Pirate Introduction

A mighty **Y'arrrrrrrr** good mornin' and or good afternoon to ye, whichever the case may be.

Ye may have noticed that I am not what you might have expected from someone who is speaking on the topic of leadership without micromanagement. That's right . . . Let's call oot the whale on the deck as it were:

I've got meeself a mohawk. And not some few tattoos as well.

Aye, it can make people really doubt mah credibility, but I also find that bein' who I am . . . bein' and embracin' transparency at every step, has allowed me to do mah best work.

Oh.

OHHHHHHHHHHH!

Also, sometimes I dress like a pirate.

Aye, I suppose that was a bit of a no brainer, was it no'?

Alrigh', let me explain this one, and ye may even be able to piss right off after this. And at the very least I can get rid of this RIDICULOUS coat.

Life on a ship was ROUGH for anyone, captains as well. Everyone had their own specific job, and it took YEARS to become good, much less an expert at it. A GOOD ship's captain had to know at least a bit about all of them, but he wasn't an expert by any means.

So he wasn't going around and telling the navigators how to navigate. Or the lookout how to look out. Or the boatswain how to . . . uh . . . swain bots. OK, a), yes that's how you pronounce "boatswain" and b) I totally know what a boatswain does. It's very technical and we don't have time to get into it right now. But I know. For reals. Seriously.

But the point is that the captain's job was to check in with his crew and to ensure that it was all running well. It was to be the person who communicated with their own officers who in turn communicated with their men, looking for the seeds of dysfunction and dealt with it before it turned into disaster (or potentially worse, mutiny). The captain who tried to navigate themselves was the captain who ran aground.

And with that, let's get this ship launched!

ACTUAL Introduction

So . . .

Whatever metaphor makes you happiest: The Golden Rule (treat others how you want to be treated)

The Platinum Rule (treat others how THEY want to be treated)

The Ship Captain's Rule (which I made up, but let the Navigator navigate)

. . . .

What it really comes down to is: CTFD

Calm.

The EFF

Down.

Yes, I said it. CTFD.

It's probably not what you were expecting, but it IS the best way for you to manage without the micromanaging.

CTFD.

Let's break it down just for a quick moment and engage in a thought exercise just so that we're all on the same page.

We're going to imagine that none of us are leaders in this room. That we're all a bunch of ICs (that would be individual contributors, just in case any of you are so far gone that you've forgotten what it's like to be the little guy).

So. You've got this boss. His name is Ash. He's taken to weird affectations like wearing an eye patch and walking with a cane. He says "arrrrrr" a lot.

OK, hard truths, he did that before.

But also, he's been doing the digital version of creeping up on your cubicle every day and saying "Hey Peter, WHAAAAAT'S happenin'" three times a day. He wants a break down of every single thing you do. He wants to be invited to all of your meetings with clients, and he wants to read all of your emails before you send them out. Asshole, I was hired before you! I trained you! You don't know a damned thing more than me.

And now, with the Bobs consulting on things, there is a push towards installing some "efficiency software" which will monitor your productivity all day, which really just seems to be a keylogger and mouse monitor, though someone mentioned that you might have to have your camera on all day as well.

So.

Tell me . . . If you were Peter in this completely made up and totally original version of remote Office Space hell . . . how much would you enjoy that?

Heh, just kidding, I'm not that guy, I'm not going to be asking for a response.

No!

That would be shit. Like actual garbage, and you'd have dusted off your resume long before now.

OK, pretend time is over. That was . . . well, that was no fun whatsoever, was it?

So hard truth time again.

If you are the type of person who has a deep desire or need to know exactly what every person that works for you is doing all of the time . . . in other words, micromanaging, I'm thrilled that you're here because it's not healthy. You need to CTFD.

If you are here even thinking about how much nicer it would be to know what everyone on your team was doing just . . . all the damn time . . . then you are probably sliding into the trap. You need to CTFD.

If you are here because your Lumburg-esque bosses are pushing you to implement these type of management techniques, THEY have some problems. No worries. I've got some ways to handle them too. THEY need to CTFD as well, but since you can't say that, I'll say it to you as well. CTFD.

