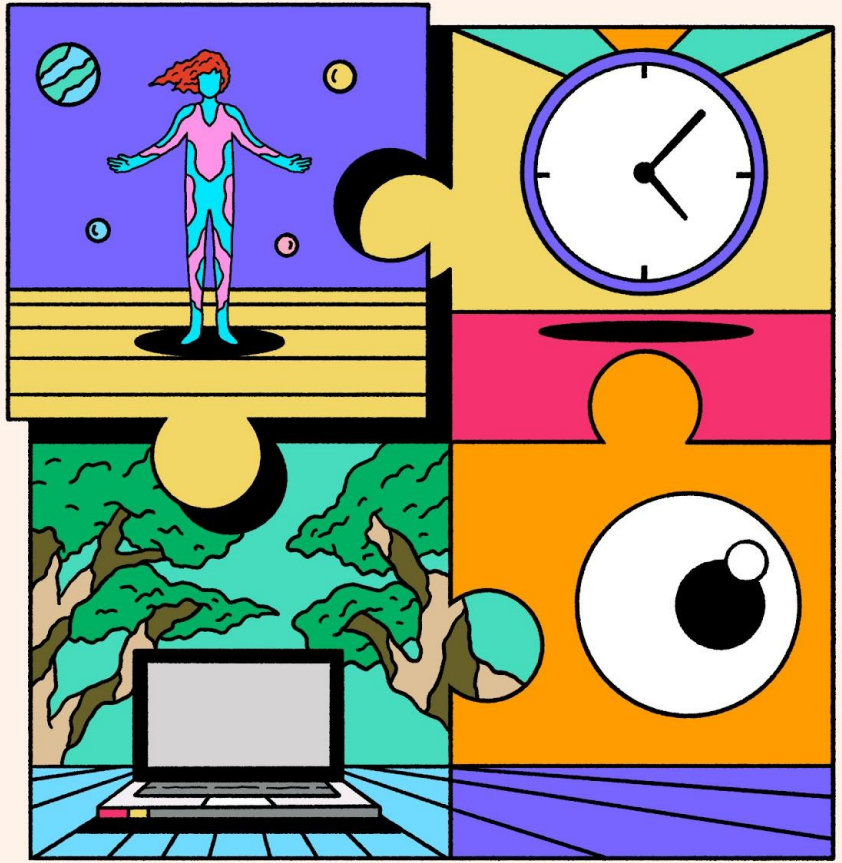


BUILDING OUR OS

People

Who is our operating system for?

What are their **roles**?



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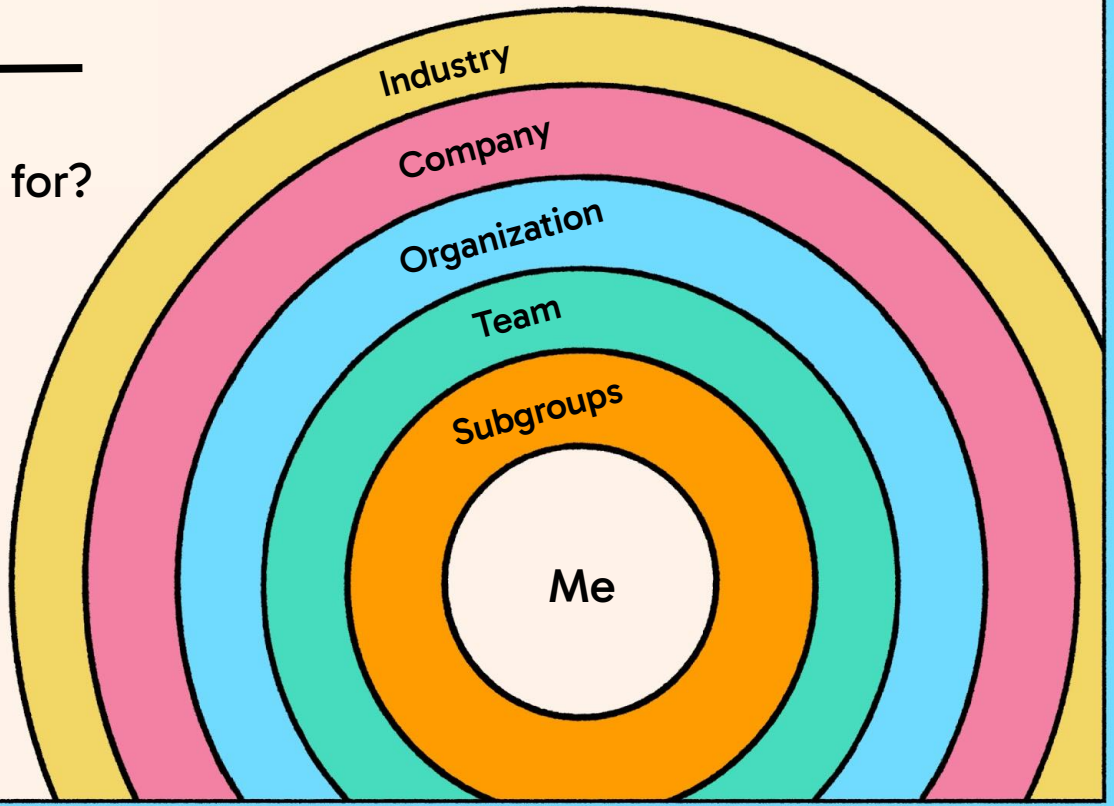

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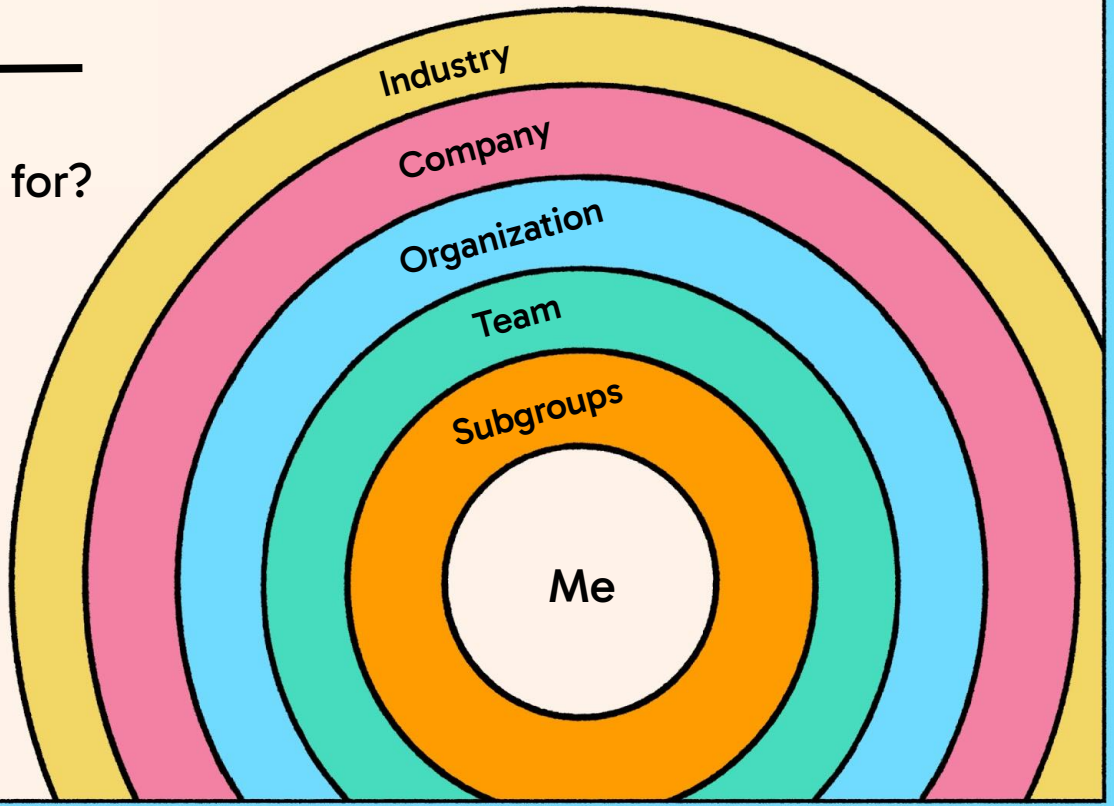

My Super Awesome Engineering Team Operating System

Our People

My Super Awesome Engineering Team is led by Meg Adams. **My Super Awesome Engineering Team** is made up of 5 teams. Each team is made up of an engineering manager and engineers (though it's important to know that each team also has an assigned product manager, designer, and data analyst that they work with in lockstep!).

- **Team 1**
  - Engineering Manager: Sally
  - Engineers: Kellen, Dashawn, Kamora, Camila, and Makenna
  - *Product Manager: Joe, Designer: Chiara, Data Analyst: Lauren*
- **Teams 2, 3, 4, 5....**

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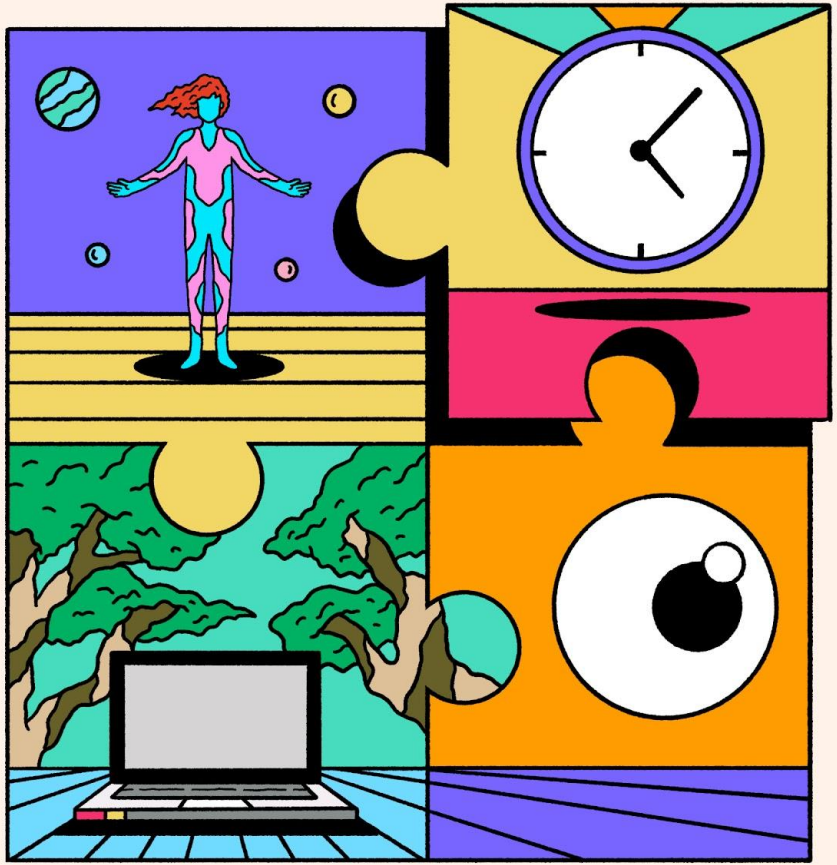
- **Time** – how we spend it
- **Information** – how it flows through the organization



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- **Events** – more immersive, less frequent
- **Business Rhythms** – predictable seasons that occur within the company

BUILDING OUR OS

Structure

Our Structure

Structure is the set of rhythms and rituals that create shape and predictability within our system. Structure includes how we spend our time and how information flows.

