

# Having an impact beyond your team

(without hurting your day job)

by **Matt Newkirk**

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Hi everyone! It's amazing to see so many of you here and hello to everyone watching this stream.

I'm Matt Newkirk and use he/him pronouns. I'm a director of engineering at Etsy and work on international customer experiences.

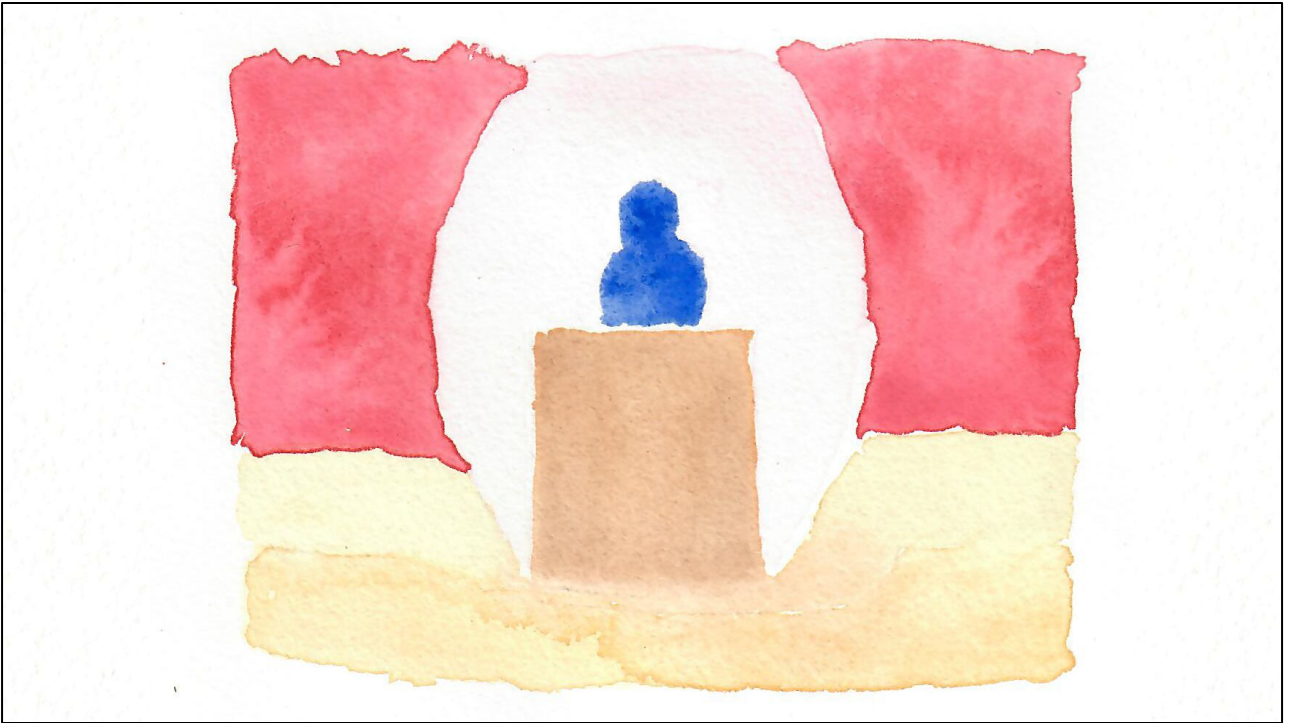
Welcome to my talk on having an impact beyond your team without hurting your day job!

I chose this topic because of my own experiences in the area. I didn't start with a playbook on being impactful, and when I tried to suggest solutions to tackle company issues, my leaders didn't get it. They didn't see the problems the way I did, they didn't see the value of the solutions I was bringing them, and I lost credibility with my frustration. It took me another few years and a lot of advice before I started to figure things out. I hope my experience can be informative and give you some tips for getting started.

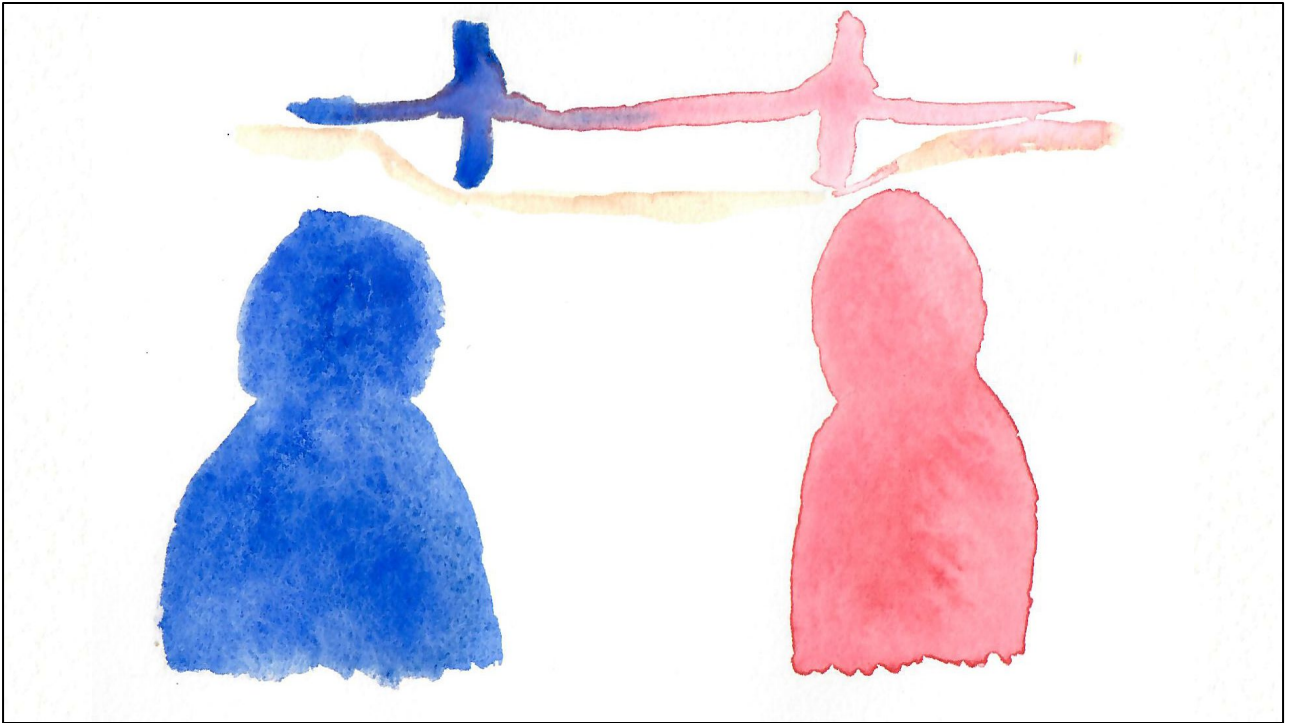
Let's take a moment and think of a time you felt like you needed to take action beyond your team.



