Inwards, Outwards, and Holistics

Flavors of leadership

There are all sorts of intimidating titles surrounding the management caste. Engineering manager, senior engineering manager, director of engineering, vice president of engineering, chief technology officer. While these names are useful in determining where an individual lies in the organizational chart, the names are merely hints as to what that person actually cares about. And you should care what they care about whether you’re a manager or an individual contributor.

Like it or not, your boss has as much effect on your career as you do, and they also effectively sign your paycheck every two weeks, and that means food. Sure, you can leave and go elsewhere, but there’s a manager there, too, and he’s got his own obscure agenda, as well.

There are three distinct classes of managers, each with their own agenda. The common names for these classes are first line manager, middle manager, and executive or senior manager. Again, these names do a good job of giving you
a clue where your manager sits on an organizational chart, but they don’t tell you what they actually do and how they are motivated. We need a different set of names for that. We need a set of names that don’t confuse us with an implied hierarchy.

The Vision Hierarchy

To understand a manager’s agenda, you’ve got to understand what he wants, and the best way to do that is to figure out what he thinks about all day. What is he paying attention to? Where does he mentally stare all day? It’s likely one of three directions.

Inwards: These types of managers are responsible for a small team of folks working on a single product or technology. An inward manager’s vision is focused on their team and their product. While they’re aware there are other things going on in the organization, they don’t tend to be involved cross-functionally unless their team has dependency on an external team.

Inwards are often junior managers, but that isn’t always the case. Some very experienced managers have settled into a comfortable groove as inwards because they want to stay near the team and near the code.

Holistics: Traditionally, holistics make up the middle layer of management. Whereas the inward’s vision is pointed down at the individual team, the holistic is staring across the organization. They are likely managers of managers; responsible for multiple products and multiple teams.

The holistic’s main job is to figure out what the hell is going on everywhere in the organization. They’re doing this because, as we’ll see in a moment, they’re actually running your company. This is why they’re never in their office; they’re running around gathering information. This constant information acquisition gives the impression that they are spread thin and, well, they are. There’s a ton of information moving around your average-sized company, and staying tapped into that flood is a full-time job.

Wait, don’t these holistics have product to ship? No, they have multiple products, but they’ve hired rock-star inwards to get the products built to specification and on time so they can focus on figuring out what to build next and who they’re going to need to build it.

Outwards: These are the senior managers. VPs, CEOs. The biggest misconception regarding outwards is what they care about. You’d think their number one priority would be the care and feeding of the company. Wrong. The well-being of the company is the responsibility of the holistics. The holistics are the ones who are spending all the time sniffing around the hallways, gathering internal competitive intelligence, and building empires out of talented inwards.
The outward’s vision is focused on the outside world. They care about the public perception of the company, the company’s relationship with its customers, the financial community, the world. That’s why they’re never at headquarters, they’re off telling other people what a great job all those holistics and inwards are doing. I’m not suggesting that outwards don’t care about the daily professional shenanigans within the company; they do, but they’ve also hired a group of rock-star holistics to run their company. The rub is this: while it’s not their job to run the company on a daily basis, they are accountable for it. Tough gig.

**Agenda Confusion**

These titles get more confusing when you realize that a manager can have two titles. First, there’s the title they give themselves and, second, there’s the perception of the rest of the organization. In a healthy organization, these roles are the same, but most organizations just aren’t healthy.

An example: You might be working for a manager who fancies himself a holistic when the organization has him pegged as an inward. This means he’s out combing the hallway looking for strategic advantage when he should really be paying attention to you, the senior engineer who has indicated, loudly, “There is no way this product is going to ship on time.” My first thought is this is both an opportunity and a problem. The problem is that your manager isn’t paying attention to his primary job, but the opportunity is that you are.

A variation of this confusion is when a title has been granted, but is not being used. How about when an inward has been forced into a holistic role via a promotion? How are these guys going to screw you? Well, it’s not going to be through action, it’s going be through inaction. See, as an inward, they don’t care about the political intrigue over in building 27, they want to design and ship product, they want to dive into the details. Problem is, the political intrigue over in building 27 will ultimately determine that your product is irrelevant. Now you’re out of a job because your manager’s manager didn’t attend that cross-functional meeting because what he really wanted to do was code. Sorry about that.

Possibly the worst example of this confusion is also one of the biggest reasons for micromanagement. When you’re being micromanaged, it means two things: first, it feels like you’re doing unnecessary work, and second, you feel the person asking you to do this work is being unreasonable. You’re right on both counts. Micromanagement is often a result of a manager jumping from one management class to another. Maybe it’s an outward who is getting panicky at the end of a result cycle, so he starts acting like an inward. Problem is, everyone knows he’s an outward. He sounds like an outward and talks like one, too. Sure, everyone is happy to get some face time with the CEO, but everyone is also wondering why he isn’t doing his job—running the company.
Watch for Growth

The progression from inward to holistic to outward is a strategic one. A junior manager starts out caring about the quality of one product and, if they continue to grow, they end up caring about the health of an entire company. Watching this growth is essential to your own professional growth.

What you need to know about your manager is how much he cares about this growth and, more importantly whether he sees this as his growth opportunity or the team’s. Junior inward managers invariably figure out the responsibility and power held by the holistics and outwards, and when they do, you want to watch them carefully. There is a spectrum here with “advantage for the team” on one side and “advantage for the manager” on the other. Eager young managers who spend all their time looking for advantage for themselves are going to screw the team at some point because of their razor focus on themselves. Are they feeding you the bits of information they find or are they keeping it to themselves? If you’re not learning something new in each and every staff meeting, you might have a selfish climber on your hands.

Perhaps your manager doesn’t care about growth. Your gut instinct might be that this is a bad situation since working for a manager who isn’t interested in growing isn’t going to grow his team. Maybe. Maybe your stagnant inward is a seasoned manager who spent time getting beaten up as a holistic or an outward. Maybe they got tired of endless information acquisition or maybe they’re just great engineers who love to code. Personally, I think these types of inwards are phenomenal employees and managers because they have a wealth of experience. The question is, are they passing that experience on to you and making sure that you’re growing?

My preference is to stock my team with holistic managers and inwards geared to become holistics. While an experienced, steady inward is a reliable manager, I prefer the enthusiasm of employees who are ready for the next thing, especially when the next thing for them is my job.