Yearly Rhythms

What are the predictable rhythms and events that occur throughout the year?

January	• Company strategy season concludes (Nov - Jan) • Performance management continues with written manager reviews (Nov - Mar)
February	• Performance management continues with calibration (Nov - Mar)
March	• Performance management wraps with the delivery of final reviews (Nov - Mar)
	• Yearly compensation conversations happen
April	• Organizational IRL Week
May	
June	• Mid-year strategy refresh and planning for the second half
July	• Cross-Functional Maker Week
August	
September	
October	• “Slush” (extra cautious changes and deployments) kicks off
November	• “Slush” continues, with a full freeze during cyber week (no deploys without approval) • Company strategy season kicks off (Nov - Jan) • Performance management kicks off with peer reviews (Nov - Mar)
December	• “Slush” concludes • Company strategy season continues (Nov - Jan) • Performance management continues with self reviews (Nov - Mar)

BUILDING OUR OS

Structure

Quarterly Rhythms

What are the quarterly rhythms I can expect?

What happens quarterly that is **inherited** from a higher level OS?	• All-Company Meeting • Cross-Functional All-Hands • Engineering All-Hands
What happens quarterly that is **specific** to our group's OS?	• My Super Awesome Team All-Hands • Team OKR Report-Out *[Async write up + live meeting to discuss]* • Quarterly Performance Check-Ins with your direct manager

Sprint Rhythms

What happens for My Super Awesome Team each sprint?

	Week 🅰️ - All times shown in ET				
	Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
		✍️ *Async track updates due*	🎉 *Sprint ends* 📨 *Async track updates delivered via email and Slack (#our-shared-channel)*	🚴 *Sprint starts*	
AM		Weekly Business Leads *(Meg + peers – this is where she gets info about what's happening with the business)* Weekly Meg and her direct reports meeting (team EMs and Principal Engineer)	My Super Awesome Engineering Team Leadership Bi-Weekly (EMS and Staff Engineers)		🚫 No Recurring Meets – Reserved for focus time and ad-hoc pairing/meetings
PM		1:1s with Meg *(all direct reports)*	🚫 No Recurring Meets – Reserved for focus time and ad-hoc pairing/meetings	My Super Awesome Team Weekly Cross-functional Alignment Meeting	

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⬆️ Up	⬇️ Down
Individuals to leadership	Leadership to individuals
⬅️➡ Laterally	🔴 Out
Team-to-team and cross-functional	To broader company or industry

Communication Weathervane

How does communication flow through our group?

How do we communicate up?	**What's the objective of the communication?**	**How do we communicate down?**	**What's the objective of the communication?**
How does information get from me to leadership?		*How does information get from leadership to me?*	
📆 **1:1s with your manager**	Dedicated time to discuss progress, challenges, career growth, and alignment on priorities in a supportive and open setting. Managers distill and share appropriate information, questions, and feedback they get in these meetings **with** Meg either synchronously in their own 1:1s with her or asynchronously if it's more urgent. Managers are the appropriate "first stop" for most things, but if there is something you definitely want Meg to know, please feel comfortable sharing directly!	📆 **Weekly Business Leads** meeting (this meeting is all discipline leads within My Super Awesome Team – Meg is the only Engineering attendee).	Camilla (Meg's boss!) provides a lot of information in this meeting (business, process, strategy, etc) and Meg distills this info and shares as appropriate. Sometimes info from this meeting makes its way into Meg's Musings, sometimes into Demos, Discussions, and Decisions, and sometimes she shares with managers to share with you.
📆 **Skip-level 1:1s with Meg** (every 4 weeks for staff engineers, every 6 weeks for everyone else).	Ensures that Meg gets to spend time with each engineer at LEAST at this cadence (though everyone	📆 **Weekly SuperAwesomeTeam Leads** meet (Meg + her direct reports).	This meeting is very operational and focused on keeping the engineering team moving forward.

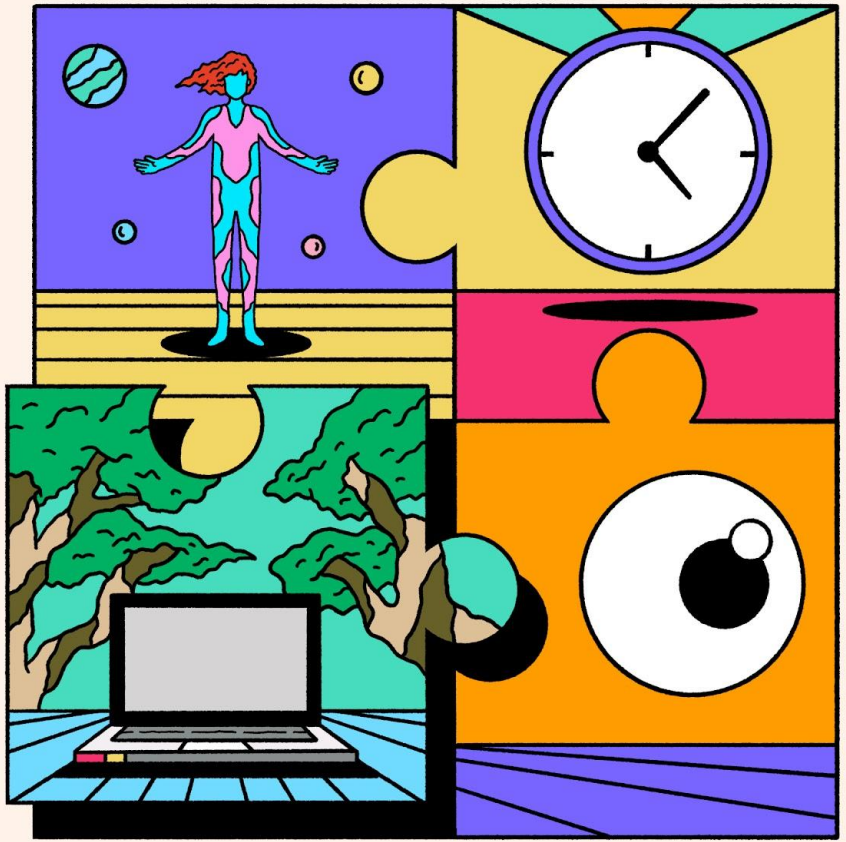
How am I communicating laterally?	**What's the objective of the communication?**	**How am I communicating out?**	**What's the objective of the communication?**
How does information flow cross-functionally? How does information flow from my team to teams?		*How do we share with and get information from the broader Engineering group? How do we share out into the industry?*	
📆 **Weekly Super Awesome Product Alignment Meeting**	This meeting is to align with My Super Awesome Team leadership and drive visibility and alignment between teams. **This meeting (and the supplementary async track updates doc) is the PRIMARY place to get cross-track visibility on work before it starts.** The right moment to present any idea is when it's about 60% – your track leadership believes in it and you know how you would accomplish it, but it's still wet paint and can take feedback and redirection.	📆 **Quarterly Super Awesome Company All-Team Meetings**	These are mostly show and tell.
💬 **#super-awesome-team-product-development**	The Slack channel for the full product and engineering group within the Super Awesome Team. Remember to think **channel first** and share information and ask questions appropriate for the full group here. If you want someone specific to see something, be sure to @ them. This is a GREAT place to celebrate incremental wins and learnings.	✍️ **Company Blog**	Share learnings and innovations with the broader industry. Run your idea by your manager and then pitch it in #blog-ideas.

BUILDING OUR OS

Setting

The environment in which your team exists and operates.

- **Physical** – in-office?
- **Digital** – tools that frame the digital space (Slack, JIRA, Zoom, etc)
- **Temporal** – time zones and working hours
- **Atmospheric** – energetic tone of our shared space



BUILDING OUR OS

Setting

The environment in which your team exists and operates.

- **Physical** – in-office?
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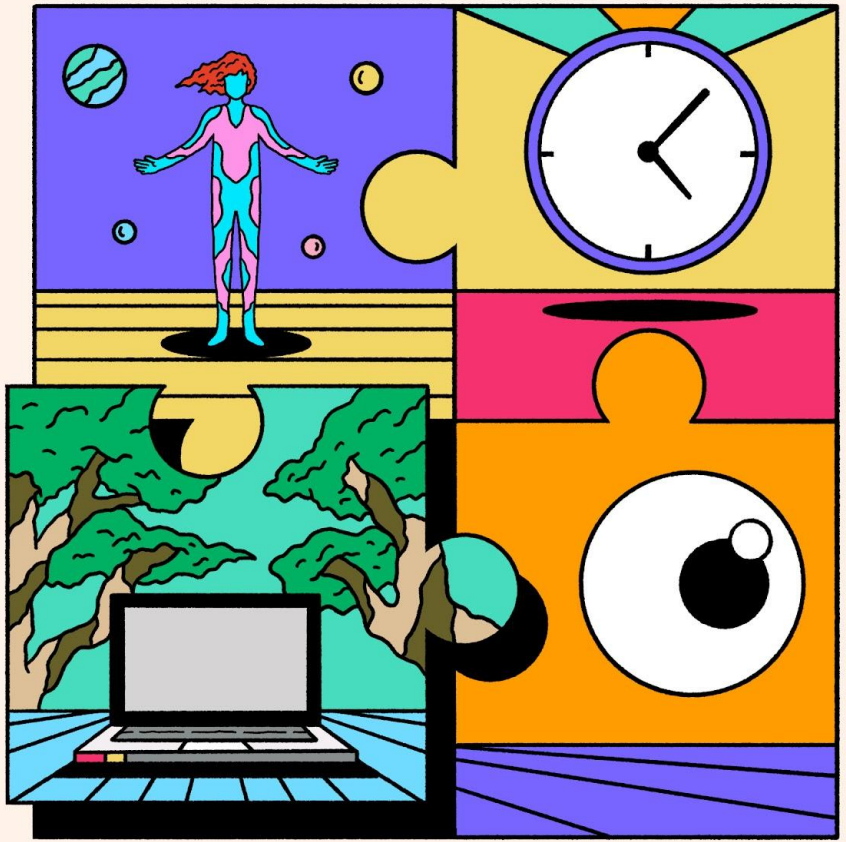

