



March 20-24, 2023  
San Francisco, CA

# Career Progression and Value: Set your teams up for Success

Hannah Mackintosh  
Art Department Lead at CerebralFix

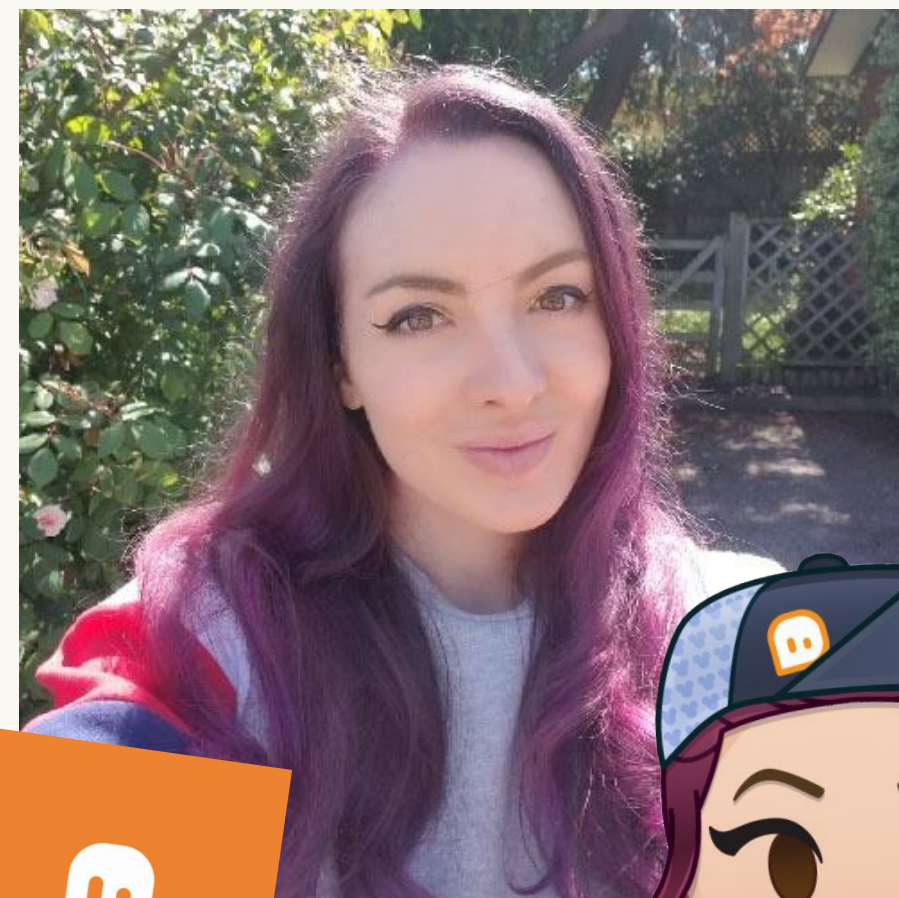
#GDC23

# Hannah Mackintosh

**Art Department Lead** at CerebralFix

- **6 years** in the Games Industry
- **Co-manages a team of 20 artists** with the help of Art Lead, Jed Uy
- 2D Illustration, Vector art and some 2D VFX and animation

A work for hire studio that works on multiple projects at a time for entertainment giants such as Disney, Universal and Dreamworks.



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# Contents

- Who is this talk for?
- What is the goal?
- CerebralFix Career Progression System
- Tools and Processes for Career Progression
- Final Thoughts and Key Takeaways



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# Who is this Talk for?

Leaders

aka. those who support teams and individuals

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# What is the Goal?

Sharing tools and  
create discussions  
around supporting  
career progression.

- Junior → Senior Growth
- Creating happy and empowered teams
- Adding studio value and keeping talent

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# Our Career Progression System

- How career movement works
- Evolution of the system



# Contribution Tiers

- Our measure of career growth is based on **how much you are contributing** to our projects, teams and wider company.
- (relatively) **Flat Hierarchy**

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Uncommon	Rare	Epic	Legendary★	Mythical
<b>New to the role/industry and committed to learning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learning profession practice processes</li><li>• Gaining experience at delivering to the role</li></ul>	<b>Performing their role effectively with guidance from others</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Performing role</li><li>• Continuing to learn and develop their industry skill set</li></ul>	<b>Performing their role effectively to a high standard</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Performing role to a high standard</li><li>• Communicates effectively with team members</li></ul>	<b>Effectively coaching and teaching others</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Leads in areas of their expertise</li><li>• Shares knowledge</li><li>• Communicates to a high level with team and wider company</li></ul>	<b>Drives key areas of the company processes and operations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Leads and implements company wide initiatives</li></ul>

(Junior)

(Intermediate)

(Senior)

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This should be you!

