

# Getting Real About Managing Up.

Kellan Elliott-McCrea  
@kellan  
<https://kellanem.com>

# Thank you for coming!

Today:

- Who am I?
- Why “managing up” at a tech conference?
- The basics.
- Some advanced techniques
- What doesn't work.
- Questions?

Who am I?



# Managing up in tech

- Distinct from generic “managing up”
- 3 key contributors
  1. Modern Software Development is Deeply Entangled
  2. The Myth of the Apolitical Engineer
  3. The Growing Expectation  $\Leftrightarrow$  Eng Manager Skills Gap



# 1. Modern Software Development is Deeply Entangled

The screenshot displays a Trello board for the 'BigPicture Sample Data Program'. The board is organized into five columns, each representing a different team or role:

- Common Objectives:** Contains high-level goals such as 'PI-1' (due Dec 20), 'Preparing resources' (due Aug 10), 'Setting up teams' (due Dec 20), 'Gathering information' (due Sep 13), 'Assembling a party of heroes' (due Oct 17), and 'PI-2' (due Sep 11).
- Knights:** Tasks include 'Gather resources for forging weapons' (due Nov 27), 'Set up a place to forge weapons' (due Sep 1), 'Increase a muscle mass by 20%' (due Sep 25), 'Gather iron' (due Nov 27), 'Chop a large wood supply' (due Sep 25), 'Gather coal' (due Sep 25), 'Build a bonfire' (due Jul 24), and 'Start a forge' (due Sep 1).
- Squires:** Tasks include 'Gather resources for basic clothing items' (due Jul 18), 'Use skills to sew essential items for all teams' (due Jul 21), 'Hunt animals' (due Jul 18), 'Preserve meat' (due Jul 18), 'Skin hunted animals' (due Jul 11), 'Produce leather stripes and patches' (due Jul 14), 'Sew clothes' (due Jul 21), and 'Make shoes' (due Jul 20).
- Dragons:** Tasks include 'Ensure basic supplies are ready' (due Jul 27), 'Get all necessary intel from other teams' (due Aug 8), 'Garner magical ingredients' (due Jul 20), 'Gather herbs' (due Jul 20), 'Mouth-blow potion bottles' (due Jul 27), 'Weave canvas for bandages' (due Jul 27), 'Gather information about other teams needs for potions and bandages' (due Jul 18), and 'Estimate the number of potions and bandages needed for the entire' (no due date).
- Witch:** Tasks include 'Take care of magical resources and tasks' (due Jul 31), 'Gather magical supplies and plan the actions' (due Aug 8), 'Whittle wands' (due Aug 4), 'Summon animal companions and minions' (due Jul 31), 'Replenish your Mana supply' (due Jul 24), 'Prepare scrolls and quill pens' (due Aug 7), 'Put on a pointy wizard hat' (due Aug 8), and 'Master your witchcraft skills' (due Sep 11).

Each task card features a progress bar, a due date, and icons of the team members assigned to the task. The board interface includes a search bar, navigation icons, and a 'Show Menu' option.



# The Myth of the Apolitical Engineer

I don't want to engage in politics I just want to ...

- be allowed to do my work
- let the work speak for itself
- let the data speak for itself
- explain why this technology is clearly superior
- build a prototype to prove the point

