



Talking with Tech Leads

Patrick Kua

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A book for Tech Leads, from Tech Leads. Discover how more than 35 Tech Leads find the delicate balance between the technical and non-technical worlds. Discover the challenges a Tech Lead faces and how to overcome them. You may be surprised by the lessons they have to share.

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Talking with Tech Leads Details

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From Reader Review Talking with Tech Leads for online ebook

Dominic Wong says

It's not a bad book, it just doesn't provide a lot of good insights. The tips provided are relatively generic imho.

Marc says

Good to use to figure out what other books to read

Darek Nap?oszek says

A lot of the interviews are going in the same direction, which is understandable, but gets pretty boring fast. In the end reading the "Conclusion" section would suffice to get all the information you need from this book. However some stories were interesting.

Bill says

Unlike general management how-tos which are a dime a dozen, there are almost no good books on technical leadership, so the author definitely gets an A for effort in trying to fill a much-needed niche. And the interview format was a promising idea, especially given the treasure trove of expertise that ThoughtWorks lead consultants have (disclaimer: I worked for ThoughtWorks for 4 years but didn't work with any of these interviewees).

Despite that promising potential, the execution of the book was quite disappointing. I am fairly certain that the interviews were actually just email surveys, because they are one-way (no follow up questions related to the content are asked) and the same questions are repeated to most interviewees. Such a format might have been a good way to gather preliminary research and identify common threads, but when read in its full form was repetitive and superficial. A good interviewer knows when to stop their subject and have them unpack a casual statement that might contain some wisdom. If I was an editor, I would've suggested that Kua toss most of the filler and just do in-depth podcast discussions with maybe 5 of the most promising subjects. I don't think there would be a way to make a book-length treatment of any of this material.

Sifting through the whole book, I did pull out a few interesting nuggets which you can find in my Kindle Notes & Highlights. I'm sure the ideas can be found scattered in blogs. However, as written I wouldn't recommend wasting your time on this one. Hopefully I can recommend a better book on the subject in the future.

Juan says

Good book to understand the transition between developer and Tech lead. Constraints, pros cons, challenges with people, with technology...

From my point of view the interviewers are repetitive because more or less all the Tech leads are or were facing the same problem and challenges.

Moises Cuervo says

I really enjoyed this book, was like having a hundreds of advice from a lot of successful leaders around the world. In some cases I found that methods that I'm currently using are used by many of those leaders, so I could notice that maybe I'm in the right way to become a good leader :D

Sebastian Gebski says

It's a good book, but ...

* with a limited use cases list :)

* you have to accept its unconventional approach

Basically, this book in 80% consists of questionnaires filled by Tech Leads - both relatively inexperienced & seasoned. Questions vary, but to be honest they still present pretty much the same views & end with drawing very similar conclusions, which ... of course is not a problem. Because this book is aimed to help fresh Tech Leads to set a proper attitude & correct priorities - providing so many rational (& enriched with several warstories) inputs adds a lot of credibility.

If you're not a new Tech Lead (or aiming to become one soon), this is not really a book for you.
I think I will recommend "Talking with Tech Leads" to my subordinates.

Hugo Corbucci says

In this book, Patrick Kua gathered a lot of interviews from multiple people that are or were, at some point, playing the role of Tech Lead in a team. It presents views from people new to Tech Leading and people who have been doing it for a while. For the latter, he groups interviews in 4 big aspects of Tech Leading: People, Tech, Bridging business and tech, you.

Overall, the book can get a little tiring due to the interview format being a little repetitive but the content is very reassuring for new tech leads and provides a few insights for those who have been doing the work for a while. In short, I recommend the book if you are thinking about what being a tech lead is, hope to become a tech lead or are a tech lead. If you can pace yourself to read one or two interviews a day, you'd probably spend 5 to 10 minutes a day with the book and be done within the month. Probably better that way than trying to read the whole book in a single shot.

John says

Repetitive, shallow, and over representation of tech leads from thoughtworks employees and clients.

miki albert says

Allthough the content is great, it gets to be repetitive fairly easy. The actual knowledge nuggets extracted would take up a quarter of this book, but still, the “interview” format presented in the book is a very good touch. Having real individuals presented, you can see how different approaches and personalities can affect the teams performance (in a good or a bad way); it’s more relateable, and somehow better than just a blob of specific best practices in an abstract format.

Leo says

Came across this book after listening to the podcast with Patrick on Software Engineer Radio, which I found quite interesting and wanted to get a bit deeper into the topic.

Unfortunately this book isn't what I was looking for. 90% of it is snippets from the interviews with other tech leads (majority of them are from ThoughtWorks but not all) and it's highly repetitive, and very generic. Everyone struggles with finding time for writing code which they enjoy very much doing, everyone is finding people aspect the most difficult. The worst part is that it doesn't go any further than that, there's almost no real insights about what to do with all that. I guess there are plenty of books about soft skills but then I am not sure what this book is supposed to be.

If you can extract and condense the essence, it'd be a very interesting article. But what happened in the end for me is that I had bookmark falling out of the book and I just couldn't find the spot where I stopped reading last time, because it's so repetitive. Figured that's a good sign to give up on the book! I finished about 3/4 of the book though.