- You just got an email about a major policy change that doesn't make sense to you.
  - Why are they doing this to us?

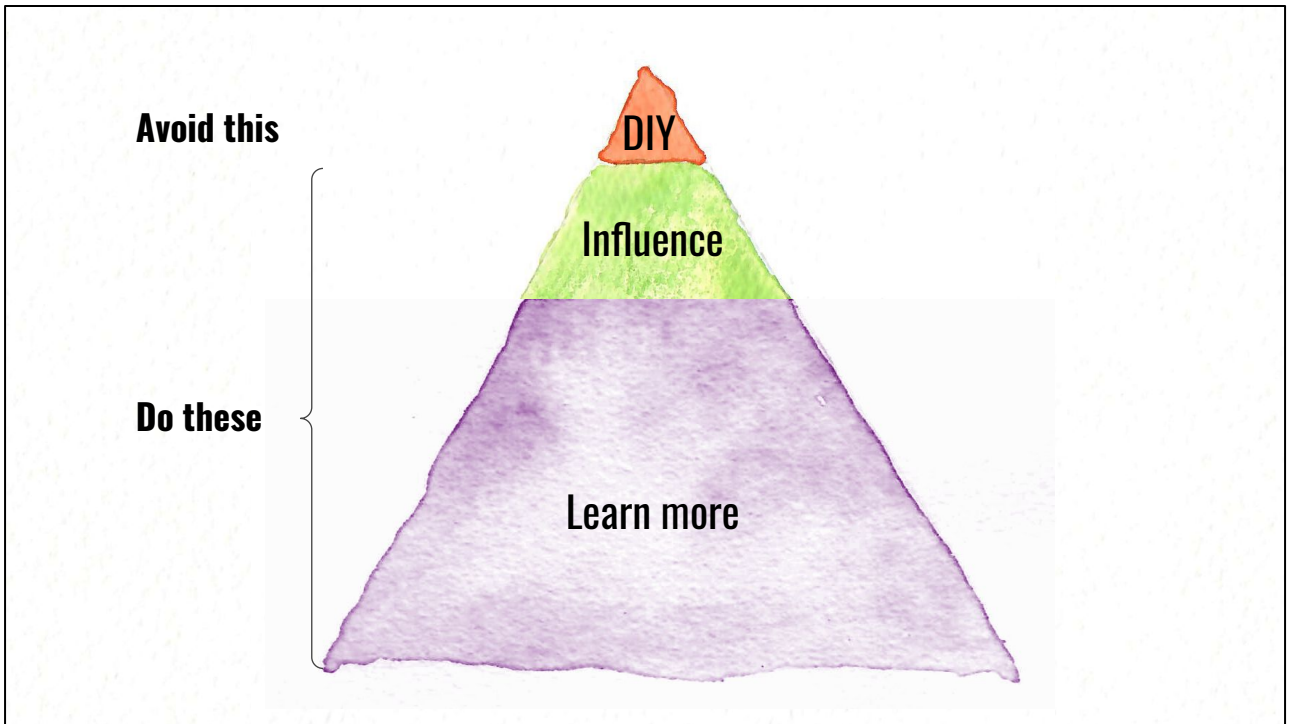


- In a company all hands, a leader said something and now you're feeling defensive. Did that person just say that they hate engineers?
  - What does this mean for me and my team?



- You're talking with a colleague and you realize that there's some sort of gap. This can be big or small, simple or complex. Think about HR publishing an existing document more broadly, creating an internship program, creating an Employee Resource Group program, and the like.
  - It feels like we have a solution, what's standing in the way?

When I started writing this talk, I thought I'd be spending most of the time talking about working groups, but as I reflected on where I've seen the most benefit, I realized that the hardest part for me was figuring out how to be impactful **without** forming a working group.



I started to think about it in terms of this pyramid of response, and I think the most crucial layer is at the bottom: gaining a shared understanding of the situation. Sometimes learning is all that you need to do to feel satisfied, or to feel like it's a lower priority for now.

The more that you're able to understand the full system, the more you're able to offer a suggestion that improves the situation. This is one of those opportunities to influence without authority which are both so hard and so rewarding.

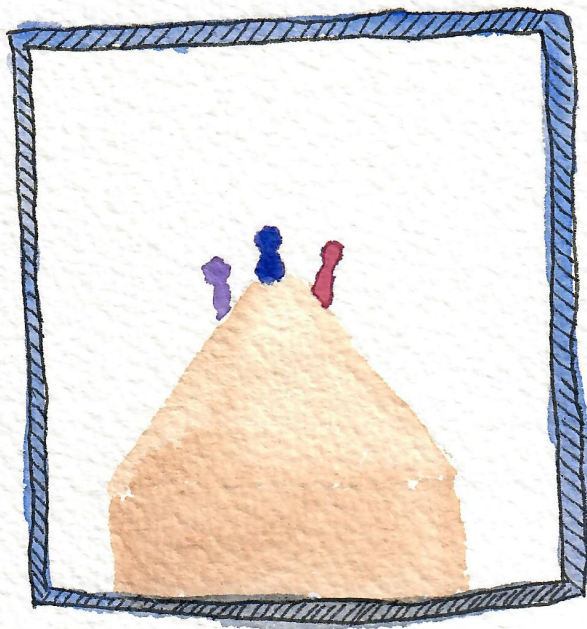
At the very top is making a change by Doing It Yourself. This is the most time-intensive for you, the least certain outcome, and can be the most fraught if you aren't careful. This usually means starting a working group or taking on a heroic effort to do something alone.