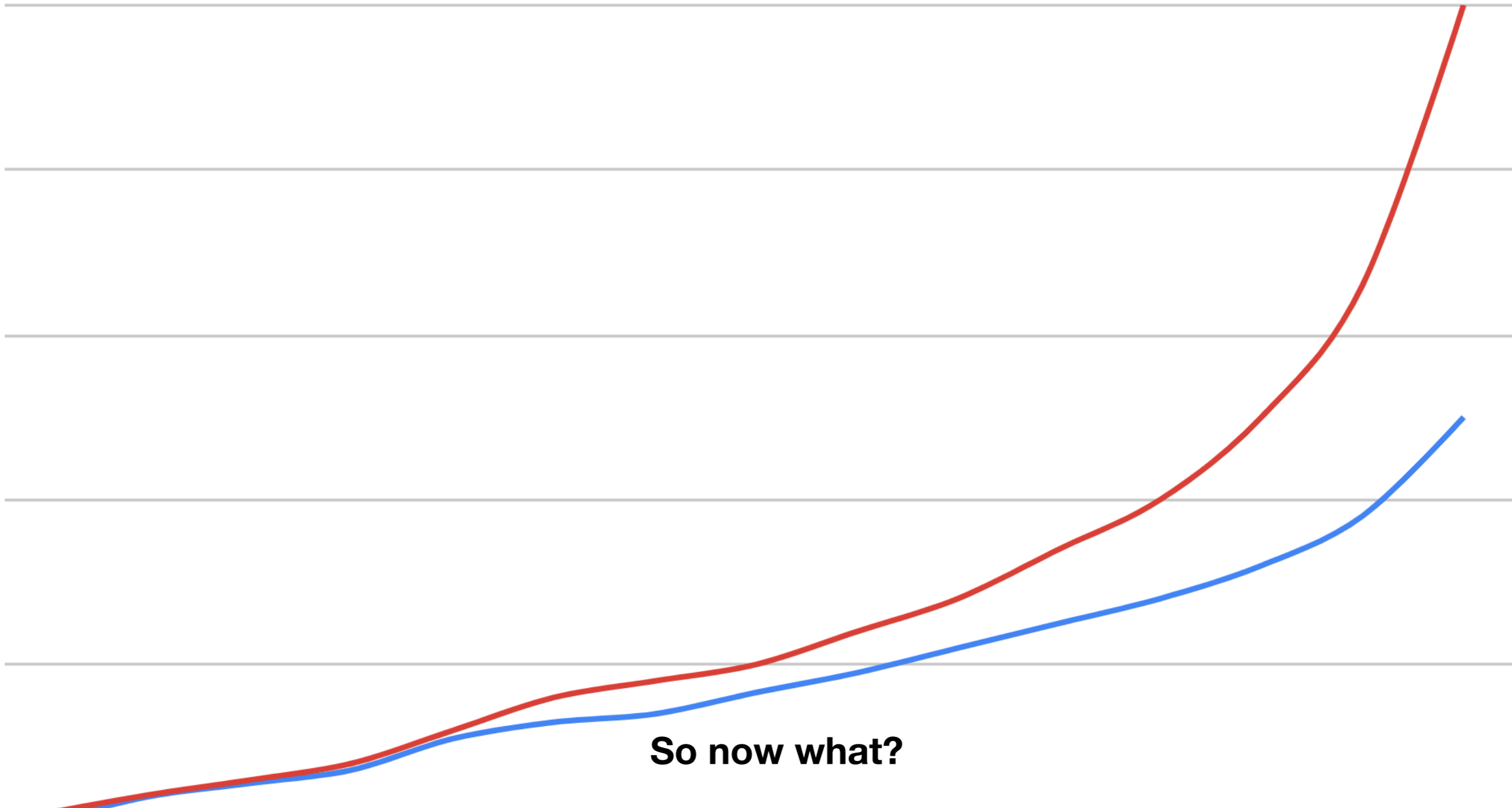


# The Growing Expectation

## <=> Eng Manager Skill Gap

Quality Eng Leaders

Need for Quality Eng Leaders



So now what?

# Influence Based Leadership

- *Staff Engineer - "You are entrusted with a significant amount of influence ... identify off-roadmap opportunities where we are under-serving business goals and can use their influence to get them on-roadmap ... They mentor other engineers and take on sponsorship responsibilities."*

**What does that mean?**



**It's a trap!**



# **The Basics**

Make your manager's job easier.

- Get Curious
- Understanding your manager and their job
- Build a Positive Relationship
- Make Your Manager Look Good

# **Get Curious**

- “What did they say when you asked them that question?”