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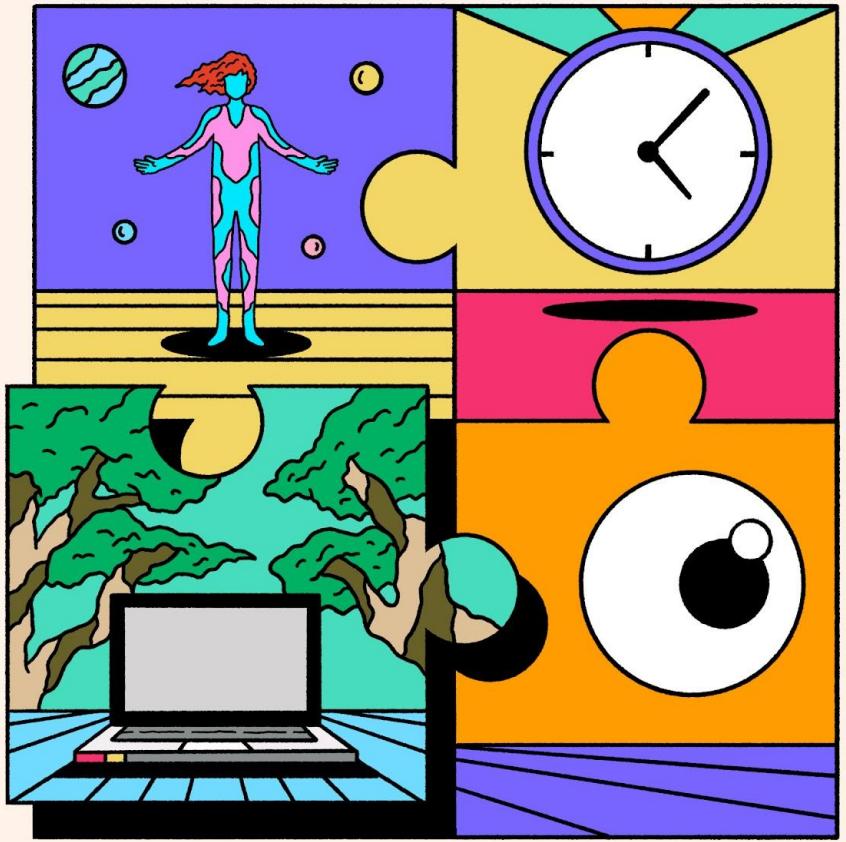

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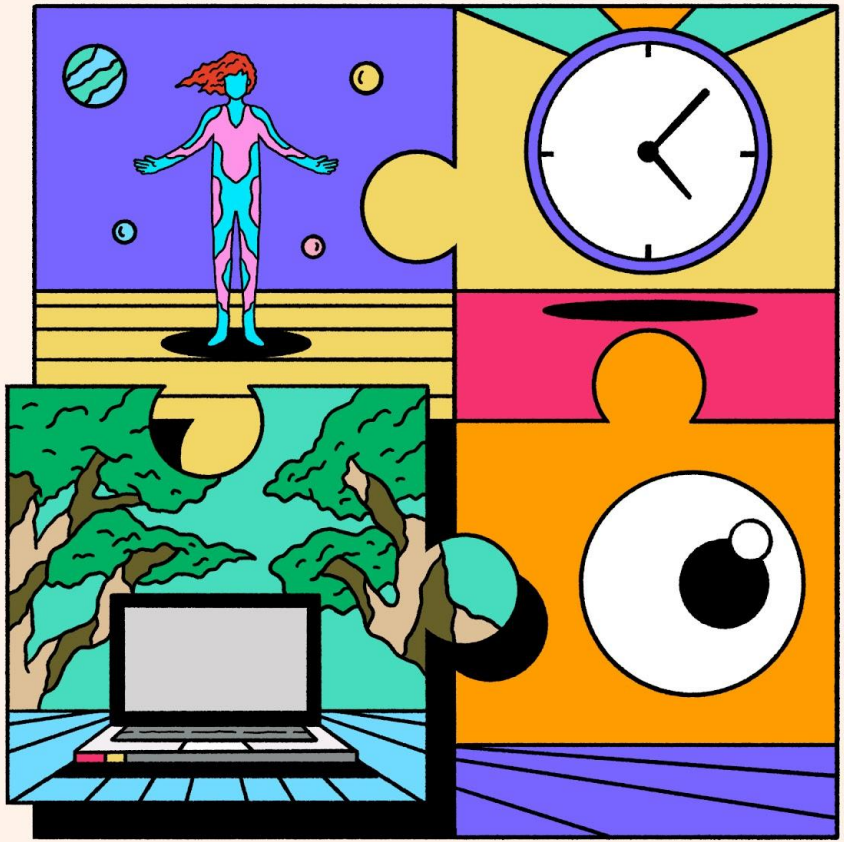

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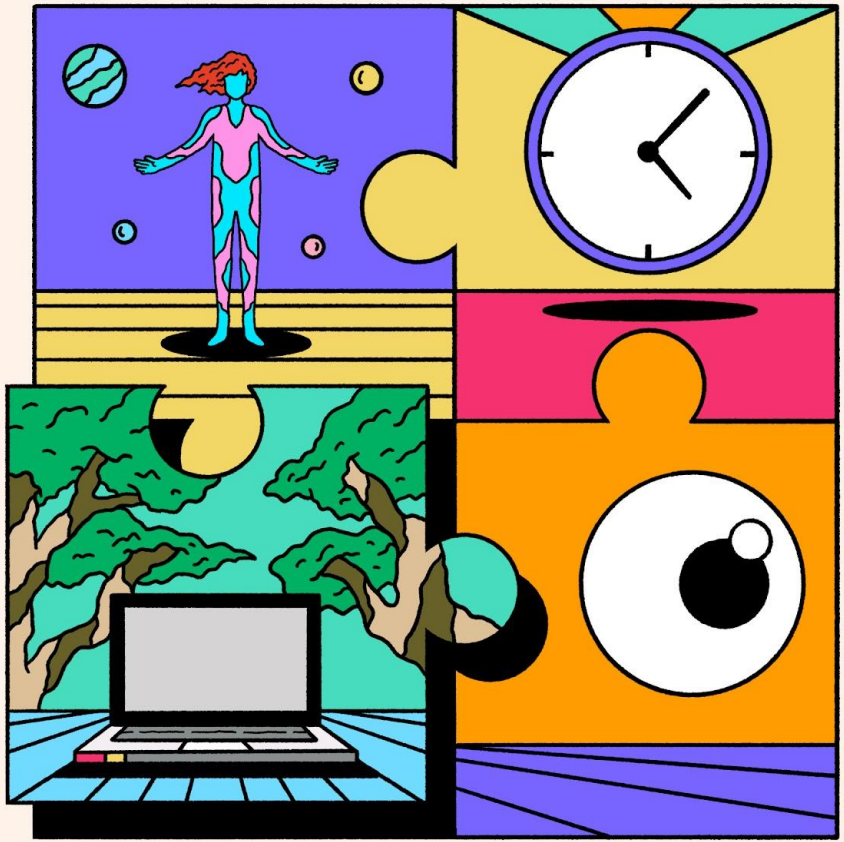

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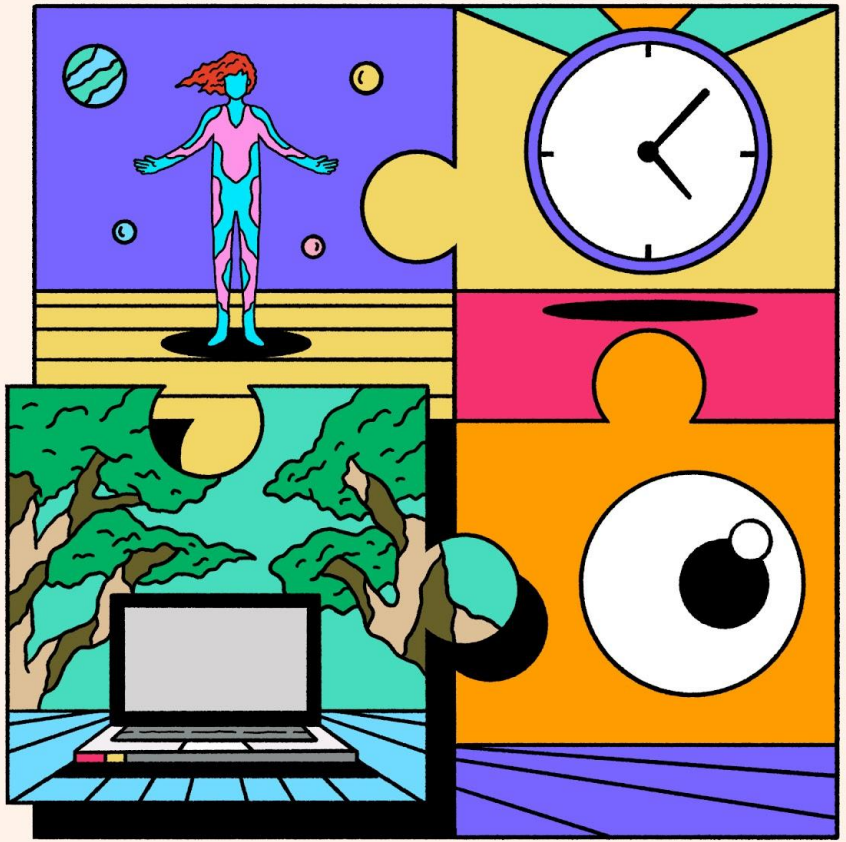

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Setting is the environment in which our team exists and operates.

In-Office Expectations and/or Hybrid Working Guidance

Some of these may be of your own design, but are more likely inherited from the company.

The Super Awesome team is partially in Brooklyn HQ and partially remote. We have remote employees in Portland, San Francisco, Austin, Atlanta, Mexico City, and Guadalajara.

Temporal Guidance

Our team hours are loose. People get in anywhere from 8am to 11am ET depending on locale and leave after a day's work. Meetings happen midday, as this is our biggest crossover of time between coasts, and should be scheduled between 10am and 3pm. If a meeting needs to be scheduled outside of these hours, you should reach out to the attendees and check with them first – don't assume availability.

Meg has only one rule about attendance for full-time employees: she never wants to have a conversation about it. If there needs to be a conversation about performance, we'll talk about performance, but we shouldn't have to talk about whether or not you were sitting in a certain chair at a certain time. This applies to everything from when you start and end your day to vacation. The team expectation is that you know your responsibilities, deadlines and obligations to your teammates and that you do what is necessary to meet them (or raise a flag early if you aren't on track). Aside from that: live your life in a way that works for you and use your Slack message and calendar to communicate when you are and are not available.

Our Core Tools

- **Slack**
  Our team runs on Slack and the bulk of our conversations happen there. It is perfect for accessing the hive mind to ask questions and find information and it is THE PLACE for chatting informally with your team. The shared channels for our group are #one, #two, #three.