## Know Your Problem

As a remote meeting attendee,

I want to feel included

So that I can participate



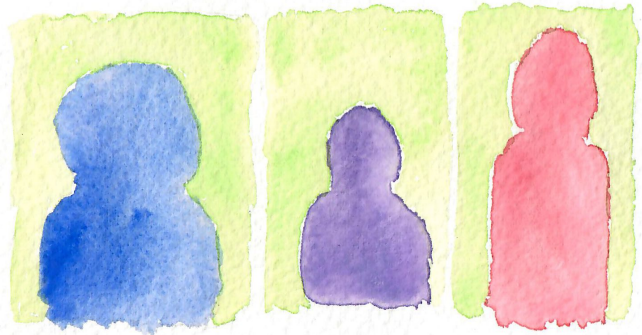
Earlier in my career I thought that if I understood my problem and saw a potential solution, that was enough to get the job done. In one of those early situations, I could see a very specific problem:

When I was dialed into a large meeting of co-located folks, I felt isolated and ignored. Folks didn't look at the camera which was far from the discussion, and even if they did, I couldn't see them very well because of the distance. At the same time, I felt new to my role and unsure of myself. I wasn't sure that people would listen to me even if I had their full attention, and this technology issue meant that it felt like I never had a chance.



## Know Your Solution

- ✓ I can see their faces and body language
- ✓ We can buy our way out of this



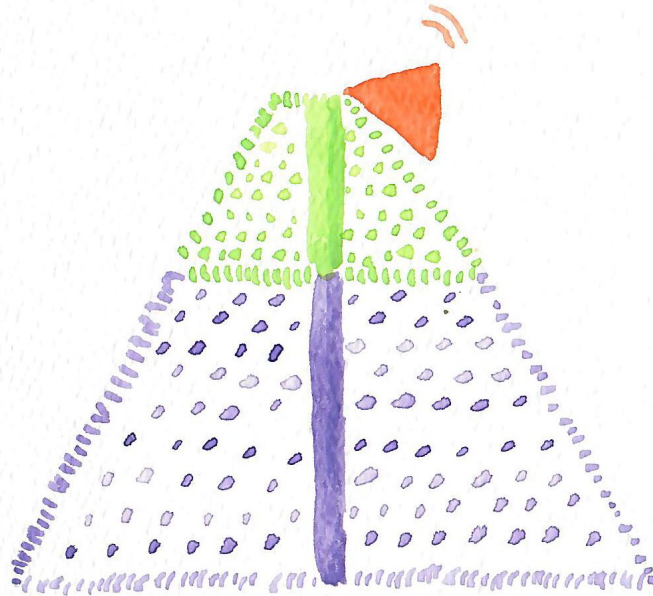
One day I was at a party and we decided to dial some other folks into the party. Our host had a 360 degree camera and set it on the table, and magically it felt like we were able to include the remote folks a lot more easily! At the next party, I dialed in and it was terrific. I started to think that something like this could really help out at work.

I understood my problem, and I had an idea of a solution, so the story obviously ends there happily ever after, right? Not quite.

I asked my IT team to try this camera out, and they were reluctant. It hadn't been approved by our meeting software vendor, and they didn't have time or budget to look into it anyway. OK, now I had two problems to solve. Fortunately, I had a solution for the second problem, too! I ordered the camera myself. I figured we could try it out with our meeting software in a very ad-hoc way, and then we'd at least know if it was worth pursuing later when time and budget freed up. IT asked me to please stop.

I stopped, but I was silently seething. I had solutions to these problems, so why couldn't we just use them?

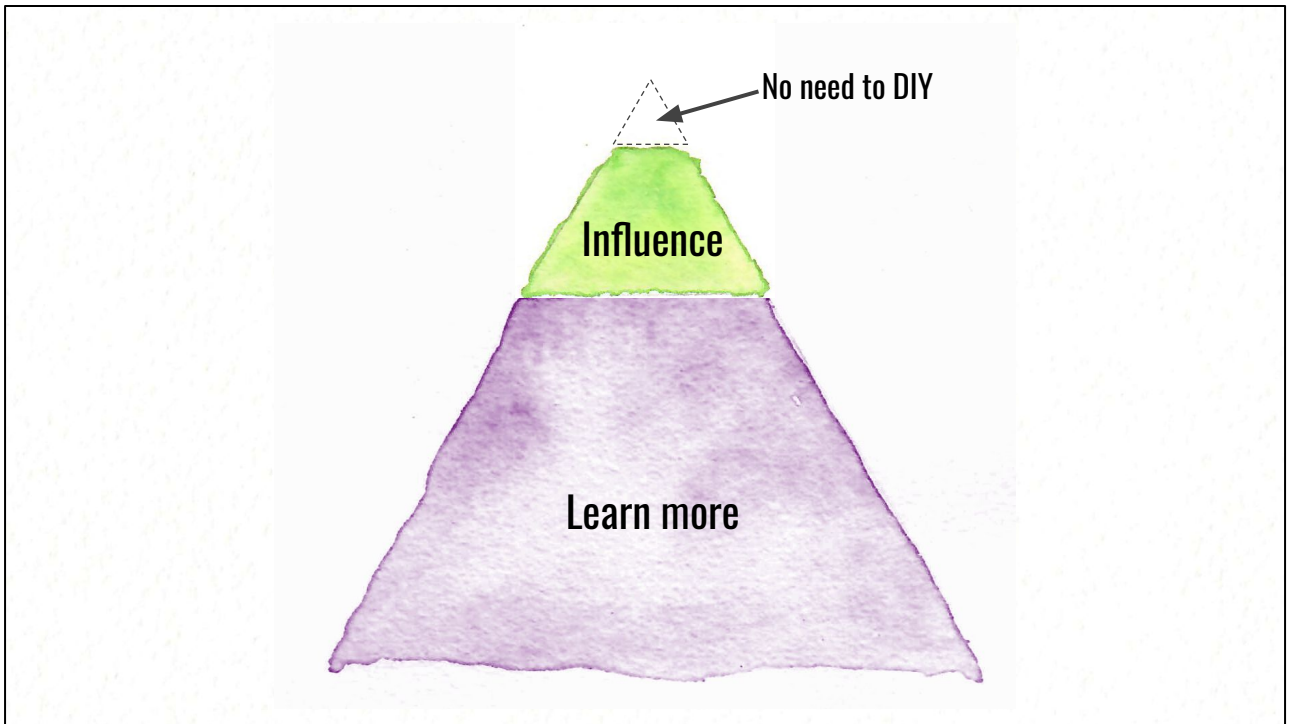
## Successful action requires a foundation of understanding and influence