Junior

Senior



with junior staff

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# When do you Progress?

- The Leadership team reviews and evaluates studio contribution tier placement **every month**
- Movement in tiers can happen at **any time in the year**
  - The leadership team identifies them in their review
  - The employee advocates for themselves and request a contribution or pay review

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# Regular Check ins

- Every 3 months - Catch up with a department lead
- Every 6 months - performance reviews with the leadership team.
  - A Self review
  - Several Peer review
  - A Department Lead review
  - A Leadership review

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# Contribution Tier Limitations

- Our focus on **leadership qualities** and **contributions to the company** in our early career progression
  - More visibility of leadership track progress
- If you didn't want to go into leadership, **we didn't have clear pathways for alternative progression.**
  - Those who excel in the specialization track often have less visible background growth

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# Legendary ★

## Specialist Track

Focus on **delivering content and deepening knowledge of chosen specialty.**

### Inward focus



### Technical Ability

- Subject matter expert in chosen specialties

### Communication

- Communicates to a high level with team, wider company and clients

### Time Management

- Effectively able to balance time between project work and Studio improvement
- Actively upskilling and developing their technical skills and sharing this knowledge with others
- Actively supporting and mentoring others in their career progression

## Leadership Track

Focus on **supporting growth of their project, team and wider company.**

### Outward focus



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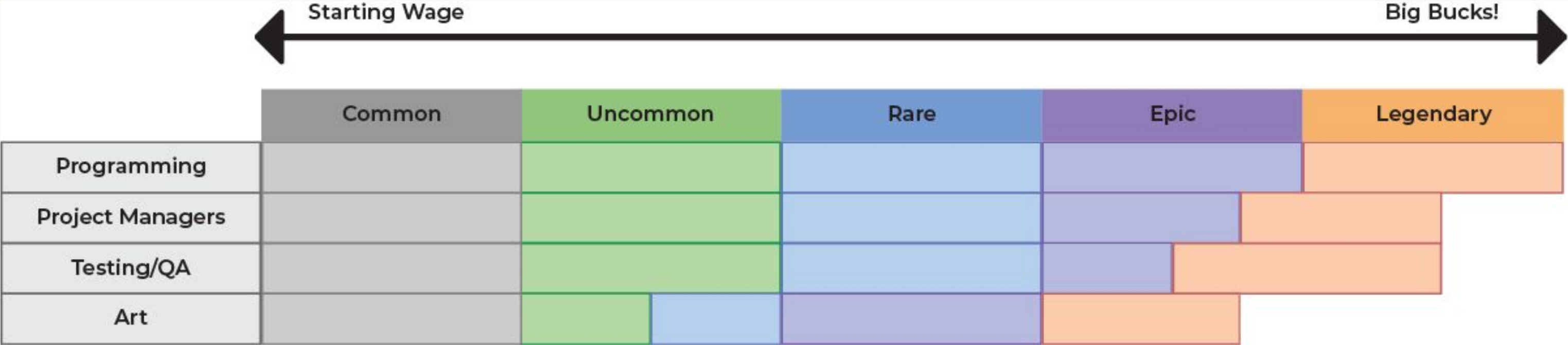


# Contribution Tier Evolution

- We are constantly evaluating our contribution tiers to ensure they:
  - Reflect our values
  - Reflect our expectations of roles and responsibility
  - Provide fair compensation

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# 2018



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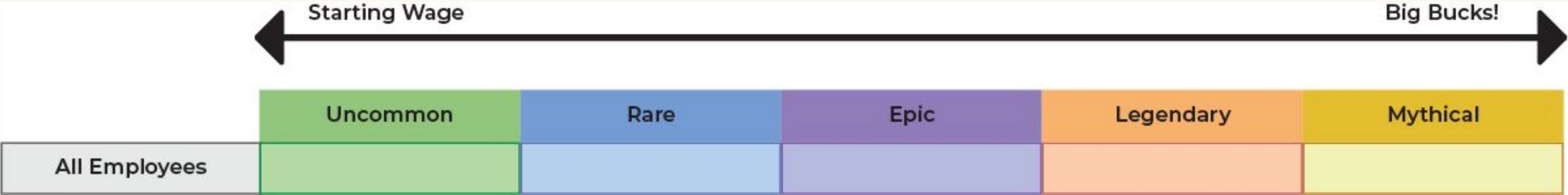