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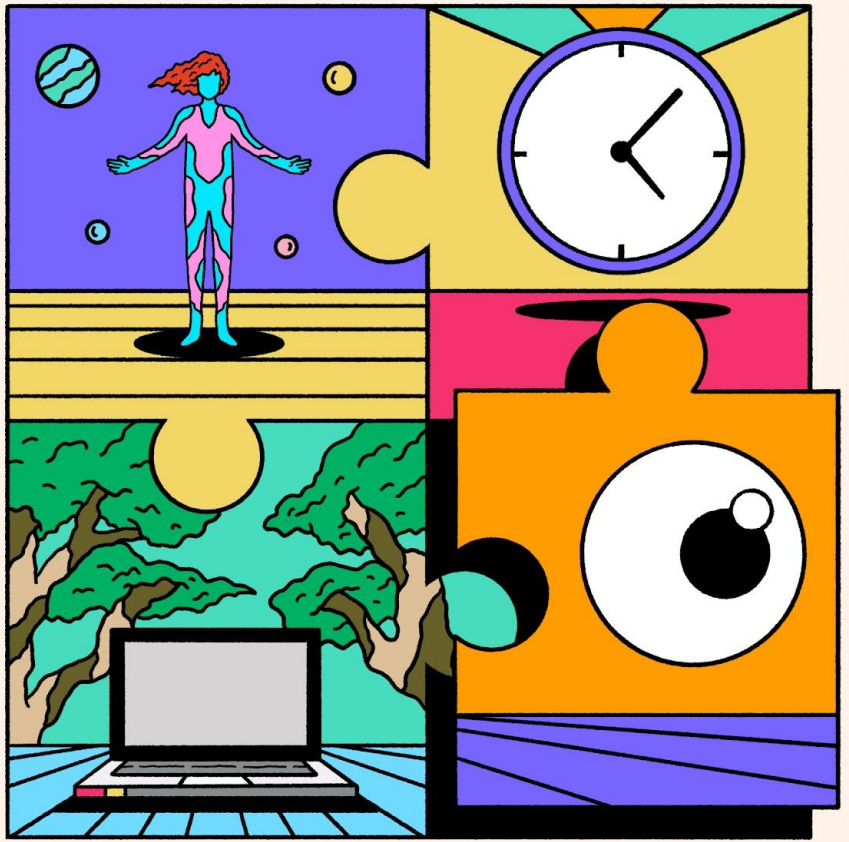
BUILDING OUR OS

Norms

The rules a group of people create and then abide by.



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The rules a group of people create and then abide by.

- **Explicit** – the types of things written into onboarding documents
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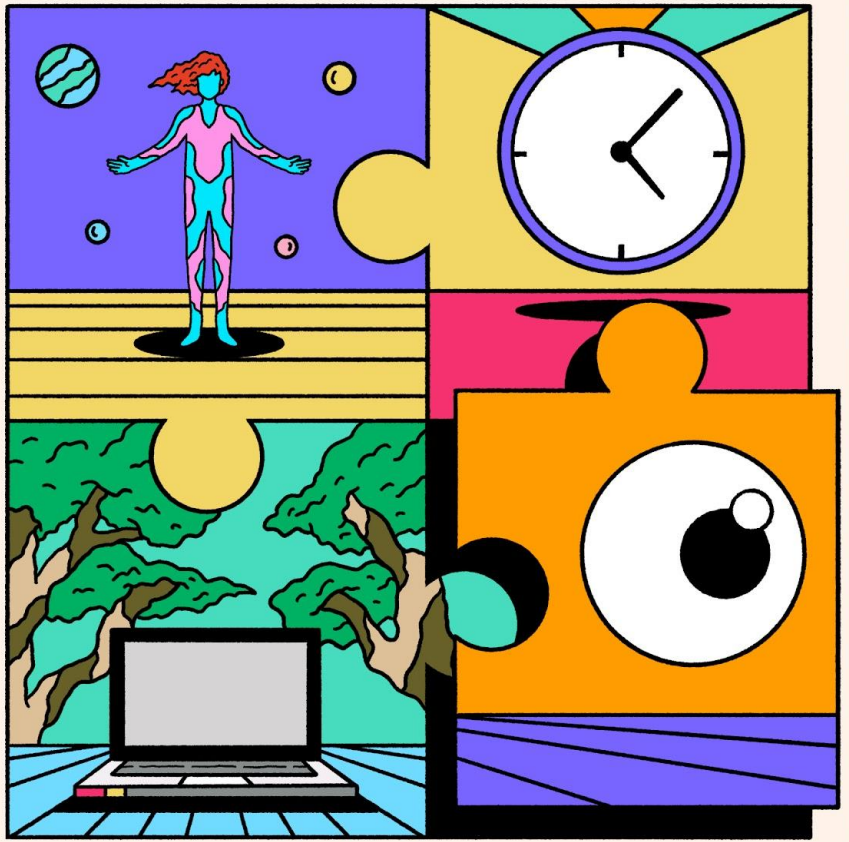

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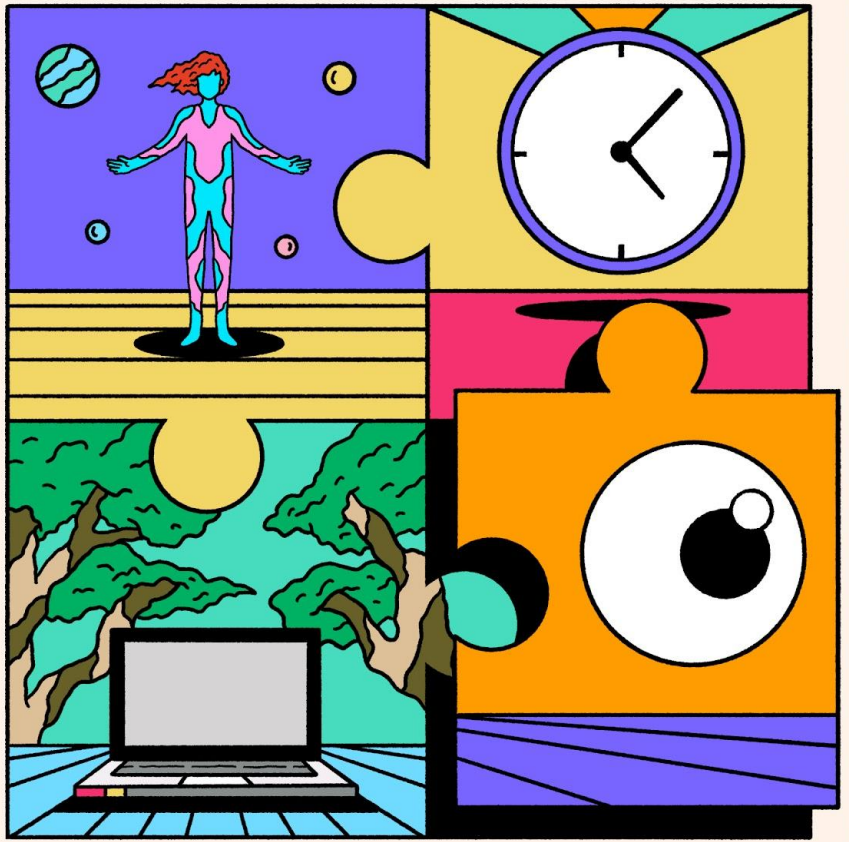

BUILDING OUR OS

Norms

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Norms

Psychological safety?

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Norms

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Conflict? Decision making?

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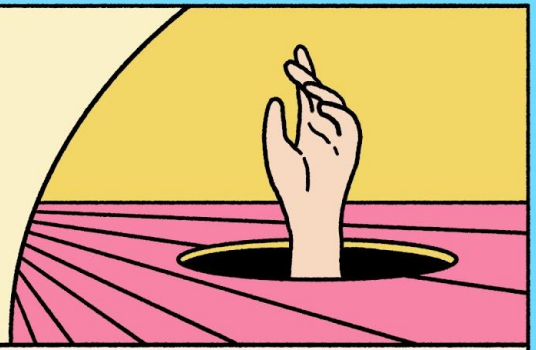
How To: Build Your OS



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Document the existing OS

Next...

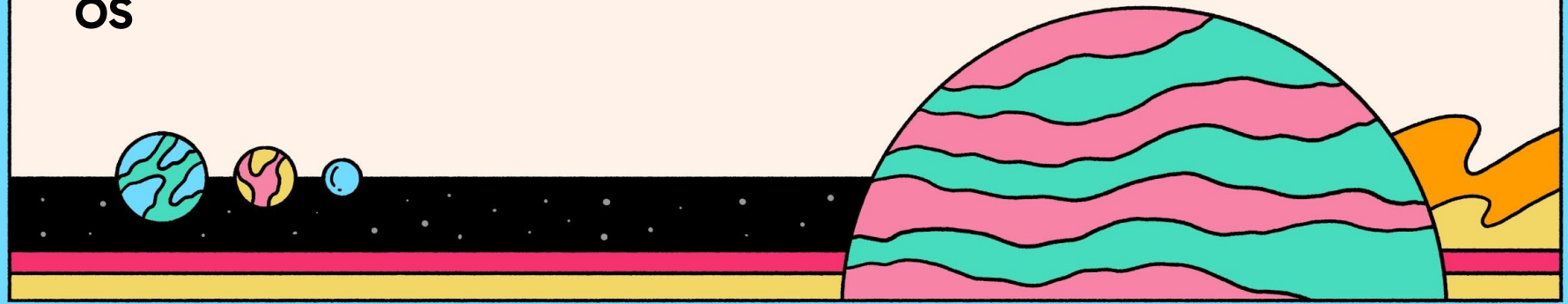
Execute on quick wins

Then...

Debug key problems

Finally...

Share and iterate



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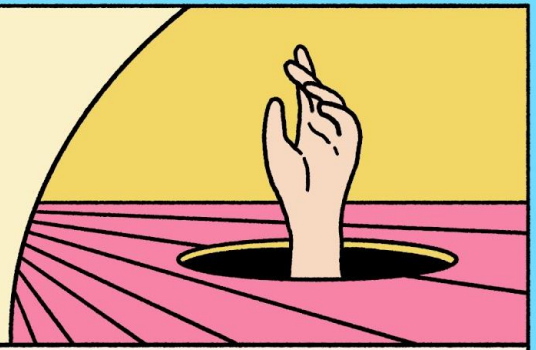

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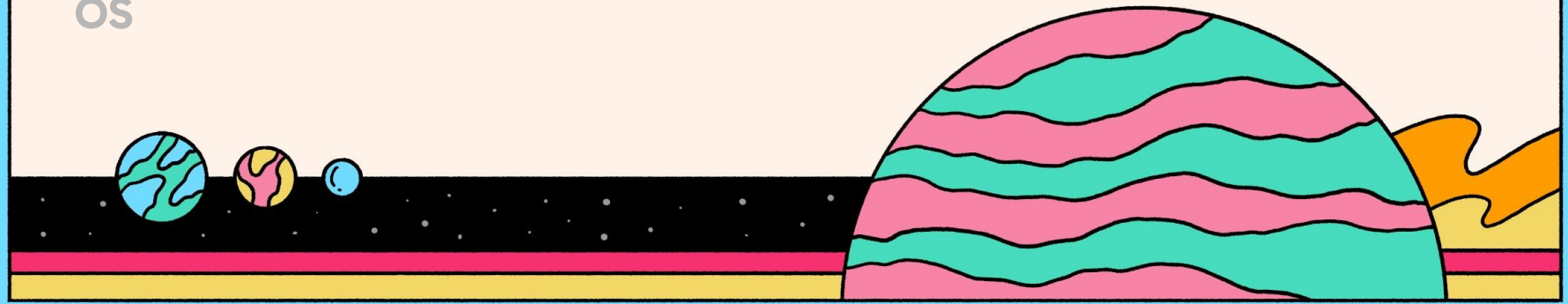