Going back to the pyramid, I only had a narrow understanding of the system, and made the bare minimum attempt to influence an outcome. And that meant I didn't know what could turn a No into a Yes for the IT team or what made this hard. I didn't understand almost anything beyond my narrow understanding of my user story.

If I had spoken with them at more length, I might have realized that our A/V systems were still relatively new and we couldn't change them so quickly. They still had a major roadmap of work to complete and anything that distracted from that could mean they'd have to stand up in front of our executive team and say "Hey, we missed our company goals but Matt Newkirk is 15% happier now."

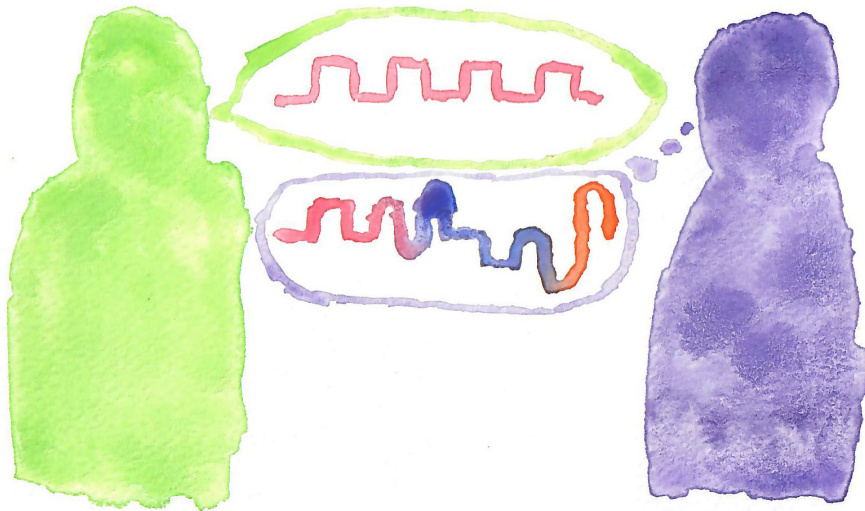




This story does have a happy ending, though. I didn't get my camera that year, but I learned who to talk to about these issues. I found ways to share feedback when it came to designing our technology to support our culture, and eventually saw my problem go away.

That experience also gave me the nudge that I needed to learn how to focus my attention on the bottom of the pyramid, how to learn more, as we'll talk about next.

## Miscommunication is incredibly common

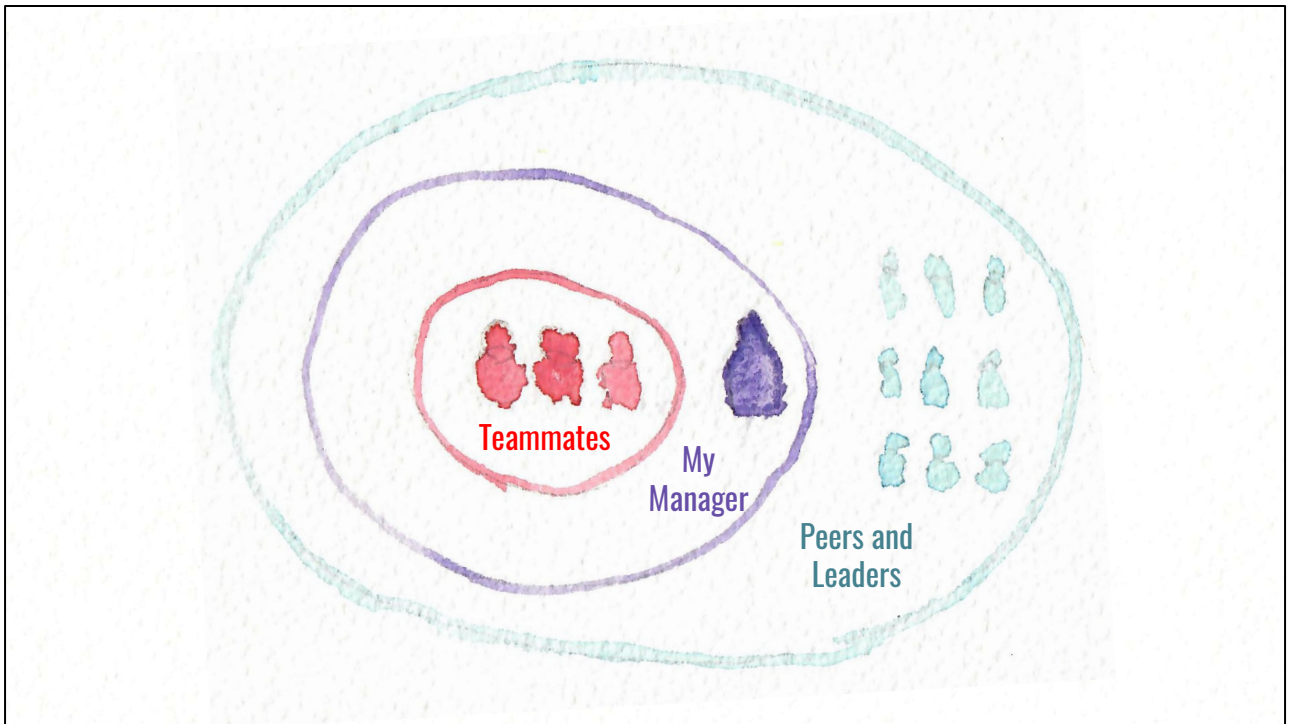


When I think about learning more, I try to remember that ***miscommunication is incredibly common because we rely on other people to tell us how well they've understood us, and we usually don't ask.***

I think of myself as a pretty good communicator, but I make a lot of mistakes. I say the opposite of what I intended, I get distracted and leave key information unsaid, and I occasionally forget to give enough context when sharing news of my decisions.