# 2018-2019



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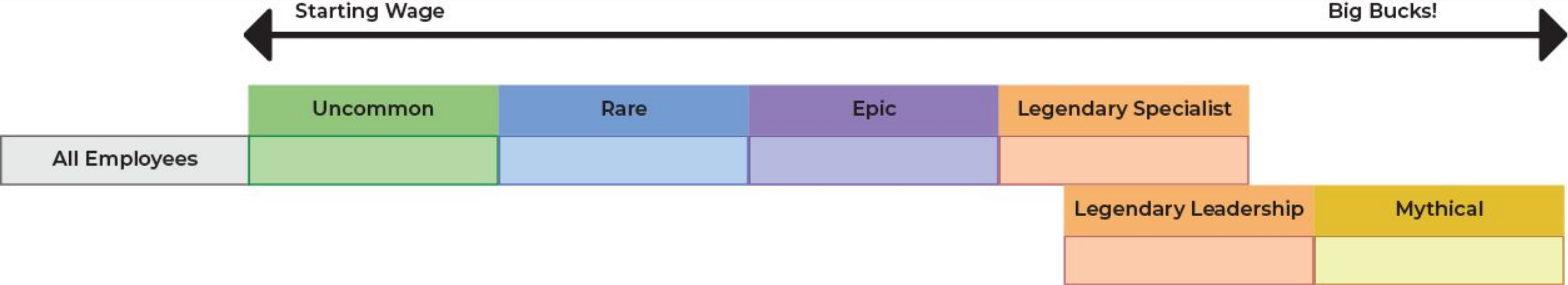
2020



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2021



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# Upcoming Improvements

- **Creating measurable tools** to better gather information for those wanting to move into **Legendary Specialist**
- Adding **better transparency** on contribution tiers and seniority

Personal - Team	Team - Discipline	Discipline - Studio	Studio - Industry
Junior	Intermediate	Senior	Lead
\$50,000 - \$60,000	\$60,000 - \$75,000	\$75,000-\$95,000	\$95,000+

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# Tool #1: Communication

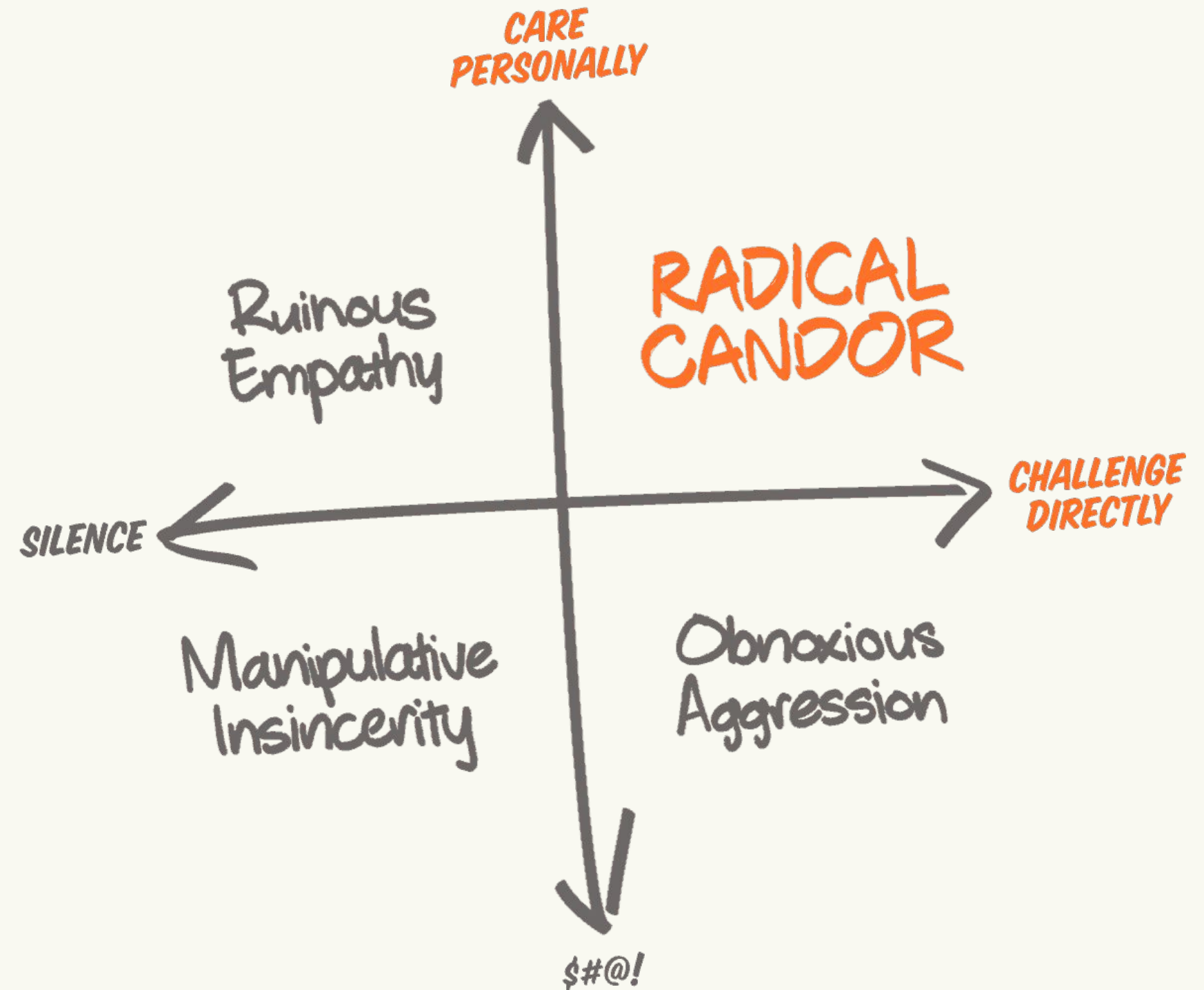
- Scenario
  - 4 approaches to the scenario