# Understanding Your Manager and Their Job

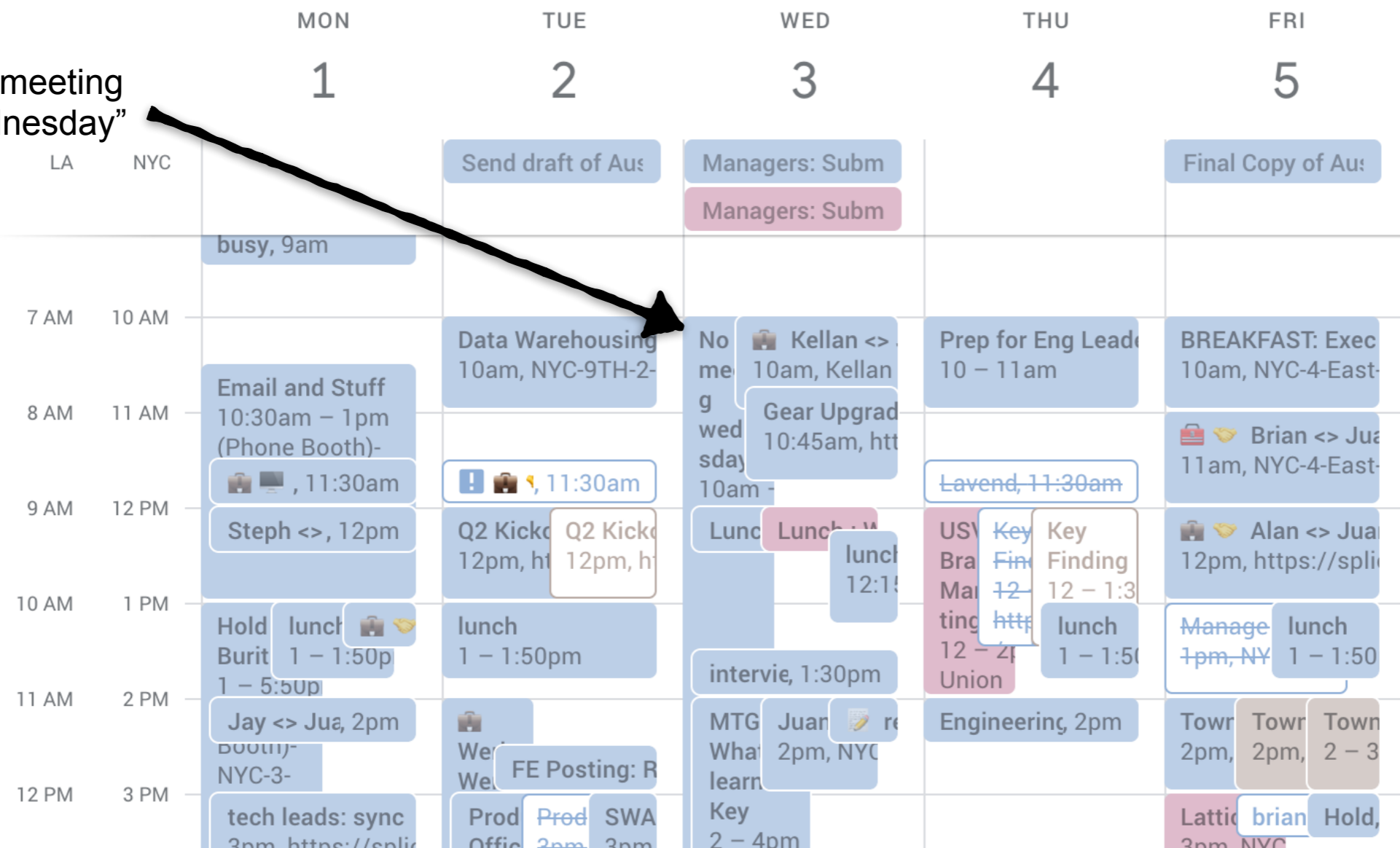
The most important thing to know:

**Your manager spends about 85-90% of their time thinking about themselves (because they're a human).**



# Understanding Your Manager's Different Perception of Time

“No meeting Wednesday”



# Questions regarding your manager

- What exactly is their job?
- What do they value?
- How are they being evaluated?
- What are they particularly good at?