I'm a leader, and I make mistakes, and something I've come to learn is that there isn't a level of leadership at which the mistakes stop happening.

It's not that we're running around being negligent, but sometimes we need someone who thinks differently and with different information to tell us where we missed a step. This is also why asking clarifying questions can be so beneficial, because it helps folks understand how to communicate better next time.



So, who do we talk to? Going back to those three provocations, if we're talking about an announcement, I talk to the announcer. They might have just been representing the information for someone else, and they'll direct me to that other person.

If it's more of a discovered gap, or I'm not sure who to talk to, my strategy is to ask folks in roughly this order:

- My immediate teammates, especially if this feels like a cross-functional concern,
- My manager, especially if this feels like something at a higher scope than mine. If they don't know, I would check with their manager.
- A broader set of peers and leaders. Other engineering managers or directors, members of our senior leadership team, and even sometimes all of our engineers.

You don't have to be confident that you're asking the right person, and mentioning that you're not sure if you should talk to someone else is an easy way to defuse that concern.

## **Demonstrate kindness and open-minded curiosity for safer questions**

Once I've chosen who to talk to, it's time to prepare my question. I have some hypothesis in mind, like "I don't understand how these colliding ideas can be resolved," or "We have a gap and I think it's important to solve it for these reasons," and I consider this question to be in service of reinforcing or dismissing my hypothesis.

Over the years, I've asked a lot of questions over a variety of channels: e-mail, slack, in person. Most of the time, I'm reaching out to people with whom I haven't yet formed a relationship. I feel extremely privileged to work somewhere that's a safe place to demonstrate kind and earnest curiosity, but I still feel a pit in my stomach when I ask for clarification. Most of that anxiety comes from a fear that I'll come in too hot and fail to be kind. I don't want them to hate me, and my wife often reminds me to avoid getting fired over what was probably a miscommunication.

Years ago, I heard a leader suggest that we should be careful to avoid sloppiness. I wasn't sure what that meant, and my mind immediately raced: am I sloppy? Is my team? Are we about to be fired?

I let myself go through some mental pacing for an hour, but then I decided I needed to take some sort of action. I sent that leader an email.

## Increasing safety in your first communication

- Make a good first impression: thank them
- Be kind and specific with your question
- Expect complexity and ambiguity
- Be patient
- Let yourself change your mind

I started off my thanking them for their comments, and asked for a clarification. Could they share any examples of sloppiness? I hadn't seen folks be sloppy in my experience, and wondered if I was missing something with my limited data.

I got back a thoughtful, candid, and **thorough** response with examples that didn't relate to me or my team, and a question for me about whether their message had been derailed by using the word sloppy.

It was wonderful. I think part of why I got back such a thoughtful response was because I approached them with curiosity and not with fear or anger. My worries evaporated, and having such a positive exchange made it easier to go back to them with additional questions or comments, too. It also set the bar for me for our company culture: you can ask challenging but kind questions and get back kind responses.

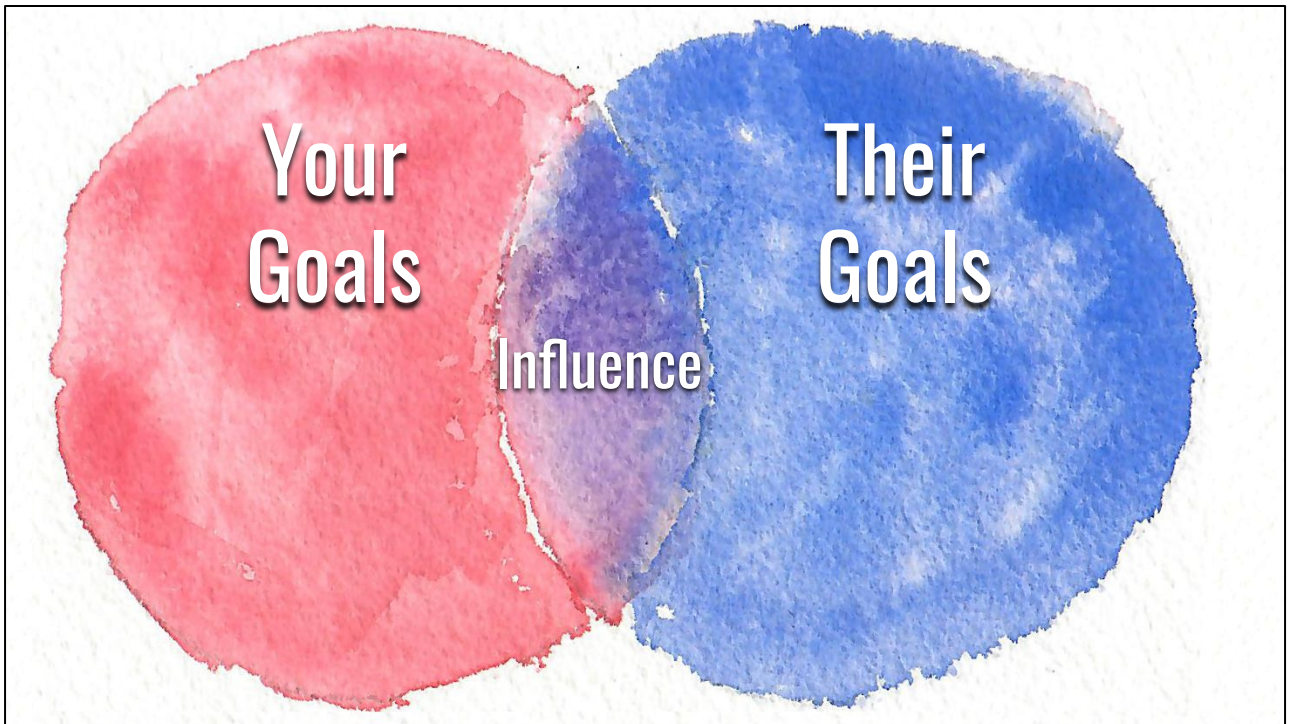
When I think about other questions I've asked, I've followed a similar pattern. I try to be as specific as possible so that the speaker doesn't have to muster up the energy to respond, and to make it easier to ask follow-up questions that don't feel like we're mapping everything about the topic.