# Radical Candor

Our expectation that all our employees use to approach work interactions

- How to give/receive candid critique in your team
- Caring Personally while Challenging Directly



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# Radical Candor Scenario

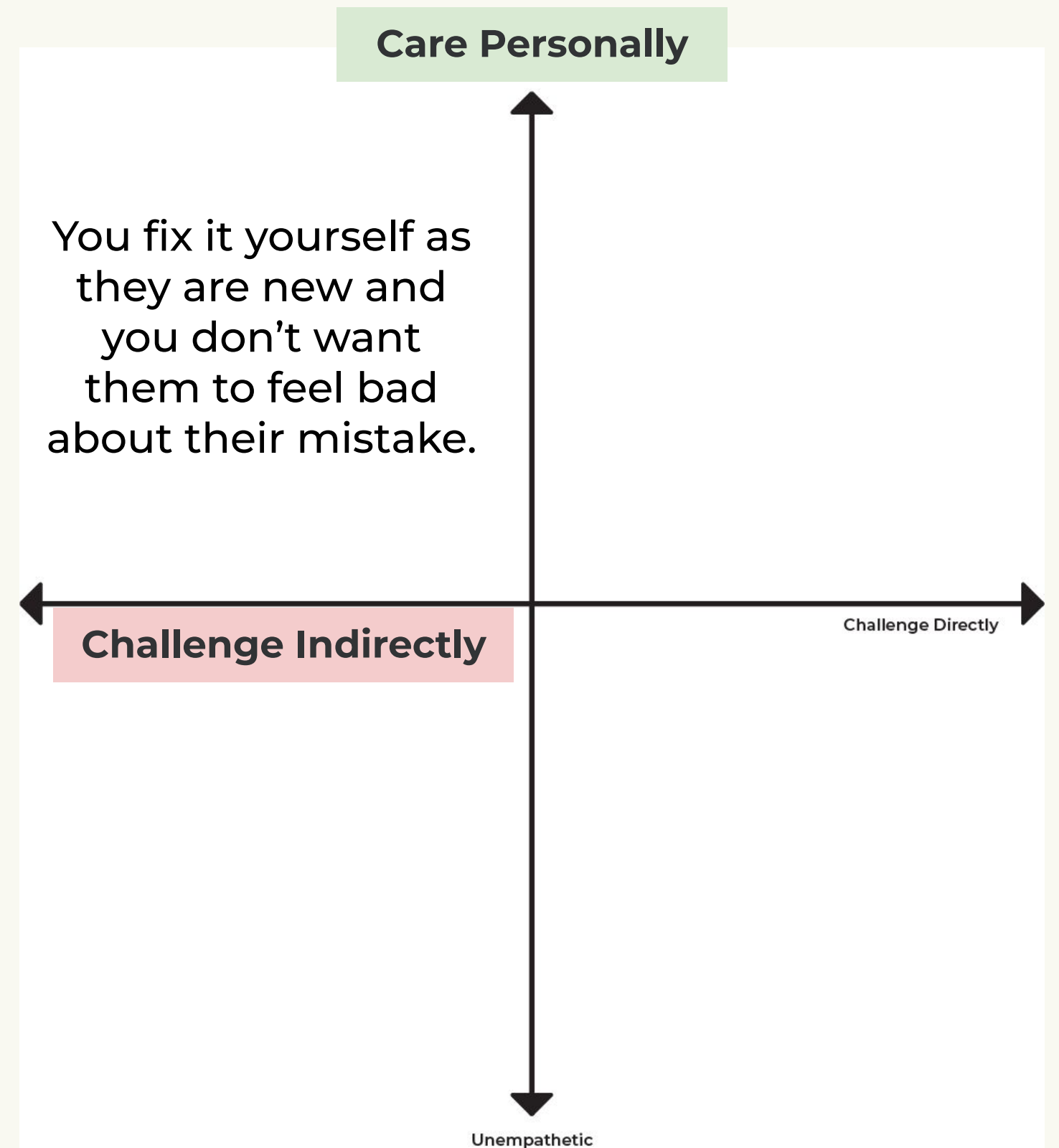
**Someone on your team is new and has created a game breaking bug that has made it into the live build.**