*Don't be surprised if your manager can't answer these questions. If this stuff was easy they'd already be doing it!*

# Establish a Positive Relationship

- Get to know them.
- Keep it mostly constructive.
- In the beginning, keep it actionable.
- It's okay to complement them. Make sure it's genuine.



# **Make Your Boss Look Good**

- Align yourself with your team's mission.
- Do great work.
- Equip them to speak fluently about your work.
- Translate into their frame.
- Help them see around blindspots.

# Help Them See Around Blindspots

- Management breeds blindspots.
- Even the best managers need to be managed up to.
- *“It’s my job to be pushing, I need you to tell me when it looks like I’m pushing us off a cliff.”*
- Who is killing it? Where is distraction coming from?
- *“I had lunch with some folks from marketing and did you know they have a totally different idea on how to drive conversion?”*

**Is it working?**



# Advanced Techniques

- Ask for advice, not feedback.
- Closed loop communication.
- Your boss is repeating themselves, listen.
- Dealing with an unreasonable desire for detail.
- Give them something to talk about.



# Ask for advice

- *“Do you have any feedback for me?”*



# Closed Loop?

- The Zeigarnik effect
- A contract to push your manager the information they need.
- Sitting on the [CEO] during an outage



# Your boss is repeating themselves, listen.

- *“You know, the best boss I ever had just left me alone to do my work.”*
- *“It seems like we aren’t hiring fast enough?”*
- *“I’m worried about our July deadline.”*





# Dealing with unreasonable requests for detail.

- *“I just need to know what everyone is going to be working on every hour between now and launch so I can help people prioritize.”*



# Give them something to talk about.



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/allspaw/5436215259/>



# Some things that don't work.

- “I got this”.
- Drown them in details.
- Catastrophizing.
- They should appreciate me for me.
- That's not my job.



# *“I got this”*

- It's good to talk about your challenges.
- When you don't talk about them your boss just assumes you are clueless and don't know about them.



# Drown them in details

- *“Why are they micro-managing me? If they really want to know what I’m up to let me subscribe them to all the Github notification emails!”*
- Like, “I got this”, your boss just assumes you don’t know what’s important.



# Catastrophizing

- *“Oh my god, everything is broken, this sucks, it’s all awful!!”*

*/giphy jack nicholson “you can’t handle the truth”*



# Appreciate me for me.

- Being loved and appreciated for who we are is a basic human need. And not what work is for.
- Remember, I'm not thinking about you.





# That's not my job.

- *“Sounds like you are asking me to manage the team, that's not my job.”*
- No. I'm asking you, as the subject matter expert who wants respect, to help out.
- **A word of caution:** bias and the perception of “non-technical” work.

# **Stressed boss vs Bad boss**

- Your attempts to manage up won't always be appreciated.
- It won't always be a good idea to try to make things better.

# Questions?

- Thank you for coming!
- And thank you to the many friends I've discussed this with over the years including: Julia Evans, Duretti Hirpa, Maggie Zhou, Silvia Botros, Allison Kaptur, Alice Goldfuss, Camille Fournier, Marco Rogers, Jason Wong, Juan Pablo Buritica, Harry Heymann, James Turnbull, Michael Gorsuch, Andrew Morrison, Dan McKinley, and Niccolò Machiavelli (obviously none of these people are responsible for the egregious mistakes in this talk)
- A couple of additional resources:
  - “Help! I have a manager” by Julia Evans - <https://wizardzines.com/zines/manager/>
  - “The Manager’s Path” by Camille Fournier - <http://shop.oreilly.com/product/0636920056843.do>