I don't always get back an immediate response; sometimes it's the same day, but sometimes it takes a week or two. Folks might not have time to answer right now, or they might intend to answer and then forget to follow through. It doesn't mean they don't think that me or my question are unimportant. If I don't hear anything, I tend to follow up again later.

This can be really hard, but I try to believe that the information I receive could change how I feel about the topic. If I'm going in with an unchangeable mindset, there's not much point in reaching out. In this particular example, I changed my mind on a few topics: I felt much less afraid, and I also felt much warmer towards the leader. If you can't change your mind based on the information you're trying to get, don't bother reaching out because it's unlikely to be a positive interaction.

In this case, I didn't need to do anything else. I asked a question and got an answer, and then I could turn my attention to my day job. That was still a terrific outcome because I was able to help my peers feel more safe when we talked about it. In other cases, I might receive enough information to help me see an opportunity for a suggestion, and we'll talk about that next.





Usually when you have an idea for how someone else can improve a situation, it can be tempting to make the improvement for them, but the reality is that the person to make those changes is usually not going to be you.

It's one thing to update a document template for other people to use, or to make a tweak to your company's push process, but it's another for an engineering leader to take complete ownership of an HR process or any other function who is accountable for those systems.

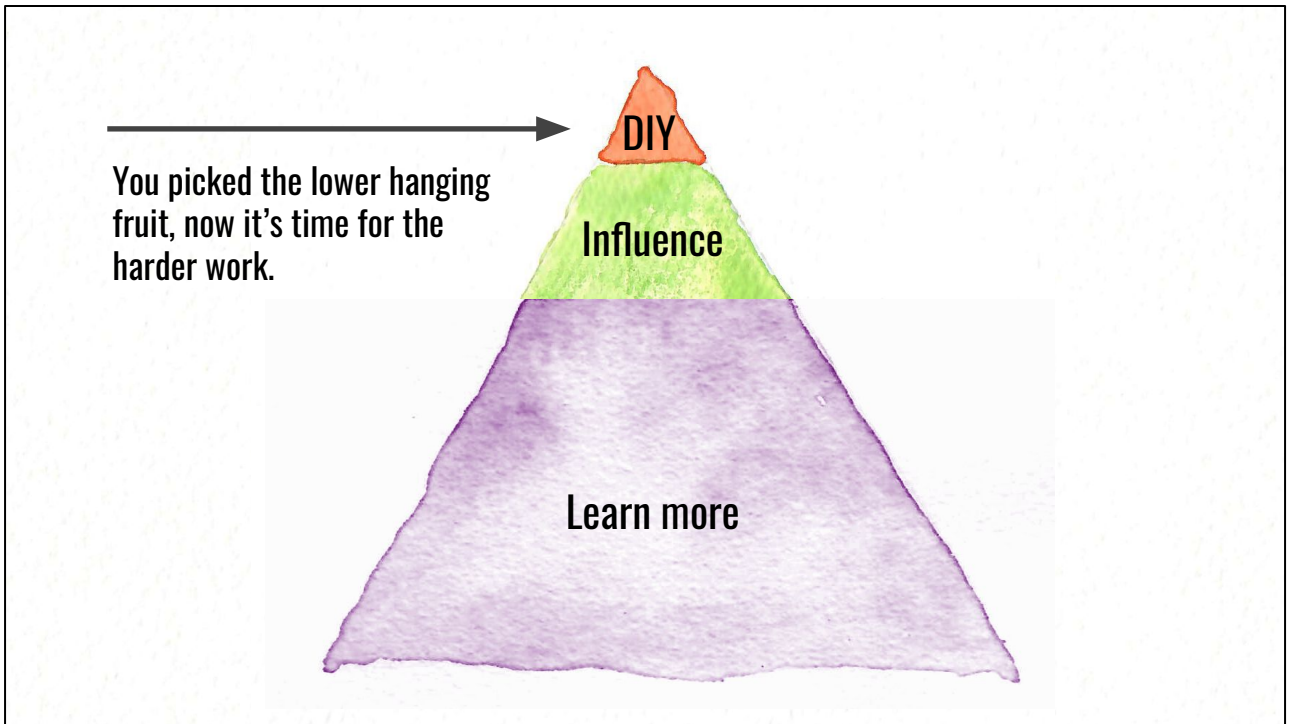
Instead, our job is to ask good questions with the hope of influencing other teams' roadmaps, often by helping them understand where our goals overlap.

You can just ask someone if they'll make a change for you, but I like to understand how much they're aware of my use case and if it's already part of their plans. If it is, or it can be, I can volunteer to be an early adopter, which provides mutual benefit, too.

If you're known as someone who's happy to give early feedback, your beta testing will give you a preview of what's to come and an opportunity to influence the implementation.

Influencing people is a big topic and I don't have time to go into significantly more detail. Thankfully, you can find more on that topic from other resources like other LeadDev talks.

At some point, you may find that you cannot influence others to reach your desired outcomes. They may not have time or budget to do the work, or there may not be any owner for the issue you're considering.



This is the time to focus on that top part of the pyramid, doing it yourself.

No matter what type of project you're considering, you need to start with a clear hypothesis, and then talk to your manager so that you don't hurt your career before you get out of the gate.

# **What** did you observe, and **why** do you think that is?

Start with what you think you know and then go through the steps of learning more about the problem and the existing constraints. You may have spoken to enough folks as you climbed the pyramid, or you may need to go back for more insight once it's clear that you're going to take initiative.

I try to talk to colleagues who have expressed some similar interest in the past, or who might have a deeper network at the company. They help me identify which are facts and which are assumptions, and help me bring something more useful to my manager.