Your team now needs to stay late to fix the mistake.

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## Ruinous Empathy

- Fear of hurting the other person
- Avoid addressing the mistake
- Fake praise

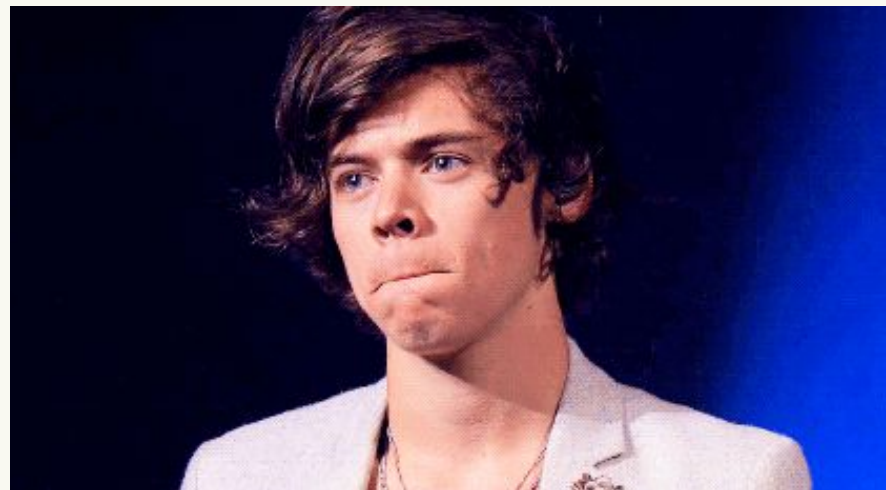


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## Manipulative Insincerity

- Personal fear is the driver
- Remain quiet
- Agree when you actually don't



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## Obnoxious Aggression

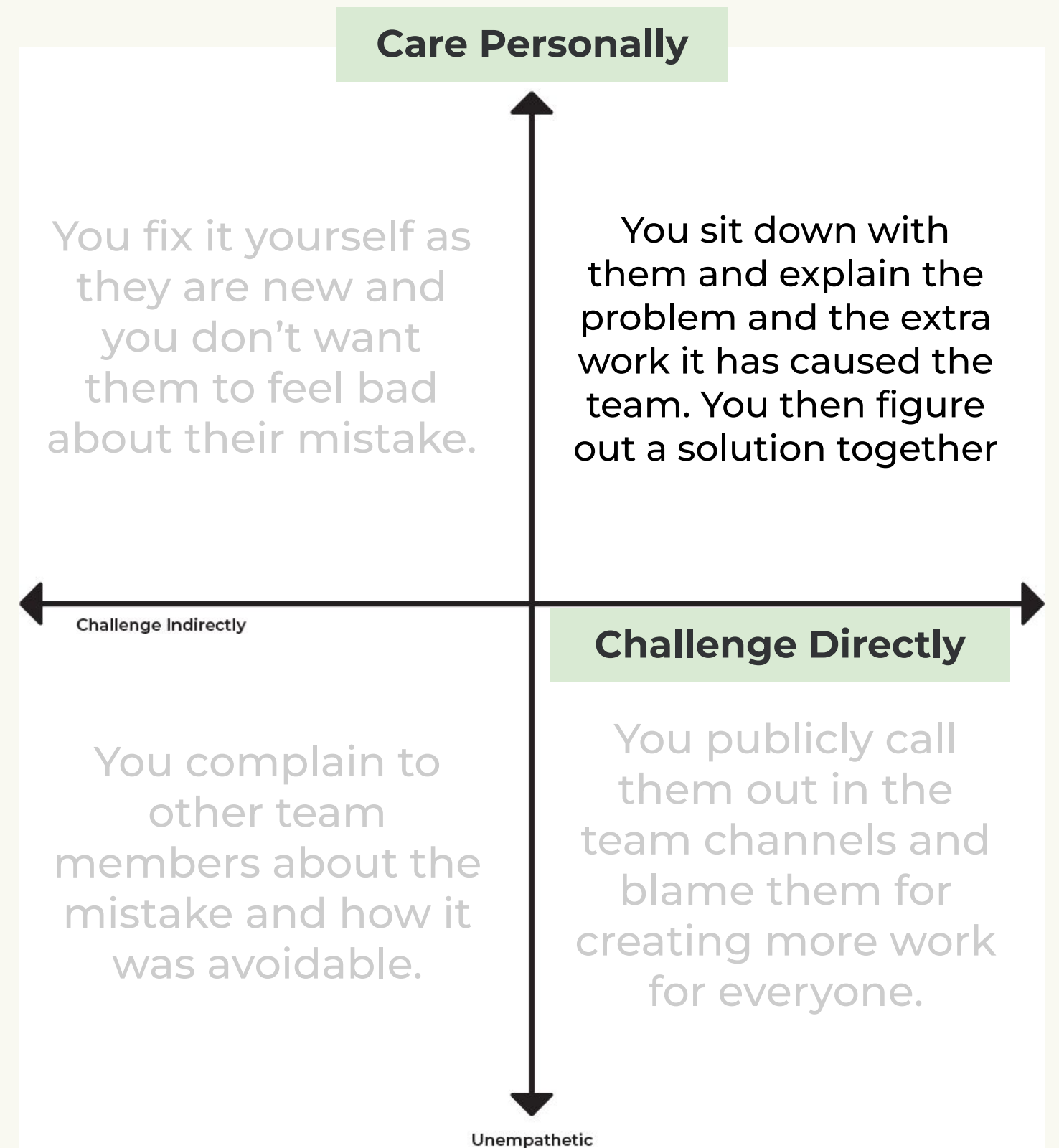
- Immediate direct challenges
- Critical in public
- Don't consider the other person