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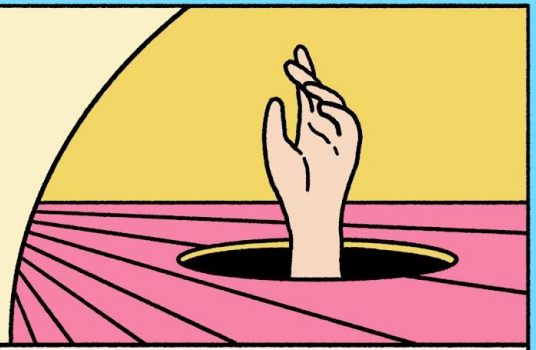

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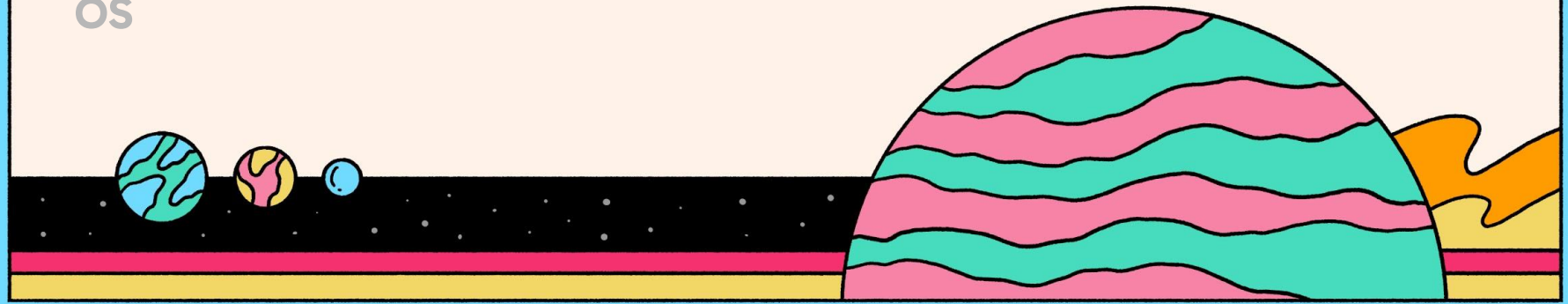

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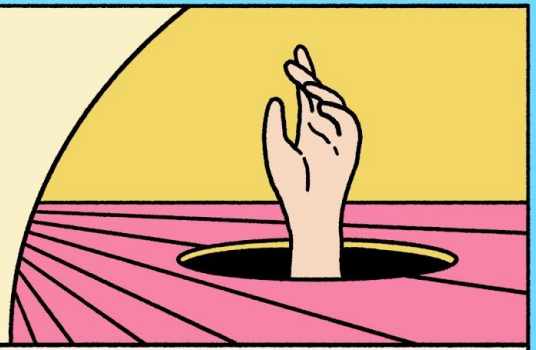

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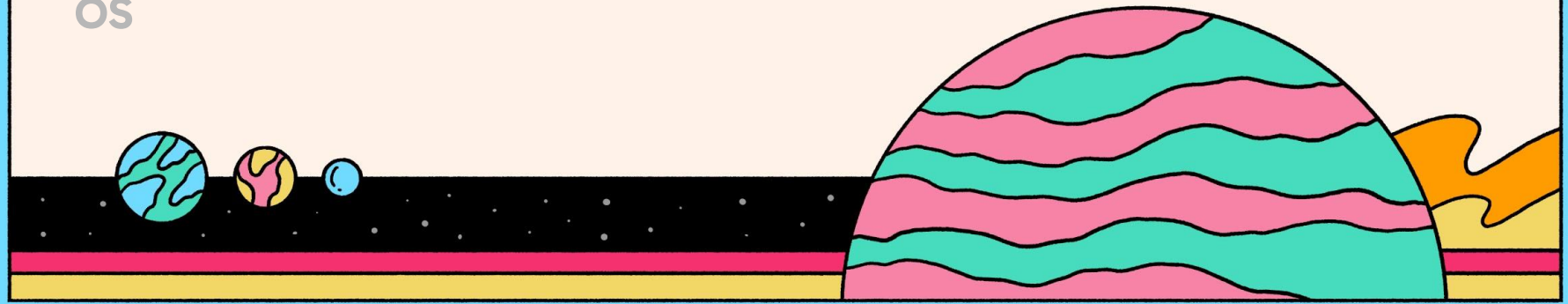
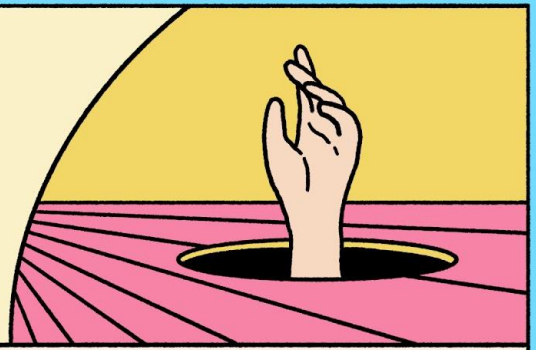


BUILDING OUR OS | Quick Wins

Little to no change management?
Go ahead and do it!

- Cull unused or overlapping channels
- Get rid of little-used tools
- Move, merge, eliminate meetings

How To: Build Your OS



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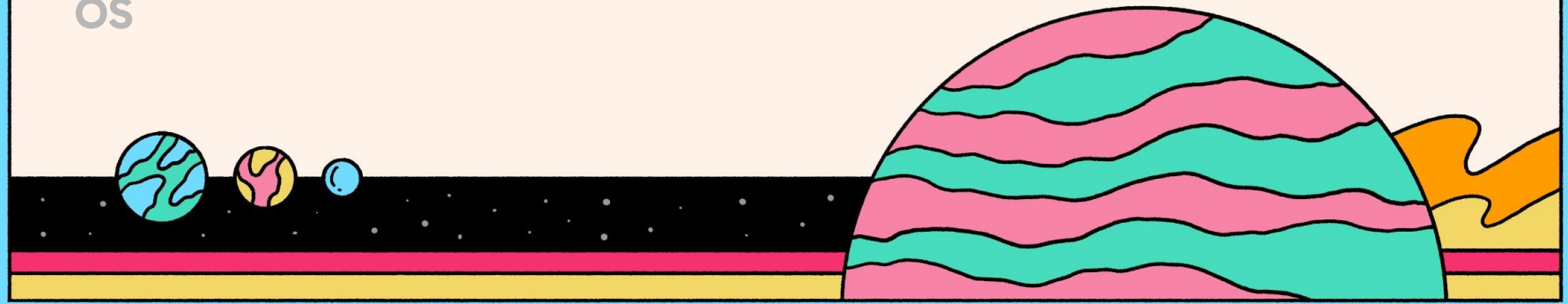

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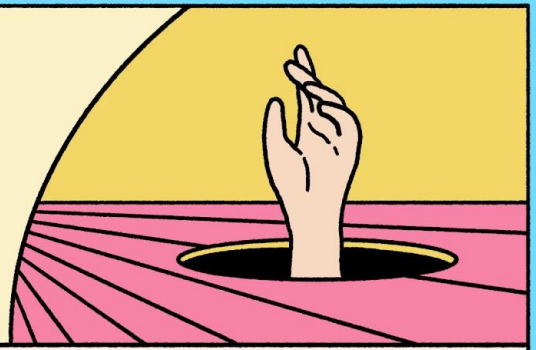

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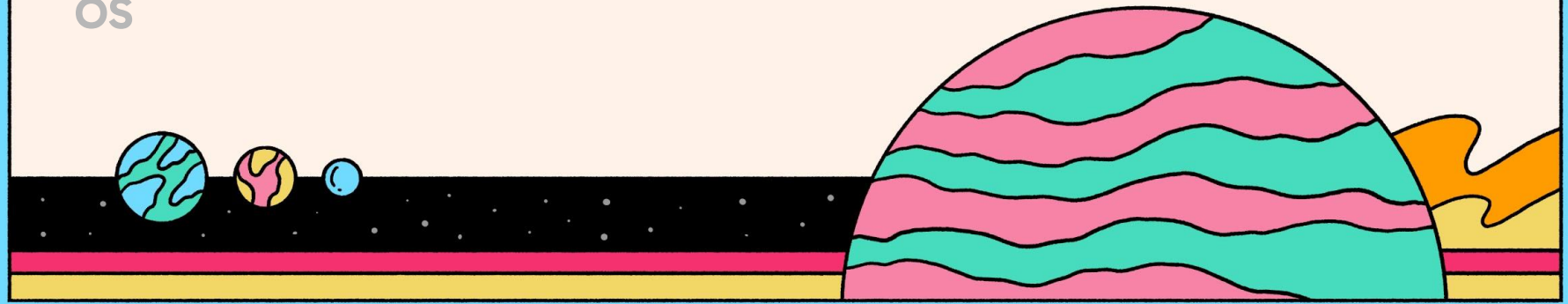

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People	• EMs and PMs are knowledge holders	
Structure		
Setting		
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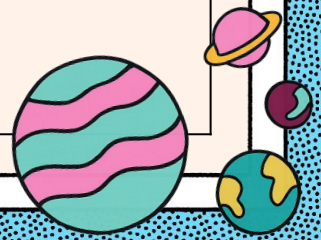

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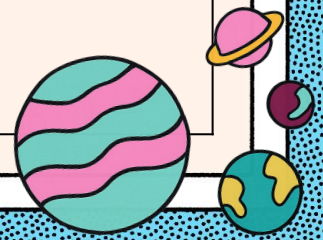

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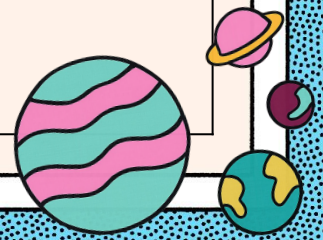

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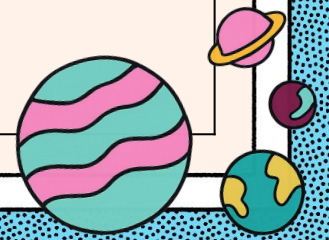

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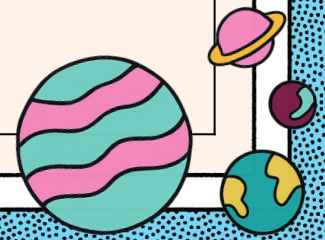

BUILDING OUR OS | Debugging

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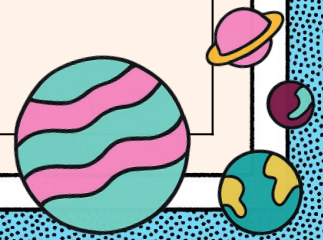

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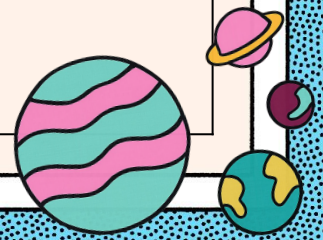

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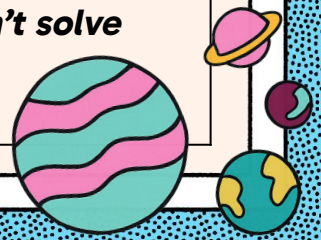


BUILDING OUR OS | Debugging

What's Cookin'?

