Role and Influence

The IC trajectory beyond Staff

Yonatan Zunger • LeadDev 2021

yzunger@twitter.com • @yonatanzunger



Yonatan Zunger

He/Him
Distinguished Engineer @ Twitter

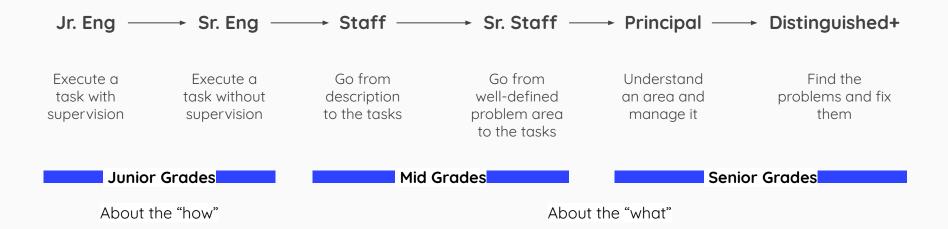


How your work, and your influence, change with level



The IC path

Levels are about **increasing independence** at managing systems of **growing complexity**.

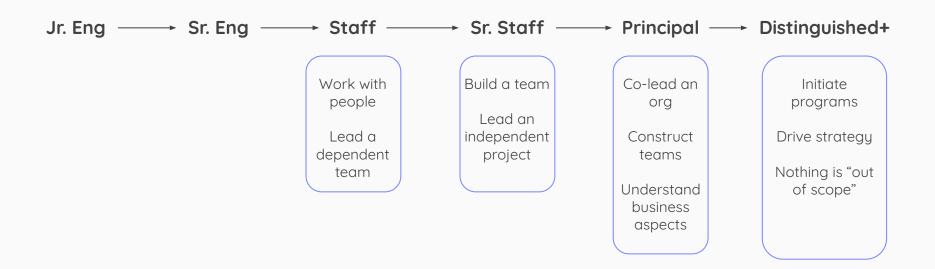


The IC path

Hidden in this: the scope of problems grows.

- The meaning of "IC" gets fuzzier.
- People are a part of the system teams, stakeholders, users, customers, etc.
- A growing expectation to identify problems of any sort and work with others to fix them.

The IC path



The Four Disciplines

Every job has four groups of skills

The core **technical skill** (software engineering, UX, litigation, etc)

Product management: Figuring out *what* needs to be done and *why*. Building the narrative and strategic vision. Prioritizing and sequencing.

Project management: Figuring out what needs to happen and making sure it does. Herding the cats and making order out of chaos.

People management: Finding the right people for the job and turning them into a team. Building them and their careers.

From a personal perspective

These jobs have NOTHING to do with what's on your business card. The higher your level, the less they connect.

You won't be equally good at all four; you won't like them equally; your preferences will change over time.

Exercise:

Discuss your first thoughts about all four and have a friend watch your emotional response as you discuss them. Look for where you get excited.

From a team perspective

Every team needs leadership of all four types.

You need to know which roles you're able to step into, and advocate from those perspectives.

Your combo shapes the kind of influence you have:

- Just engineering: Hyperspecialist (and your influence wanes)
- + Other tech skills (beyond eng): Bridge and communicator
- + Product mgt: Become a strategic leader, shape direction
- + People mgt: Become a mentor to the company, the person IC's turn to
- + Project mgt: Become an operational leader, drive execution

The Fifth Discipline

Adult Supervision

With experience comes good sense. Engineers make excellent **adult** supervision.

What makes engineers good adult supervision?

- You aren't freaked out, because you've seen this before.
- All engineering splits into product engineering (how things should work) and safety
 engineering (how things might fail). Experience makes you more conscious of the latter.
- You learn this
 - ... more at big companies than startups: need experience of risk mattering
 - ... from maintaining systems over time
 - ... from **diversity of experience** (and I *don't* just mean eng experience!)
 - ... from understanding more about people

Conclusion

Understanding your role explains how you can influence

- Every level at Staff+ represents a different job role
- Growing scope of problems you think about
- Your voice as a product, people, and project leader
- Your experience at dealing with things going wrong