All joking aside:

Do not forget that this kind of work is stressful in its very nature. You've got a ton of split attention with multiple requirements on your time. If you try to know every single thing about every person **and control them**, then you're going to have a stroke. I'm truly trying to help you here.

CALM. THE. EFF. DOWN.

Managing without the Micro

Alright. Now that we're through with all of that messing about, what would you say that we're DOING here?

Sidenote: I'm well aware that we've thematically crossed piracy and Office Space multiple times now. If anyone has significant problems with a talk which absolutely GLORIOUSLY merges the

topic of avoiding managerial micromanagement over the themes of the golden age of piracy AND a late 90s cinematic masterpiece which captured the zeitgeist of managerial micromanagement . . . well . . . ye can just walk the plank over to Inetek because I will burn this building down.

Moving on.

In my experience, I have found that there are three basic reasons for most folks to do just about anything in their jobs:

1. Internal/psychological motivations
2. Pressure from their peers and/or positions of authority
3. Feelings of loss of control in their role

In practical terms in this case, we can translate those motivations into:

1. A leader feeling insecure in their role
2. Someone getting pressure from their stakeholders or their executive suite
3. Or someone having low trust in or from their team

Or, of course, some combination in any or all of those three. 😬

While this can sound dire, it's not at all unfixable, and we're going to address each one of those in turn.

Insecurity in the Leadership Role

I want to take a quick moment to acknowledge that this section in particular might seem a bit simple or basic for intermediate or advanced leaders, but I would put forth that everyone experiences these issues, no matter where they are in their career and it only isolates us to perpetuate the stereotype that we should in some way be "past it" once we have X number of years on our resume. So never be afraid to put your hand up if you need help!

I don't really think that I need to tell anyone in this room that Leadership is neither easy nor something which comes naturally to anyone. In fact, one of the things that give my eyes the biggest workouts when they need to do a lot of rolling is the phrase "natural-born leaders". UGGGGHHHHHHH.

I swear, I can see my own brain when I hear that term.

Leaders, whether they be new to the gig, old hands at it, or somewhere in between, can often find themselves absolutely at EXTREME ENDS . . . filled with self-doubt and insecurity that is sourced from nowhere other than themselves.

- Was that comment from their boss an observation or a critique? Was it an order?

- Was that slack message from that rep a sign of discontent? Or were they just having a bad day? Are they the only ones feeling this way?
- Do I love my job? Do I hate it? Am I paid enough? Too much? CAN THEY TELL THAT I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL I'M DOING?!?!

I joke . . . OK, I joke a lot, but this genuinely is common. And there are so many resources that are available to all of us to help with any or all of this. Time is limited here, so I'm going to summarize it as **GET SUPPORT**. Nobody is treading new ground here and asking for help or guidance or reassurance is a GOOD thing. You'd be happy if someone in your org did that, wouldn't you? 🤔

- The first and most obvious, given where we are, is Support Driven itself. If you're not already in the #leadership channel, you should be. But then there are also, depending on your needs, the:
    - #x-mental-health
    - #positive-vibes
    - #culture
    - #vent
    - #silly channels
- Additionally, a mentor (either within your org or not) is invaluable. I have personally seen how the mentor/mentee relationship has allowed even experienced leaders to grow at rates which you would never have thought possible.
    - Even if it's someone with whom you just meet to chat work stuff with regularly, that works!
    - I'll put my own hand up and say that I consider my fellow SDer, Valentina Thoerner, who is younger and has less time in leadership, a mentor of mine. But because she takes the time to show me her processes, allows me to learn from her, and holds me to expectations; I have grown as a leader with her help.
- Finally, if you have the access, I cannot recommend strongly enough finding access to a therapist. I know that not everyone can get one, and they can be so very expensive, but having someone who is trained in how to get to the root of problems and who you pay to just sit in listen to your ramble and vent . . . it's very much a worthwhile investment.

If you find that you have issues finding any of these items, or indeed with any part of this talk, my contact information is . . . somewhere? In these slides. I am happy to help with anything you need.