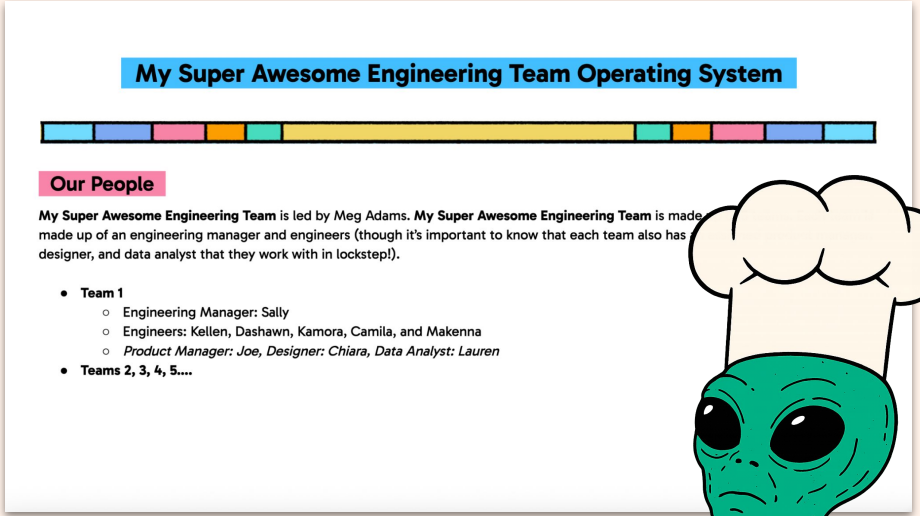
- Modify purpose and agenda of **existing meeting**

How am I communicating laterally?	**What's the objective of the communication?**
How does information flow cross-functionally? How does information flow from my team to teams?	
📆 **Weekly Super Awesome Product Alignment Meeting**	This meeting is to align with My Super Awesome Team leadership and drive visibility and alignment between teams. **This meeting (and the supplementary async track updates doc) is the PRIMARY place to get cross-track visibility on work before it starts.** The right moment t… idea is when it's a… track leadership b… you know how you w… accomplish it, but it's … and can take feedbac… redirection.
💬 #super-awesome-team-product-development	The Slack channel … product and engin… within the Super Aw… Remember to think … and share informati… questions appropriate fo… ll group here. If you want s… specific to see someth… to @ them. This is … to celebrate incre… learnings.

BUILDING OUR OS | Debugging

What's Cookin'?

- Modify purpose and agenda of **existing meeting**
- Rotate teams to **share updates and work in progress**



BUILDING OUR OS | Debugging

What's Cookin'?

- Modify purpose and agenda of **existing meeting**
- Rotate teams to **share updates and work in progress**
- **Rotate presenters** from each team

Norms

Here are some norms around how we work together.

Meetings

- Meetings are scheduled to start 5 minutes after (:05 and :35). This is intended to give people a break between meetings.
- In reality, meetings tend to just roll over (ending at :05 instead of :00 and :35 instead of :30), so people rush from meeting to meeting.
- People use the hand-raising function in Google Hangouts to wait to contribute – few people just chime in.
- People often also ask questions and contribute to the conversation via the chat feature.

Contribution and Participation

In observing My Super Awesome Team meetings, I noticed...

- A lot of information sharing happens in meetings.
- That information is often taken away for async decision making or decision making in a future meetin
- Group leads are often meeting facilitators and often the people sharing information. Because of this, talking time towards leadership voices.
- Leadership often asks questions. Individual contributors ask questions less.

Have I found the perfect solution...?

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We will know in time.

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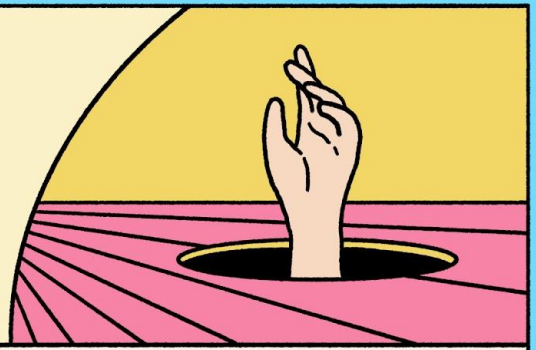

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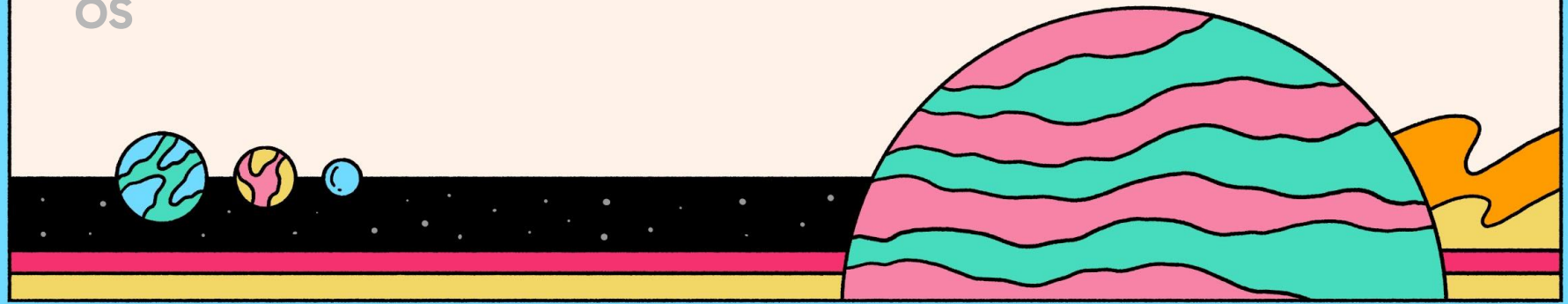

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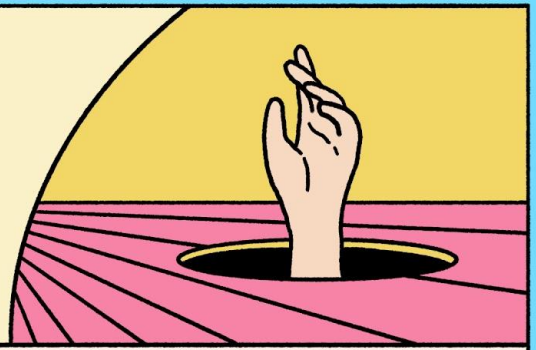

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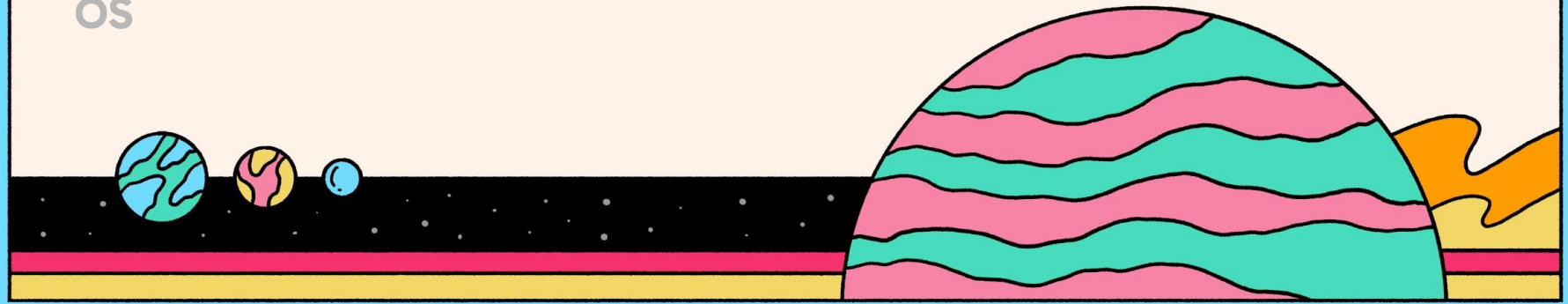
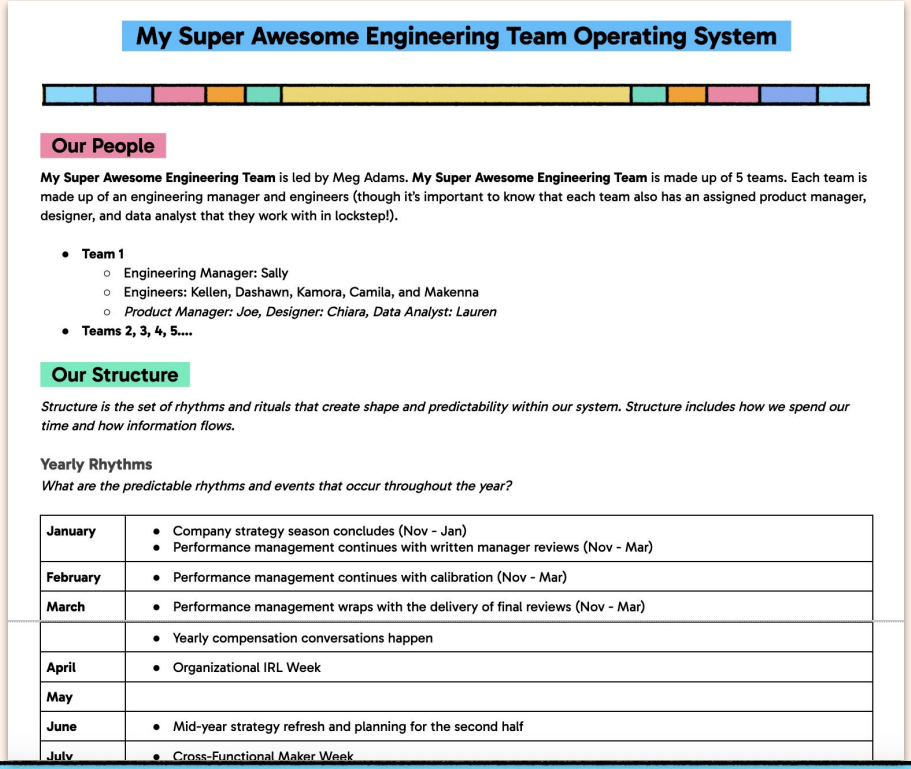


BUILDING OUR OS | Share and Iterate

- Publish **what's working.**



My Super Awesome Engineering Team Operating System

Our People

My Super Awesome Engineering Team is led by Meg Adams. **My Super Awesome Engineering Team** is made up of 5 teams. Each team is made up of an engineering manager and engineers (though it's important to know that each team also has an assigned product manager, designer, and data analyst that they work with in lockstep!).