Nat says

A bunch of interesting interviews. Only downside is they all have pretty similar backgrounds. Would have liked more class and experience diversity.

Mark says

An important contribution, but hamstrung by its format.

The book's format is asking ~50 tech leads, mostly from ThoughtWorks, a few questions:

- what should the tech lead focus on
- how do you manage time
- how do you balance coding/non-coding responsibilities

This is an important book; there are many management books, but not much focussing on technical leadership. It was interesting hearing from the individual tech leads in their own voices, and hearing about individual projects was good for examples. But nobody had enough pages to drill down into specifics. The best moments were when some tech leads became vulnerable, recounting failures and what to learn from them.

It was reassuring to hear that almost every tech lead has trouble balancing coding and non-coding responsibilities, and nice to hear the wide variety of strategies for time management.

I found myself wishing that the book was rearranged to be indexed by themes (as the excellent conclusion is), then it would be a lot easier to compare different approaches to the same challenges. It'd be easier to use as a reference material too, if the time management tips were collected together rather than scattered every 4 pages.

It was a little frustrating how many interviewees were from ThoughtWorks - it left me wondering whether the approaches outlined are general, or are specific to the development context of ThoughtWorks.

It's a good book for a new Tech Lead seeking some confirmation that everyone's going through the same challenges. But it could have been a much better (and shorter) book with a different format, and perhaps some more diversity of workplace interviews.

Andras Csibi says

I liked how this book is not about the author telling you how to be a tech lead, it's about a bunch of different people telling you how to be a tech lead. It's a bit more evidence-based when $N = 20$ instead of $N = 1$. Still, I struggled hard to finish this book. It became repetitive quite quickly. In a way, this was good because this lets you find common patterns and draw your own conclusions. On the other hand, this gets boring. Yes, you have to pay attention to the people. Finding time for coding is hard, yet important. Can't keep your head down, gotta understand business needs.

This leads me to my biggest problem, which might be related to the selected tech leads not being diverse enough. They were all from mid-sized companies doing waterfall development disguised as agile development. This resulted in a book that is full of agile dogma. After all, I'm fairly certain that not 100% of tech leads think that pair programming is the only way to produce software, and I would have liked to hear their take on tech leadership too.

Overall, I liked this book, though. There were some cool practical tips in it, and it was nice to see that others are struggling with the same problems as I am. I'm not alone, this is indeed hard, I will get better.

Zbyszek Sokolowski says

To be honest I was hesitating between 3 and 4 stars, but due to weaker first part rather boring 3 will work. The book is mainly consisted from interview of 35 TL, with different experience as TL. Different approaches

and so on. The idea is to look at other TL work, how they can deal with their job how they find time to write code and so on. Some quotations:

"noticed that the transition for a developer to a Tech Lead is never easy. Even experienced Tech Leads struggle when they first change teams or organizations."

A hard lesson for the Tech Lead is allowing people to fail, allowing them to make mistakes.

Allow them to try their own approaches, but if you sense it is heading in the wrong direction, find ways to let them see that for themselves.

On the other hand, there were things that I loved: I learned that understanding each person's technical aspirations helps you manage team dynamics. A person may crave opportunities but may hesitate to proactively take them on. To be able to do this well, I had regular one-on-one talks to get feedback and each person's perspective.

“Wisdom comes from experience. Experience is often a result of lack of wisdom.” - Terry Pratchett

“A set of people does not make a team. It only exists as a group. A team is a set of people working towards a common goal. An effective leader aligns people towards that goal.” - Anonymous

Keeping track of what people find interesting evolves over time as people grow, and learn. The only way a Tech Lead can keep up with these changes is to ask people frequently enough.

A Tech Lead appreciates the different strengths that each person brings to the team. Over time you will recognise these different strengths. For example, some developers are better thinking in more abstract terms, whilst others are more detail-oriented. Some developers will be better thinking visually, whilst others must communicate best through code.

A Tech Lead manages technical risk and champions the need for time invested in quality, but this can only be done with trust from other parties. Finding enough time is a constant challenge. When the team spends too much time on software quality without delivering value, you risk breaking the trust you have built.

Fortunately, spending time on quality issues has a direct positive impact on end-users or the business, by making the user experience better and faster, for example, or resulting in fewer requests for help and assistance. Spending too little time on software quality leads to internal quality issues and quickly turns into visible external quality issues. Managing the Technical Debt is a key skill for the Tech Lead.

When a Tech Lead decides on all the tough problems or keeps all the interesting work, the following scenarios could arise: A person starts to feel they are doing all the “boring work” and decides there are more interesting opportunities elsewhere. A person feels as though they are not valued for making important decisions, and seeks a place they are more valued. Key decisions stall because they wait for the Tech Lead, who is busy with other responsibilities. As a Tech Lead, you feel stressed because everyone is constantly asking for you to make a decision.

To resolve a decision-making bottleneck, the Tech Lead finds ways to delegate this to the team.

It is important to resist the temptation to step in and take over. Instead, you have to exercise the new control you have inherited: to make the developers around you better.

Early on, I thought the only issues were code issues. Over the years, I have realised that the majority of our issues are communication issues.

Remaining technically grounded - Other developers respect you more if you still write code with the team. Your understanding of the issues also improves if you have contact with the code.
