Lessons in Technical Leadership

From small startups to large enterprise

Annie Vella

Who Am I?

CURRENTLY

- **DISTINGUISHED ENGINEER, WESTPAC NZ**

EDUCATION

- **VICTORIA UNIVERSITY, 2000-2003**

- **UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND, 2024-PRESENT**

EXPERIENCE

- **INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR, 2004-2014**

- **TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP*, 2014-2024**

FUN FACTS

- **FELL IN LOVE WITH COMPUTERS AT 6 YEARS OLD**

- **LIVED IN 7 COUNTRIES AND SPEAK 3 LANGUAGES**

- **WORKED IN 4 COUNTRIES AND 11 INDUSTRIES**

Diversity of organisational needs

Context is key

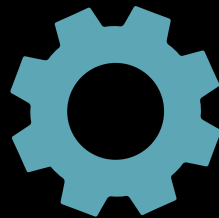There is no one-size-fits-all approach

3 Tiers of organisational scale

STARTUPS

SCALE-UPS

ENTERPRISE

3 Pillars of Staff Engineering

Tanya Reilly - The Staff Engineer's Path

BIG PICTURE THINKING

PROJECT EXECUTION

LEVELLING UP OTHERS

Exciting and chaotic

Pros:

- **High autonomy**
- **Innovative and creative freedom**
- **Accelerated learning opportunities**

Cons:

- **High responsibility and accountability**
- **Constant urgency to deliver**
- **Multifaceted roles**

Dynamic and fast-paced

Pros:

- **Opportunity for impact**
- **Professional growth**
- **Innovation with purpose**

Cons:

- **Constantly changing and evolving**
- **Very demanding**
- **Speed over quality**

Stable and structured

Pros:

- Opportunity for big impact
- Specialised teams and roles
- Very well supported

Cons:

- Risk-adverse
- Communication overhead
- Change can be challenging

The Startup/Enterprise Pendulum

Variety

is the spice of life

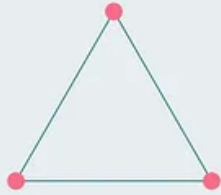# It takes time to adapt

Be patient

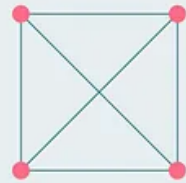# Lesson #2: The cost of scale

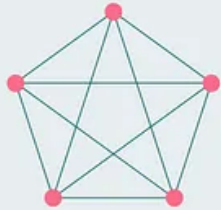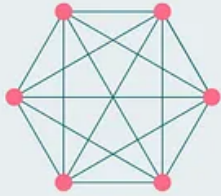**Gene Kim & Steven Spear - Wiring the Winning Organization**
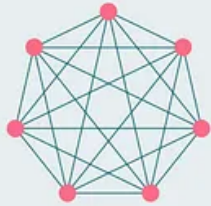

2 people, 1 line
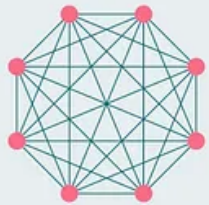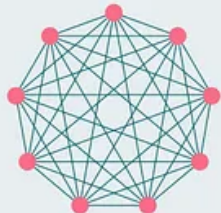
3 people, 3 lines

4 people, 6 lines

5 people, 10 lines

6 people, 15 lines

7 people, 21 lines

8 people, 28 lines

9 people, 36 lines

10 people, 45 lines

Social circuitry

The larger it is, the harder it is to navigate

To be a good leader

you must first be a good follower

Lesson #4: The buck stops with you

Resilience and resourcefulness

are key to your survival

Lesson #5: The cost of prioritising speed over quality

YOLO!