Pressure from Stakeholders or Executives

This is a difficult topic for just about anyone.

Pressure from executives and/or bosses and/or general stakeholders can feel very much like "I have to do this thing or I'm going to be fired", and in some companies or cases, that may even be the case! I know that I, for one, have actually worked at that company. I don't know about the rest of you.

So with that acknowledgement that I do not know your own situation, and that it can be COMPLICATED AF, I'm not going to tell you how to just directly *not micromanage*.

Instead, I'm going to tell you my observation about what these folks are usually really looking for when they are making such requests:

What they really are looking for is insight.

They want to know as much as they can about your team/department and where they are vis a vis the rest of the company.

So what you want to do is to give it to them, and you want to give it to them as proactively as possible and in a way that is not going to negatively impact your team or you.

This really all comes down to numbers. To metrics.

What metrics matter to said stakeholders?

1. What do they THINK they want to see?
2. What metrics do they ACTUALLY want to see (two very different things, of course)?
3. What metrics can you actually provide?
4. And what metrics are FAIR? ← WILDLY important

It goes without saying that since your stakeholders are your internal customers, your stakeholders are likely going to think that they want metrics which are in some way impossible. It may be that they want a single number which encompasses "How CX is doing" entirely and use that metric to judge both the department and individual reps.

All of us, of course, know that there is no such number. Departments cannot be judged on the same metrics as reps. And if there is one single number, it's the product of other numbers which have been combined in a way to capture the productivity of reps across all of the things that folks do across a day/week/month.

You also have to be realistic. CAN you even provide these numbers? Are your reporting systems capturing all work? For example, does your CRM capture all responses on a ticket or does it only count tickets? Do you have a way to capture project work? To capture time spent onboarding others? Meetings? All of these may seem minor, but they're metrics which are going into an employee's productivity (or lack thereof), they have to be counted or else they could end up eventually being terminated despite doing legitimate work!

And finally, are you asking your employee or your department as a whole even, to be judged on metrics which they cannot control? Do your metrics include NPS? Or even CSAT? Time to close? If so, why? Unless your rep or department completely controls the product and policy, the customer's mood for NPS or CSAT should not be taken into account because the rep is acting based off of products and policies that they have no control over. The time to close, which relies

on coworkers and engineering departments, similarly is not something a rep has control over. Why are they being measured against this?

The north star metrics that I find shine most bright are:

- Time to First Response
- Time Between Responses
- QA Score
- Number of Tickets (though that can be a controversial metric for other reasons)

Now that is all just to GET to the point of collecting metrics. What do you do once you have them?

Well, first off, ALWAYS know what those metrics are from week to week. Know where your team stands not only now but where it stands in relation to previous week. Are you trending up? Trending down? Know the story as to why you're doing either as well. Have you had folks out? Was there a release which didn't go super well? Did a new product go over REALLY REALLY well and people are thrilled?

Note that none of this is micromanagement.

Every single bit of this comes only from your own metrics and knowing what is going on within the organization itself. It's not from controlling your reps. In fact, it's all fully transparent to your reps entirely, unless you needed clarification on any specific ticket from any of them.

WITH THAT SAID, however, you don't necessarily need to do all of it. I can tell you from long experience that it's exhausting and long work.

Remember that you're a Ship's Captain, and part of your responsibility is to train up a new round of captains out of your own first mates. So these various reports about how the team is doing and why it's doing it? All of it can be an exercise that is completed by an unlucky boatswain which is passed around from Peter to Michael Bolton to Samir.

Low Team Trust

I could talk for DAYS on how teams can end up dysfunctional or on how trust can end up broken. But to fix it, the best way is not to squeeze harder, it is to instead get closer with the team . . . to join in with them and become more present.

In imagining a situation wherein someone has low trust for a team or vice versa, I know that this can be for any number of reasons . . .

It can be because a person did not themselves hire the team and is the sort to trust slowly.

It can be because a person is new to a team and the team themselves don't trust easily.

Or they AREN'T new to the team but instead were promoted from within and so there are some bruised feelings.