## Ask your manager if a working group is right for you

- ☐ Are you right about the problem?
- ☐ Are you the right person?
- ☐ Who needs to be involved?
- ☐ Who might help?
- ☐ Who will sponsor this project?
- ☐ Do they think this is a reasonable time to pursue these efforts?

You're going to need to talk to your manager about your plans.

This conversation is going to help you with a lot of the setup for making an impact, and it'll pay off along the way, too. Here's what you want to find out:

- Do they think your premise is valid?
  - Do they agree that the problem exists, and agree that your hypothesis is sound?
  - Do they have any additional context that could change your perspective?
- Do they know of any existing (or competing) efforts to work on the problem?
- Do they know of anyone you should work with as domain experts or stakeholders?
- Do they know of anyone else that would be interested in helping, or anyone that you need to partner with to succeed?
- Depending on the scope of the matter, who do they think should sponsor the project? (Themselves? Your department lead? An executive?)

Realistically, they might not have answers to all of these questions, but the most important one is: is this a reasonable time to pursue this? If your skills are needed elsewhere right now, you're in great danger of receiving negative attention for your efforts.

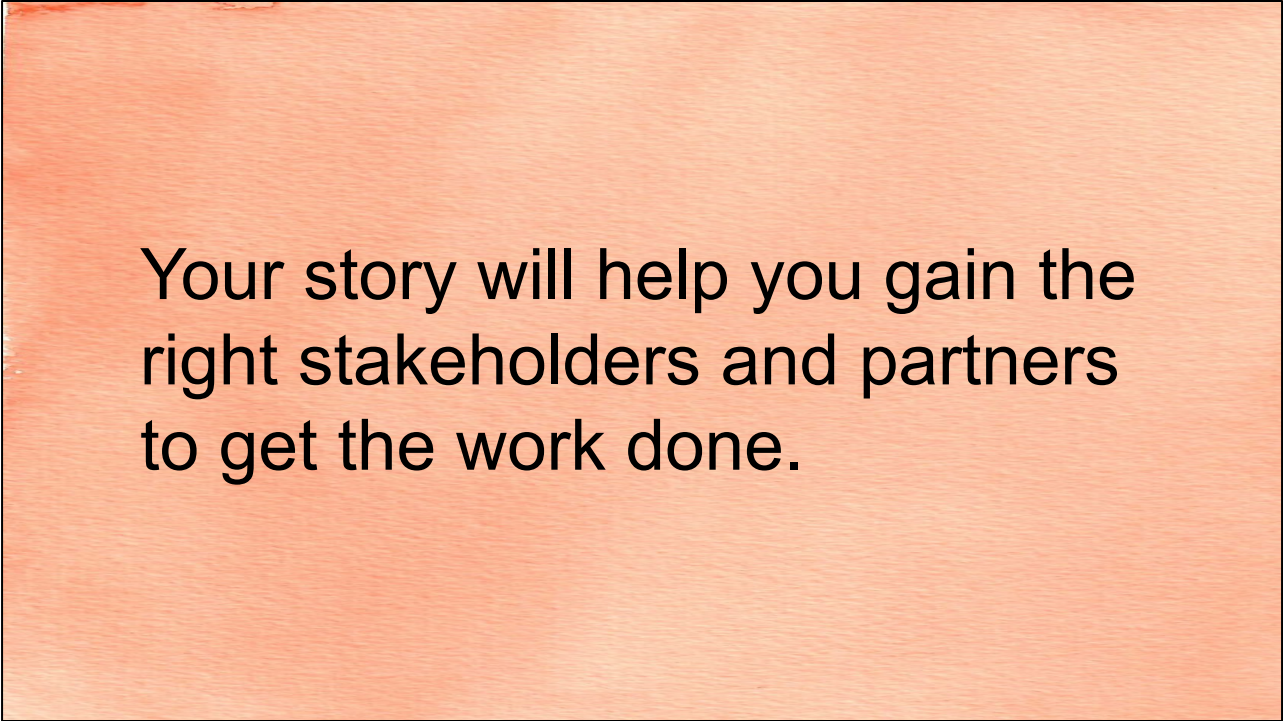


Refine your problem statement  
and proposal.

You need to be a storyteller!

Assuming you have your manager's approval, your next step is to start telling your story. What is the gap and how are you going to solve it? Why is this important right now, and why is it important for you to do it?



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# Your story will help you gain the right stakeholders and partners to get the work done.

You need to avoid doing this work all by yourself. In order to accomplish your goal, you're going to need to figure out who will eventually need to help you take your idea from a proposal to a pilot to a full implementation. Some of those people are the domain experts who will help integrate your idea with their systems – you shouldn't try to build a promotion process without including someone from HR. Some of those people are the folks who will help you keep the work going when you're being pulled away momentarily, and will help you deliver something better than you could think up by yourself.

**Continually triage your time,  
even if you have to pause your  
effort.**

Speaking of getting pulled away, I want to emphasize that it's OK to withdraw from working group activities as more critical priorities come up.

You'll be seen as wise for not letting your team or company priorities fail in the service of something you're working on because it isn't yet a company priority.

You're doing this to improve the company, but you don't want to do that at your own expense, so it's important to continually triage your time -- quarter by quarter, and month to month, and sometimes even day to day.

# Design your alliance

- What's our purpose [as a team]?
- What intention (plan or aim) are we out to fulfill?
- What does success look like? (or, How will we know if [our team is] working?)
- How will we know if we're not succeeding? (or, How will we know if it's not working?)
- How will we "recover" if we notice we're not succeeding?
- How will we celebrate our successes or each other's successes?

As early as your first working group meeting, you should focus on figuring out how you want to work together. An amazing coach taught me about designing your alliance, which is a way of being explicit about how you'll operate and succeed. This is just a subset of potential questions you could ask, but whatever questions you ask, ask them. Don't assume that you'll share every update proactively, pick up each others' slack, and meet milestones by default.