News flash: incidents aren't fun

Don't fix symptoms

Find and resolve key constraints

A good architecture

is one that can be easily changed
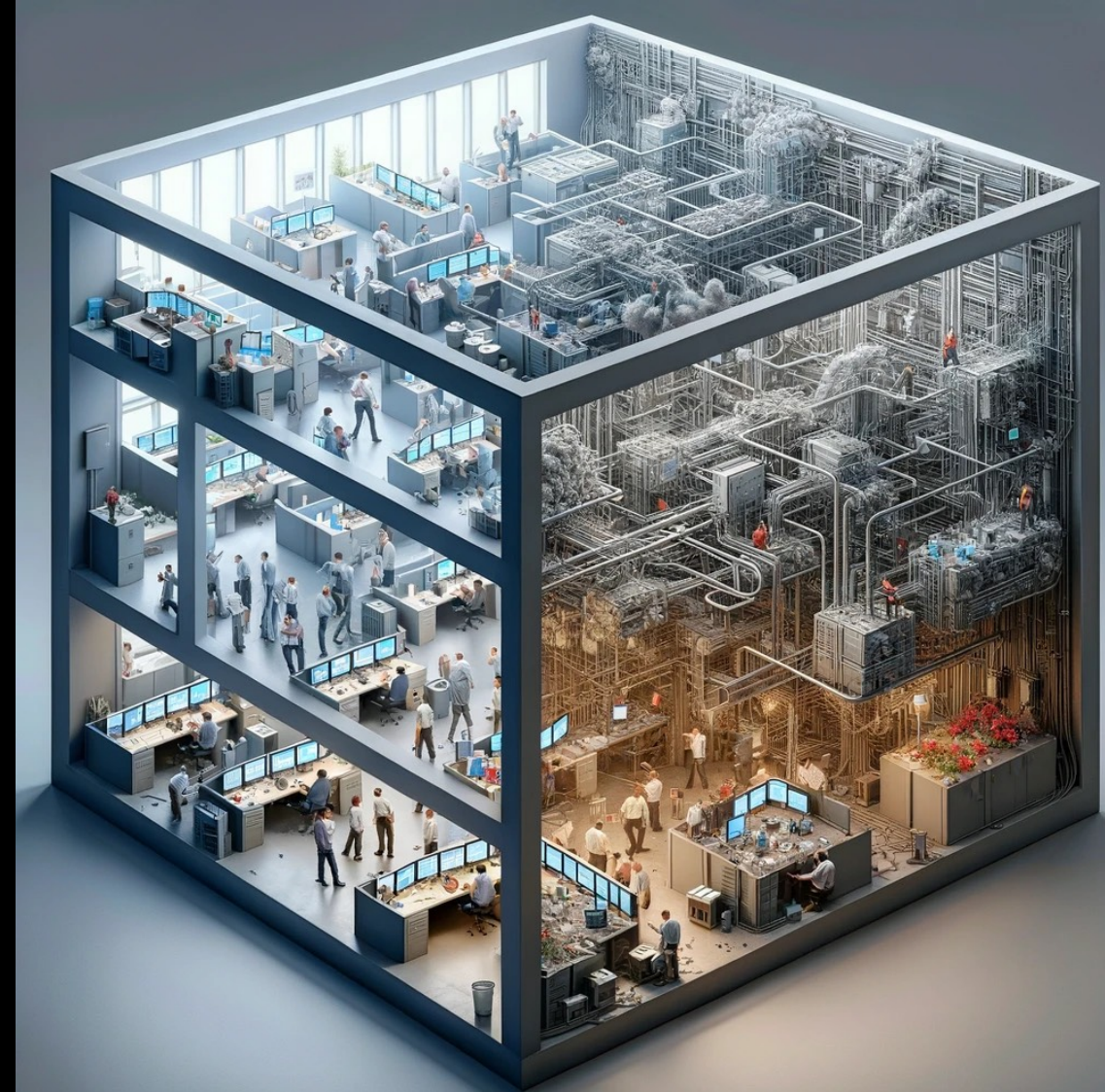
Building software

isn't the most expensive part

Lesson #9: Be the supply to the unmet demand

Opportunities exist everywhere

It's up to you to find them

Lesson #10: They're all beautiful puzzles

Regardless of size

there are many interesting problems to solve

Technical Leadership means...

- Embracing the spectrum of challenges
- Adapting to different organisational needs
- Having a growth mindset
- Being a learner first
- Evaluating your new environment
- Respecting existing norms
- Gently introducing new perspectives
- Cross-pollinating learnings for greater impact
- Being the supply to the unmet demand

So, are you ready to try something new?

Broaden your horizons

Take a swing on the Startup/Enterprise Pendulum

Questions?

Reach out

- LinkedIn - www.linkedin.com/in/annievella

- X/Twitter - @codefrenzy

- Blog - www.annievella.com