Or, and this is where we are going to focus, because it can happen at any time: Things may have just . . . happened. The team was overworked and/or felt under-appreciated, or feelings soured, or a popular rep had to be terminated . . . or any number of a hundred things could have happened that have lead to a difficulties between a team and a leader.

However it happened, there are easy general ways in which things can be brought back from that edge and you can not feel like you're heading into battle when you step into work.

Now once again, I want to remind everyone that this topic has been kept until last because we could dedicate not just a talk, not just a track, but an entire conference to the topic. There is no understanding just how nuanced the management of a team can be, and when the team is on edge, it is even more complex. There is no one single and simple panacea which will fix everything, and anyone who says otherwise is selling something, Princess.

HA! You thought I slipped in yet another theme, didn't you? Well . . . I mean . . . I guess I KINDA did, but only technically because it was the Dread PIRATE Roberts who said it.

Seriously, this is way too fun. And this eye patch is startlingly comfortable. I think everyone will be wearing one in the future.

Eh?!

Oh come on. That was great.

Like you know humour.

Anyway.

So when we are trying to fix a team, it's like trying to fix basically any relationship.

You have to start with a statement of contrition. You have to get up in front of the team and really drag out into the light and acknowledge what has gone wrong, why it happened, and what you're going to be doing — and what you're asking them to do! — in the future to avoid it. Before you go out there, take a solid look in the mirror (either proverbially or an actual one) and ask yourself what you had to do with causing this and then **APOLOGIZE FOR IT.**

I know, bold right? There's a whole school of thought that those in leadership should never apologize. Clearly, I am not part of that school . . . I'm in Customer Support. Apologies are basically comma pauses for me!

Next, you need to explicitly remind everyone of your team's expectations, norms, and metrics. If you don't have any, that's not a problem. Everyone has to start sometime! Set them and put them in writing some place public.

I'm going to pause here and tell you that I have written up a supplemental page on my website that is NOT available to the general public because, well, it would not be in my own best interest to! On it, I go into a bit more detail on all of these points and give some very much un-asked-for advice on things like what kinds of norms and expectations you should consider, how you should gather feedback from your team and stakeholders about these, how to have successful 1on1s, and so on. You can find that link right here:

[LINK]

So speaking of 1on1s:

HAVE THEM.

Set yourself up a schedule of 1on1 meetings with every one of your direct reports on ideally a weekly basis and then keep them. 1on1s are a time for THEM to have YOUR time. They get to speak to a leader who has knowledge (both within the company and about your industry) that they don't normally get. Don't short them that access because you might be busy or tired. This is your job and you should be doing it!

On a quick side note, I am also a very big believer that 1on1s should indeed be FOR the representative. You should spend a few minutes going over metrics or any item of high import, but beyond that, let them generally guide the discussion. If they want to talk about queue issues, the release schedule, or even their passion for lego minifigs, let them do so. It's their time. If it becomes inappropriate, re-direct the conversation, but otherwise let it flow. If there is something important you need to speak with them about, such as behaviour or work correction, reach out to them immediately. Don't wait for a 1on1 as it could be days or weeks, giving them ample time to continue to make the same mistake(s) over and over again; plus their 1on1s should allow them to always attend a meeting confident that they have nothing to fear. This way it ensures that.

Skiplevels are not any different from 1on1s. If your team is big enough that you sit a level or more removed from some of your employees, skip levels are almost as important as 1on1s. They will allow you to get insight into what is happening in your department that might not otherwise get surfaced.

Further, if your team, or, more appropriately your department IS big enough for you to need to have skip levels, that means that you have delegated some responsibilities to leads or supervisors.

Well done, you! Seriously!

But keep it delegated. Sit down, first with yourself and really figure out what pieces of information you NEED from each disparate part of your department in order to be able to report to your stakeholders. Then, sit down with your direct reports and frame out what reports you want to see and the frequency in which you expect them.

I'm a great big ol' believer in culture, so I also set expectations in what kind of team I expect THEM to run as well, but in a . . . "hey, don't be a dick" kind of way, ya know?