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## Radical Candor

- Care Personally but challenge directly
- Context is provided on both sides
- The aim is not to be “right”



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# What if I made the Mistake?

- Embrace the discomfort, take a moment and assess
- Avoid shifting blame and focus on next actionable steps
- Listen with the intent to understand, not respond
- Solicit/Seek context and provide your own when appropriate

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# Radical Reminders

- Everyone at our studio gets **training in Radical Candor when they start** working at the company.
  - **Refreshers are every year** in groups of 3-5
- To practice for a hard talk, **try a Radical Candor ‘practice’ session** before the real thing with yourself or a trusted person.
  - Become more clear in your intention and delivery

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# Tool #2: Catch Ups

- Cadence and environment of meetings
- Structure of meeting



# Check ins with Teams

- Each artist has a **regular catch up every quarter**
  - We often take these off-site to a nearby cafe
  - 1 hour meeting
- **In person is my preference**, but we also hold these digitally in video calls for anyone working from home.

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- **Goals**
  - Short term
  - Long term
- **Status check**
  - Workload/ Resourcing
  - Satisfaction
  - Team Dynamics
  - Representation
- Questions about the company

[Artist] Catchup [Date]

Reporter: [Name]

**Goals**

What is a short term goal you have?	•
What is a long term goal you have?	•

**Status-Check**

• Work-load vs resourcing?	•
• Satisfaction?	•
• Team dynamics and interpersonal complications?	•
• Do you feel you are being heard/ represented properly?	•

**Questions**

Is there anything in the company you would like to know more about?	•
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**Notes**

•
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# Make Time for your Team

- Your time is valuable, but this signals to your team that **you value making time for them regardless of how busy you are.**
- Set up regular **placeholder catch up slots** in your calendar

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# Tool #3: Progression Plans

- What is it?
- Case Study

# What is it?

- **Opt-in program** (aimed at intermediate/seniors)
- A tool to measure **technical, leadership and soft skills**
- A tool for your team to use to **advocate for themselves** and **self reflect on progress**

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# What is it?

- Regular **15-30 minute catch ups every 2 weeks**
- Held with a discipline lead and optionally a mentor when needed
- Similar to a standup meeting, but for goals

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- **Three levels of goals**

- North Star (career/5+ yrs)
- High Level (6 months-1 yr)
- Actionable (days-weeks)

## [Artist] Progression Plan

Updated 18.02.2022

This plan is designed to help your Discipline Representatives support you in your professional growth at CerebralFix and encourage accountability and reflection in goals that you set for yourself.

Review dates are not necessarily due dates. While it is important to try and keep achievable goals and hit these, review dates give you the opportunity to reflect on how close your estimation was and factors that contributed.