- **Team 1**
  - Engineering Manager: Sally
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- **Teams 2, 3, 4, 5....**

Our Structure

Structure is the set of rhythms and rituals that create shape and predictability within our system. Structure includes how we spend our time and how information flows.

Yearly Rhythms

What are the predictable rhythms and events that occur throughout the year?

January	• Company strategy season concludes (Nov - Jan) • Performance management continues with written manager reviews (Nov - Mar)
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BUILDING OUR OS | Share and Iterate

- Publish **what's working.**
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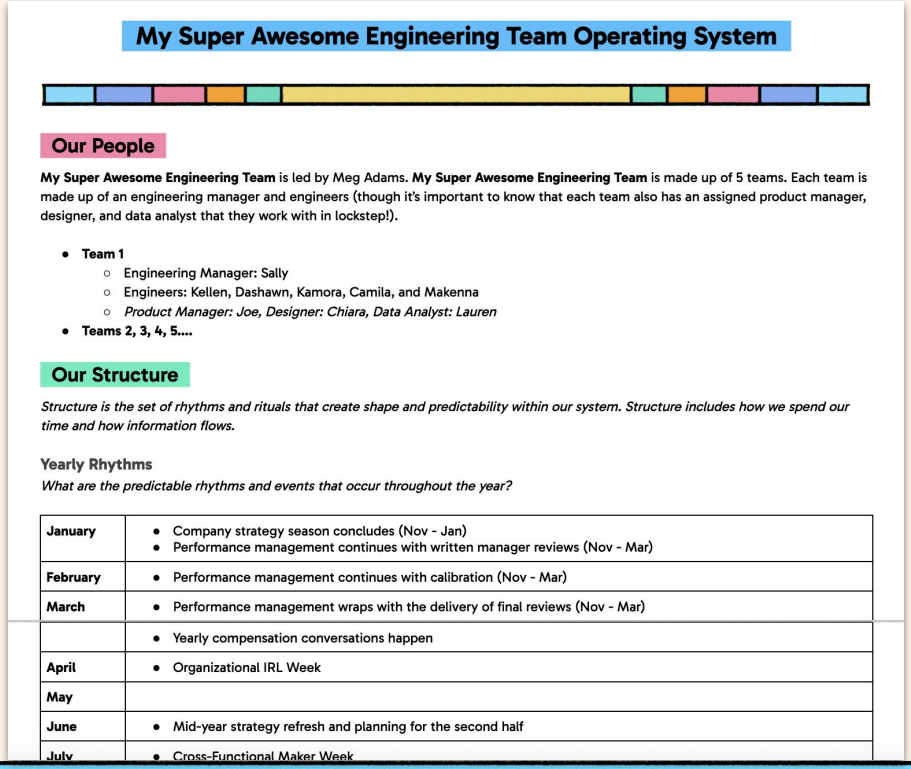

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- Publish **what's working.**
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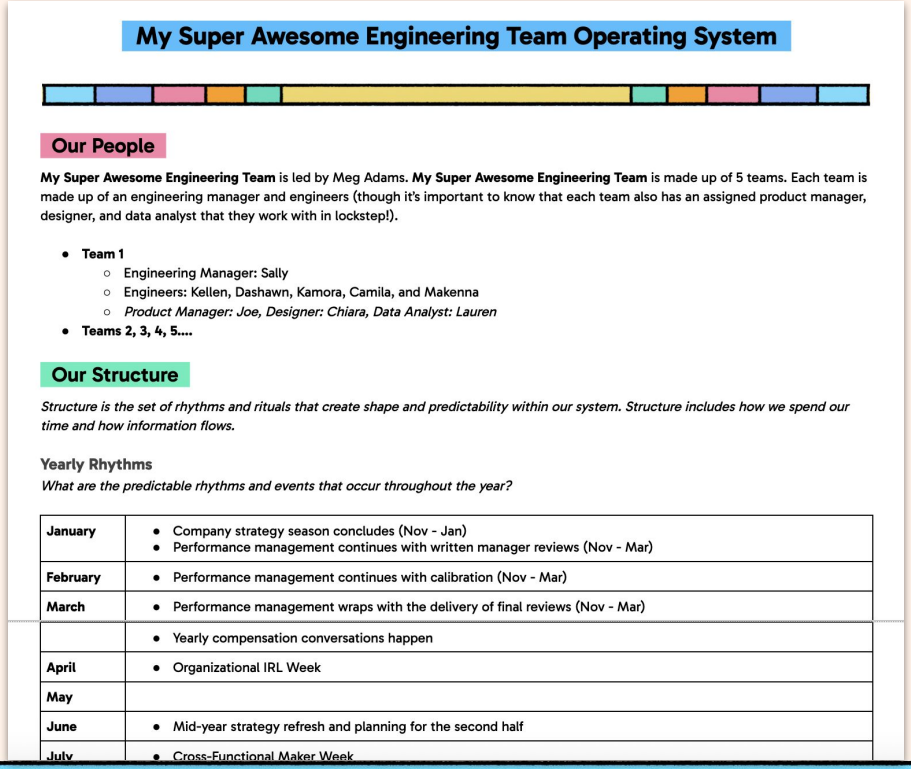

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BUILDING OUR OS | Share and Iterate

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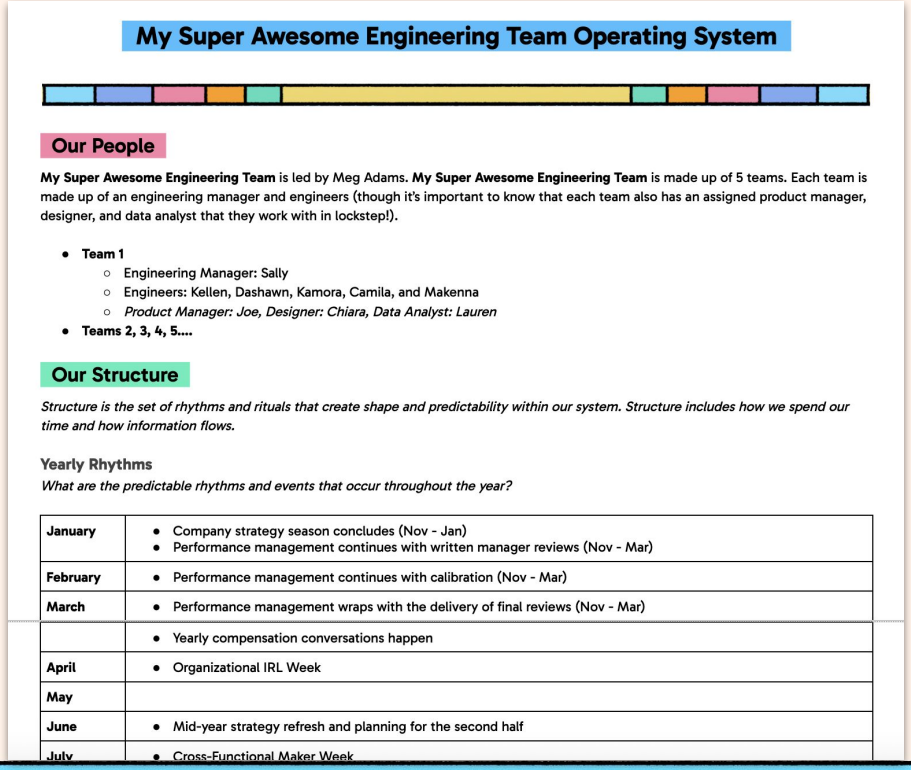

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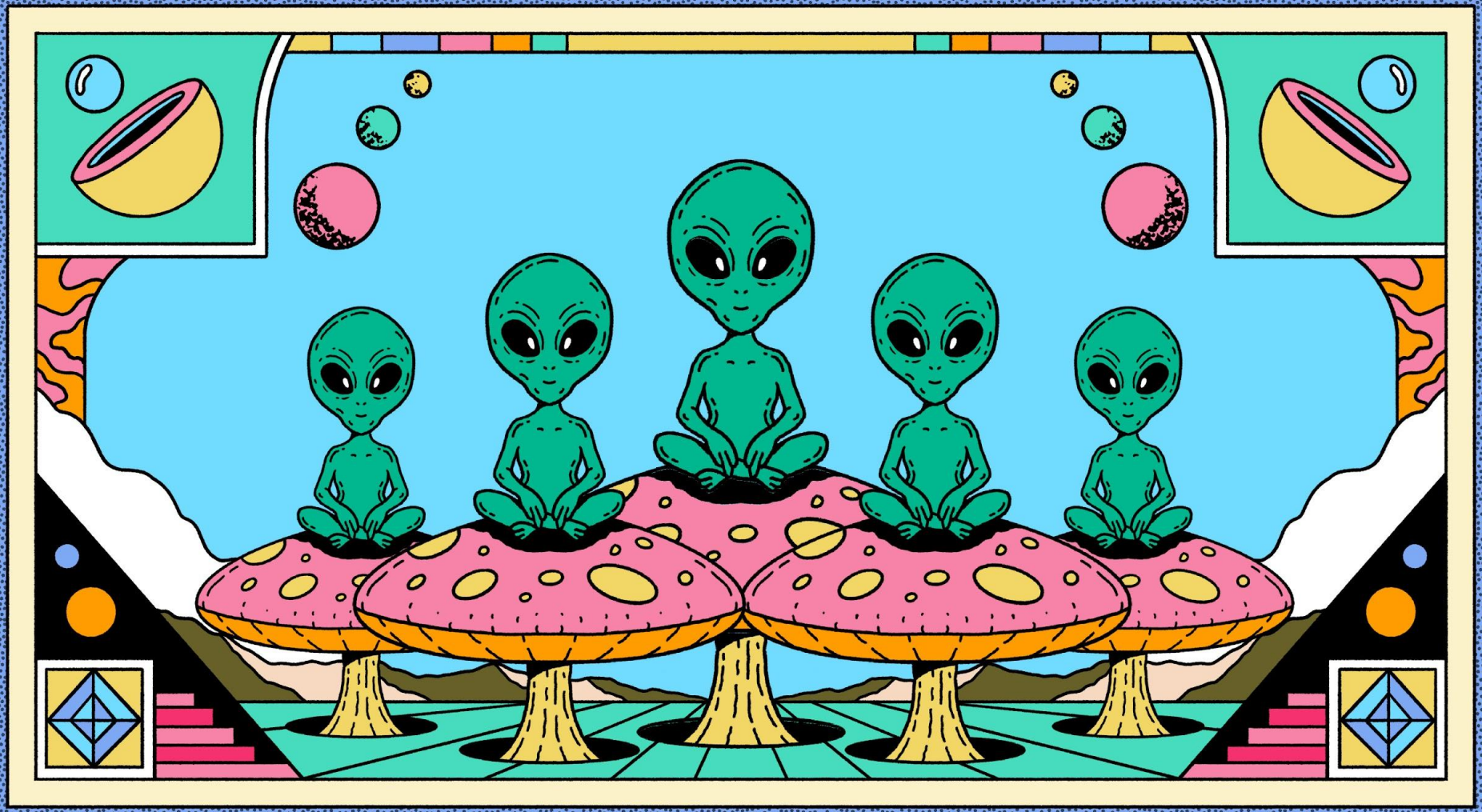
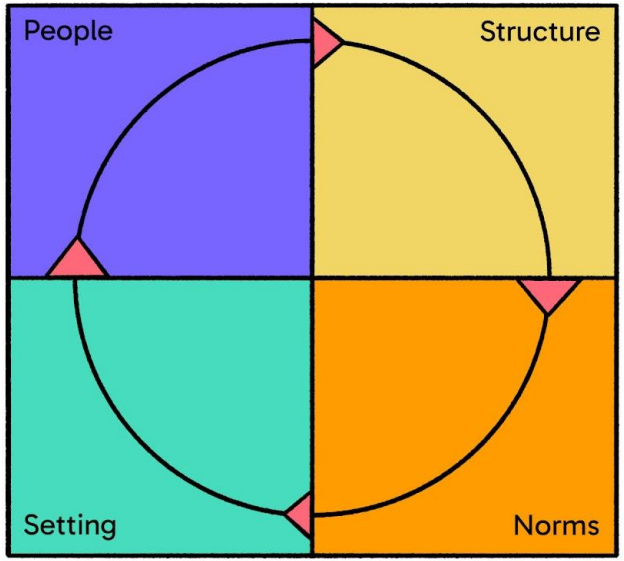