But then? As much as it may pain you . . . you've gotta let them fly. You need to provide them the autonomy to work in the best way that they possibly can . . . which is a hell of a balancing act because you also don't want to leave them struggling in a world without any resources whatsoever! So instead you'll most likely want to make sure that you are being clear that you're available to your leaders, you want to be helpful to them, and that especially newer leaders are welcome to make mistakes, but that HERE is what their deliverables are.

So what else can help with the rest of the team?

It's reached the point of cliche, but we all have to remember that we ARE remote and work is not the only thing in the world. Yaaaaawn, am I right?

But in all seriousness, it is so much easier to mentally abstract a person that you only ever interact with via text. You can see this in action just by visiting some of the more toxic corners of the internet, whether it be Reddit or the comments sections of YouTube.

So while you generally want to do all that you can to encourage work/life balance, you also want to ensure that you have a team culture that emphasizes seeing each other as people, not just a name in a slack channel. That can require some extra time, both in person and online.

To that end, there are a variety of things that can be done:

The obvious one is team meetups. In an ideal world, you'll be able to get JUST your team together once or twice a year so that you can do both work and non-work related stuff. Really pull your team together and get everyone meshing. Now on the other hand, your company is hopefully having company-wide meetups on an annual or semi-annual basis, so if department-only meetups aren't in the budget, OK! STICK TO YOUR GUNS and make sure that your team gets significant time (like an actual day) to go and do stuff together.

Non-work stuff.

Go paint something. Learn a skill. Enrich your lives.

Oooooo! Rob a bank together.

Look, I'm not your dad here. Probably. I don't know, is Malcolm or Georgia here?

OK, cool. I'm not your dad. Rob a bank together. It'll be fun. You'll learn a new thing AND enrich your lives. Win-win.

(neither support driven nor Ash Rhodes actually suggest the robbing of banks. Do not do this. And if you do do this, do not get caught.)

But that's not everything.

Once or twice a year is not sufficient for creating and maintaining a positive team culture. That's like exercising and eating well twice a year and saying "Why am I not losing weight?!"

You've got to keep the momentum going with non-work related team "events".

Those events can take any of literally dozens if not hundreds of forms.

I know one company which has a daily standup which is a drop in. They open up a zoom and just work together all morning in a group setting. They'll mute or turn off the camera or drop out as needed for focused work, but otherwise keep things going to ask each other questions or to crack jokes and generally maintain relationships.

Another company that I know does weekly happy hours. Every Friday (fairly early my time, around noon or so?), everyone logs on with their beverage of choice — alcoholic or not — and they just drink and chat. The only rule is no work talk. Their chats freak me out because some of them get WILD. I recommend at least a COUPLE of extra rules, but hey . . . you do you.

Another company I know does curated events. They've done everything from show and tell to trivia to scavenger hunts and beyond. Winners get different prizes depending on the month.

You can also arrange brown bag lunches where guests are invited to do AMAs or presentations on what they're working on or just how their job functions from other parts of the company. I was always a huge fan of those, myself!

These can be department or company wide.

Remote doesn't have to mean isolated, and a team with a positive and connected culture doesn't need to have a top down, command and control leadership. It will run like a well oiled machine, even with you not there.

Conclusion

This rather conveniently allows me to close things out.

I want to quickly remind everyone that I take a perspective of remote work by default. Not only am I a bit of a fan of and advocate for remote work, I also believe that it is going to continue to be a huge "thing".

So in each of the cases that I have mentioned, there has been an assumption that you are not working directly with your employees or bosses on a daily basis. If that's not the case, your job may be a bit easier or more difficult, but your approach will definitely be just a bit different. Come and talk to me and we can work through how!

And now, I'd like to leave you with one last slide and one last piece of advice.

First, keep with you my mantra from today:

CALM THE EFF DOWN.

Life is too short to stress as much as I know you all are.

Second, in a world where life is crazy insane, you have choices. Choose to be Pirate Santa. Because of my final point:

I ask of you.

I beg of you.

Nay, I DEMAND of you all:

DO COOL SHIT.

EVERY DAMN DAY.