# You need a communication rollout plan

(<http://bit.ly/ticktockdoc>)

Once you've figured out how to communicate within your group, you'll need to work out how to communicate with stakeholders and the rest of the company. Lara Hogan's [Tick Tock Doc](#) is a great template for this kind of plan, and I highly recommend it.

Date	Owner	Channel	Talking Points to Cover	Feedback or Input
			•	
			•	
			•	
			•	
			•	

You can use it for all of the minor milestones, like who will prepare the slides, when you'll review them, do a practice run-through, and when and who you'll deliver it to, but remember to think about the bigger picture. When your plan is ready to see the light of day, who will you show it to first? And how many focus groups will you have between that first peek and the full launch?

I like to start high and work my way down. As an example, you might start with your CTO and then go to their Department Leads, and then perhaps your managers, and then everyone else. You want to use those tiered previews as a way to hone your presentation **and** to build up your set of advocates. You want to avoid situations where you make your big announcement and folks ask their manager: What is this? And they respond: I don't know! You run the risk of alienating your company's managers, and neither of those groups are as likely to adopt your efforts.



# Consider your adoption plan

And speaking of adoption, what needs to happen after your plans go live? How will you provide training, if needed? How will you measure adoption and success? Who will provide support and maintenance?



# Consider the potential endings for this project.

You should think a bit about what the potential outcomes will be for your project and working group.

Maybe you will deliver on your efforts! It will go really well and you'll move on to the next phase of your project, expansion.

Or it will be really tough, and you'll iterate a few times before it gains any traction.

Or along the way, you'll deprioritize the project in favor of more impactful work -- maybe your team needs you more, or a team is tasked with owning the project instead of your volunteer working group.

Or your working group will fizzle out because none of you can't find enough time, or you can't agree on how to move forward, and you'll learn a lot for your next effort.

# Talk to your manager about your progress

The last part of ensuring that you're on the successful side of a working group is to keep your manager in the loop. Give your manager updates on your efforts, to remind them that the work is happening and to get any advice when things are going tough.

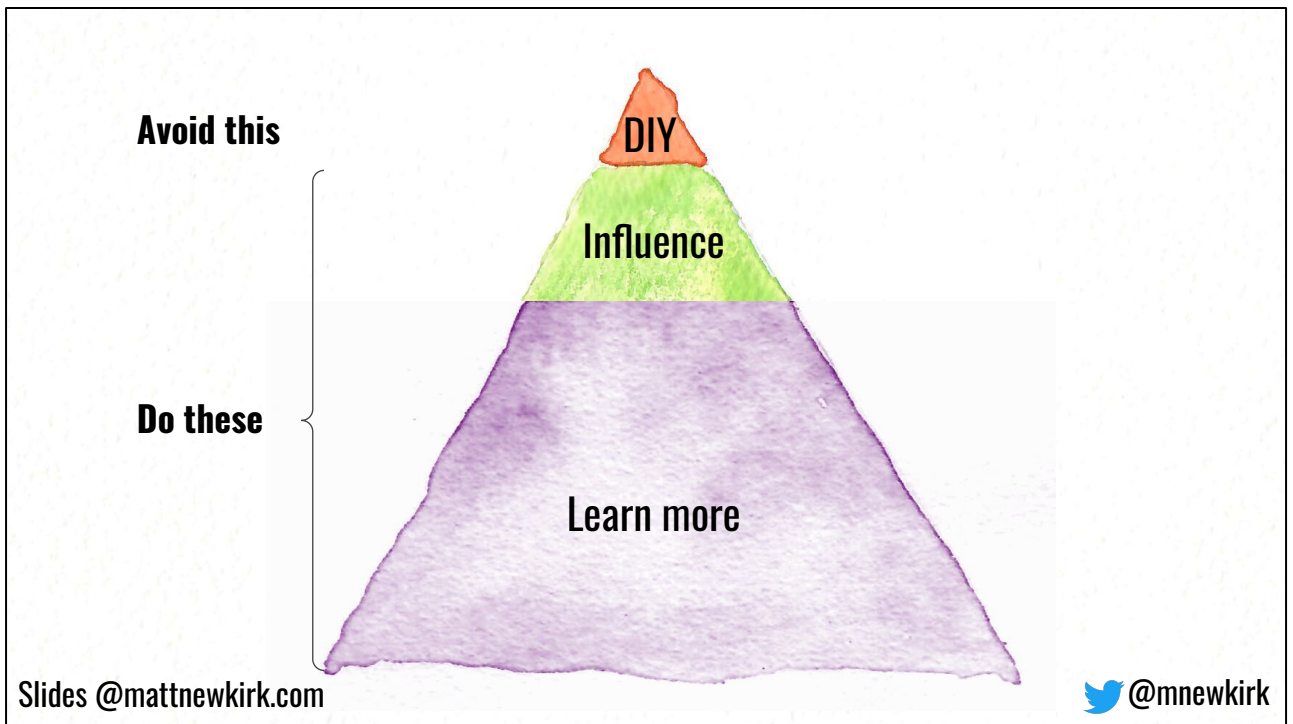
Include these updates in your 1-1s, any other performance check-ins, and in your annual review! Note that if your review happens before the impact materializes, you should focus on **how you have been working** on the project rather than **how other people have been impacted by the end result**. Just like you need to always be the storyteller for your project, you need to keep convincing your manager that your efforts are not an unproductive distraction from meeting the goals that they are accountable for.

You can do it. I believe in you! And now you have a playbook.

# The Working Group Playbook

- ***Avoid working groups if when possible***
- Build a hypothesis
- Consult your manager
- Refine your hypothesis
- Build the team
- Ruthlessly prioritize
- Design your alliance
- Use a Tick Tock Doc
- Consider your adoption plan
- Consider how this project might end
- Share progress with your manager regularly

We covered a lot over these thirty minutes, and you now have a playbook for how to engage in additional efforts in your company. More importantly, I hope you now have a playbook on how to **avoid** having to take additional efforts.



Your time is your most valuable resource, and you need to make the most of it. Learning more is going to be the first step for any action you take, and hopefully you can either stop there or stop at influencing someone else to take action. However you take that next step, I'll give you a little bit more time today by ending my talk. Thank you for listening!