	North Star Goal	Review Date
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Goal -</li><li>• Success Metric -</li><li>• Review Outcome -</li></ul>	Yearly

	High Level Goal	Review Date
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Goal -</li><li>• Success Metric -</li><li>• Review Outcome -</li></ul>	

	Actionable Goals	Review Date
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Goal -</li><li>• Success Metric -</li><li>• Review Outcome -</li></ul>	
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Goal -</li><li>• Success Metric -</li><li>• Review Outcome -</li></ul>	

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- **Goal**
  - Brief description
- **Success Metric**
  - How do you know you are successful in the goal?
- **Review Date/Outcomes**
  - NOT a Due date, a check in date
  - Reflection of progress
  - Is more support needed?

## [Artist] Progression Plan

Updated 18.02.2022

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	Actionable Goals	Review Date
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2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal -</li> <li>• Success Metric -</li> <li>• Review Outcome -</li> </ul>	

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# Goal Examples

- Moving up a contribution tier
- Improving a skill
- Training for a new upcoming project
- Mentoring others

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# Case Study

- Contribution tier progression was slow/stagnate
  - Time management and skill mastery needed
  - Was however meeting other soft skill requirements
- Sought out more support to help

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	Bite Sized Goals	Review Date
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Goal - 11.5 Hanging flowers 1x1 model</b></li><li>● Success Metric - Improve understanding and visual quality of foliage. Efficient use of foliage segments.</li><li>● <b>Review Outcome</b></li></ul>	Done <b>-SUCCESS </b>

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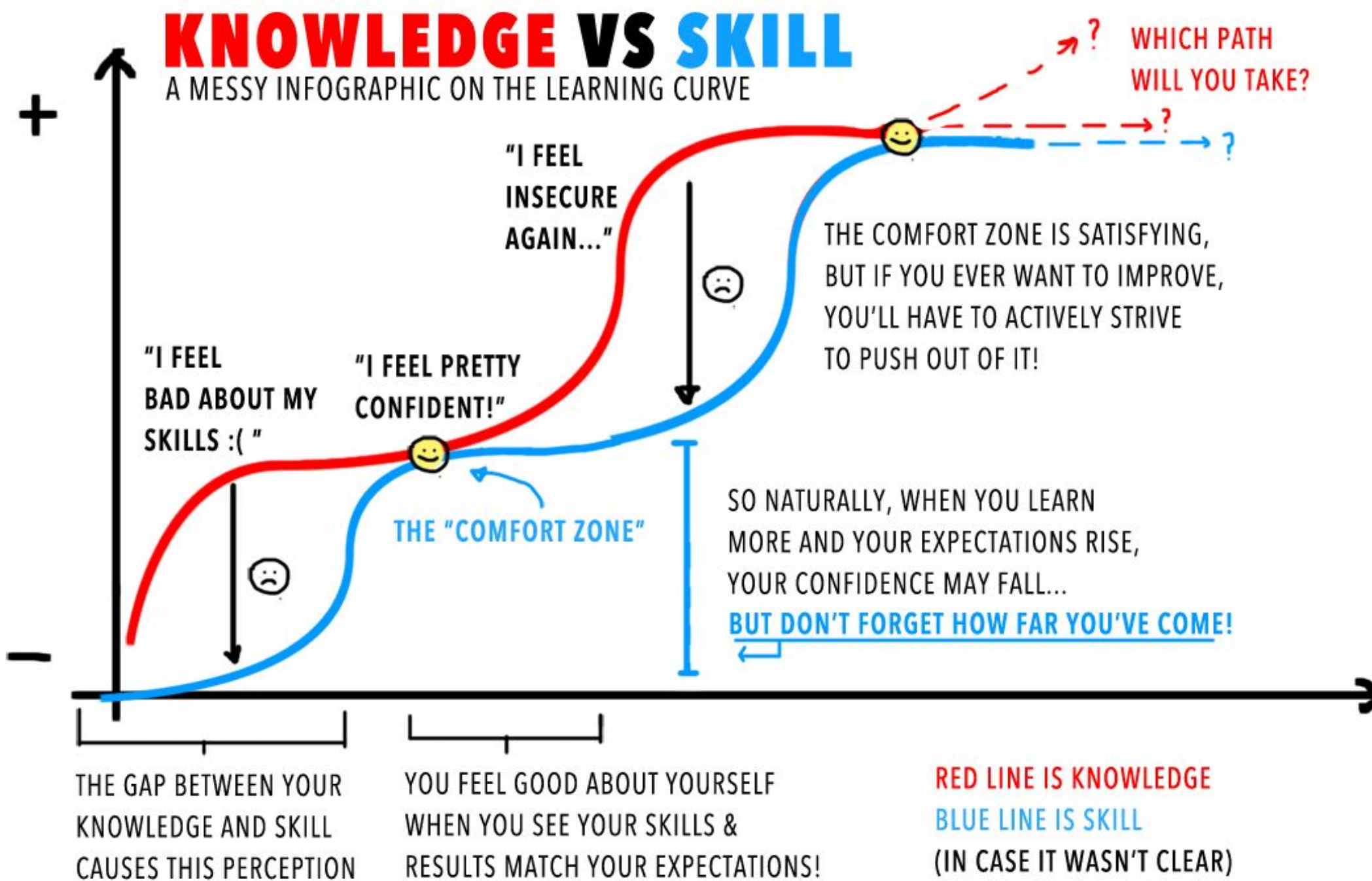