OPERATING SYSTEM

a purposeful construct of people, structure, setting, and norms, bounded by time



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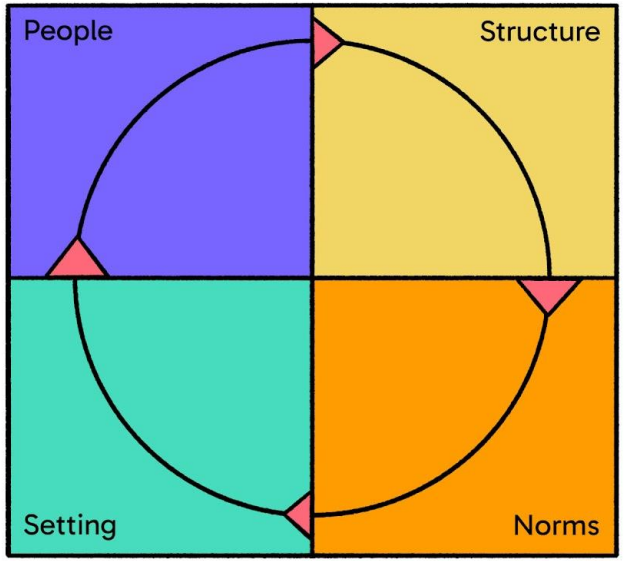

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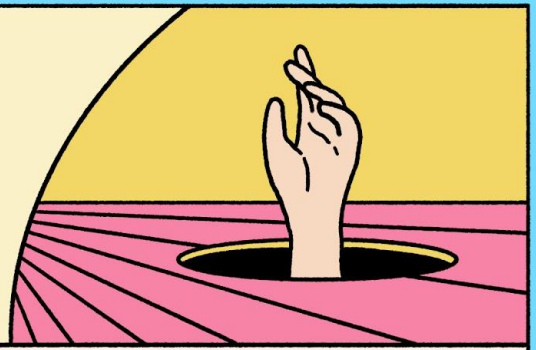

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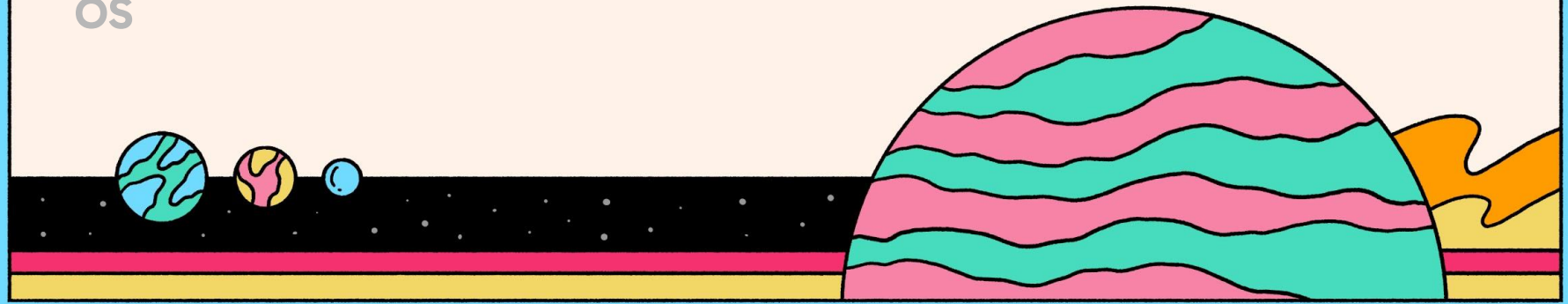

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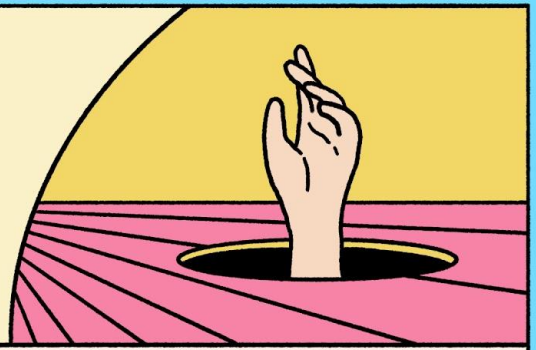

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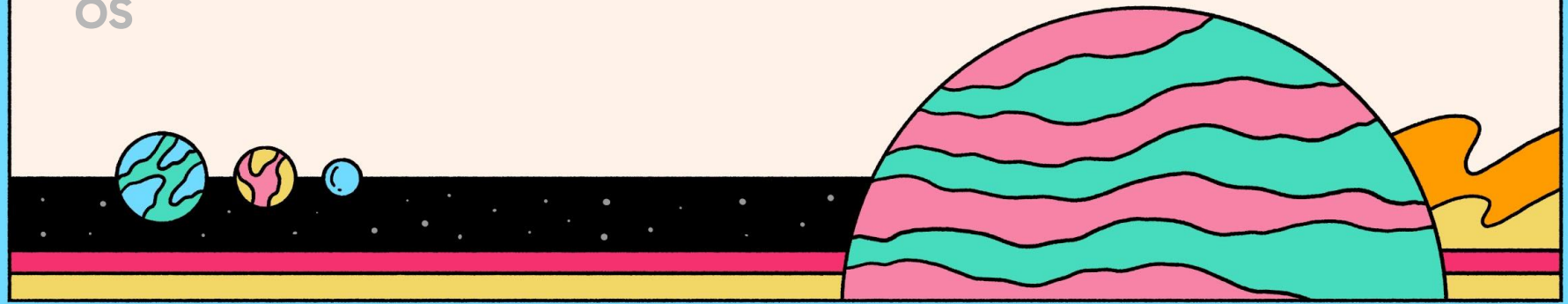

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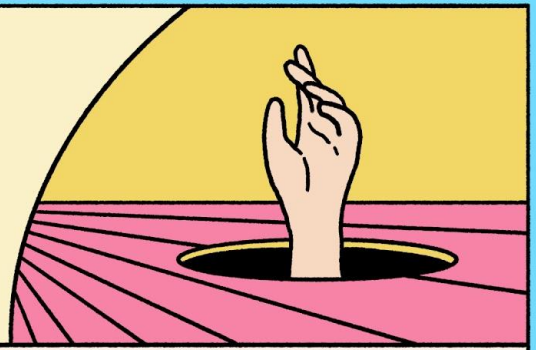

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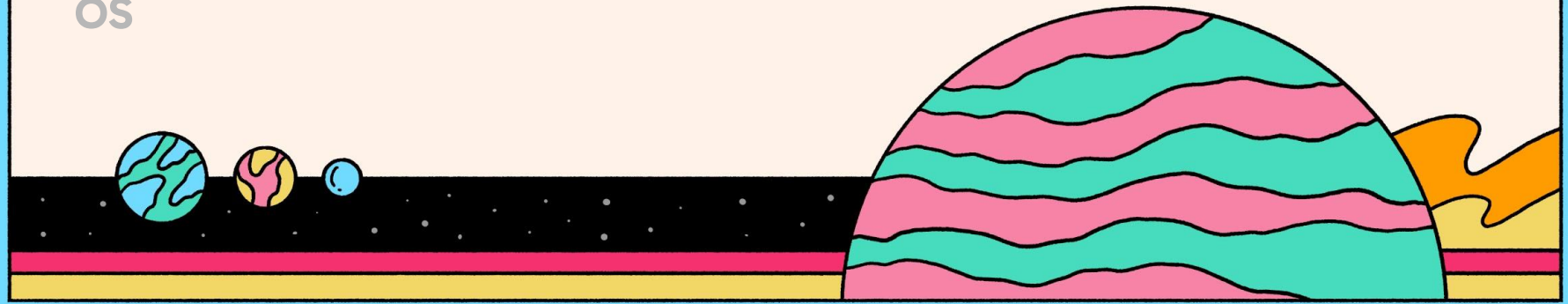
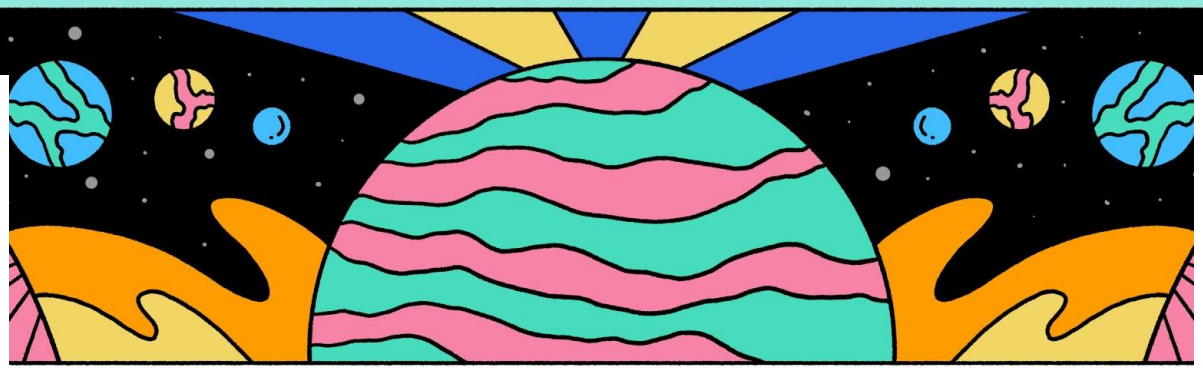


bit.ly/os-template

Theory to action: Architecting and implementing your team operating system

Meg Adams
Senior Director of Engineering at the New York Times