	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Review Outcome</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Friday March 4th</i> - Ok with most of it but not enjoying foliage. The way that she has started setting up the foliage, it doesn't allow for easy lighting. She needs to figure out the next solution and redo a few parts to improve the model. Flowers are going ok, leaves are a bit trickier. Has been making one pot and rotating it - working with _____ to decide the best solution on making 1</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
	<p>pot and dup or 4 pots.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Friday March 18th</i> - Still working on. Finishing up shadows and highlights. Has been also working on other things eg. ACE model and helping _____. <b>Has learnt a lot about leaves that is useful for future models.</b> Understanding the why has been so much better for learning then just being told just to do - learning how Lila best learns.</li> <li>○ <i>Friday April 1st</i> - Almost done, Just have some minor color feedback to finish up the asset (changing the pole from green to black or grey). _____ sent straight to _____. Foliage is done though!</li> </ul>	

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Credit: art by auriee (tumblr)

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2 hours ago

Perhaps the green is a little too pastel? If you push the contrast to emphasize the difference between the flowers, and help differentiate it from the BG, I think that'll help

Did a quick example, it's not 100% accurate to what the intention is (edited)

image.png ▼



2 hours ago

Really digging the model and shape/silhouette! Nice job! The flower pots could possibly be a bit bigger/lower to match the concept a bit more 🤔



14 days ago

I agree with the fellows above. I added a bit of a paintover here with some of my thoughts.

image.png ▼



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# What if Project Work Doesn't Align with Goals?

- Ultimately, everyone has their own **personal responsibility to find value in their time at work**
  - Our job is to **open up opportunities** that align with their goals when possible.
- Progression plans need dedicated **paid** work time

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# Tool #4: Personal Development Time

- How much time?
- Examples
- What didn't work

# How much Time?

- Everyone at the studio has **10% of their time each week** to work on professional development time.
  - This is **4 hours for a full time team** member
- Targeted time to develop future career goals
- **Big morale booster**, especially when projects get stressful

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# Examples of Upskilling

- Career Progression Goals
- Upskilling in a skill
  - Participating in a course for hard skills
  - Participating in a course for soft skills
- QOL improvements on projects
- SPARK
  - Mini projects done in small teams

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# What didn't Work?

1. Having an hour at the end of the day
  - **Context switching is rough**
2. Taking it when we had downtime (unlimited time)
  - People just kept working on project work (getting ahead etc.)

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# Final Thoughts

- Problems
- Bias
- Parting Ways



# All I'm Hearing are Problems...

- **Don't panic!** You've likely set up an environment that your team feels comfortable coming to you for support.
- **Listen first**
  - What have they done themselves to solve the problem and/or what support are they seeking from you?
- **Ranting** - Once is therapeutic, more than that is a pattern.
  - Encourage radical candor
  - Provide candid feedback and critique

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# Check your Bias

- We are a pivotal part of creating more diversity in our industry.
  - Check that your unconscious bias isn't making decisions for you and **who excels in your team**
  - Are you **meeting each individuals needs** for an inclusive environment?

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# They won't be there Forever

- Sometimes you won't be able to offer them the **right opportunities** for them to grow to the next stage of their career
- The aim should be for the **parting to be bittersweet**
  - Be happy for them and their growth
  - Good word of mouth is powerful
  - Opens up new opportunities

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# Key Takeaways

- There is **no out of the box solution to career development**
  - Each individual will have different needs
  - Iterate and evolve to find what works
- **Investing in your people and their environments**, will add value to your studio
- **It's not always easy**, but it is worth your time

	High Level Goal	Review Date
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Goal</b> - Give a talk at GDC</li> <li>● <b>Success Metric</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Be able to share a screenshot of this on a slide</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Review Outcome -</li> </ul>	March 2023

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# Questions?

**Hannah Mackintosh**

**Art Lead** at CerebralFix

[Hannah@cerebralfix.com](mailto:Hannah@cerebralfix.com)

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