

The background features a light blue pattern of paw prints of various sizes. A solid teal rectangular block is positioned in the upper right quadrant. A white rectangular box is centered horizontally and vertically, containing the main title. A black horizontal bar is located at the bottom left, containing the subtitle.

# Herding Cats

**Building and leading high performance teams**

# Who and Why?

- Joy Shafer
- 25 years of experience managing technical people
- Way more years than that herding cats
- Dozens of happy workers and cats



# Why Leadership Matters

- In 2018 Tech had the highest turnover rate in any industry: 13.2% and rising
- On average it takes 35 days to hire a tech worker (and at least 30 interviews)
- Replacing employees is expensive
  - Cost of hiring
  - Cost of onboarding
  - Cost of skill development
  - Cost of vacant seat/loss of knowledge/skill
- Reasons people leave their job:
  - Bad boss
  - Lack of opportunity for promotion or growth
  - Offered a “better” position

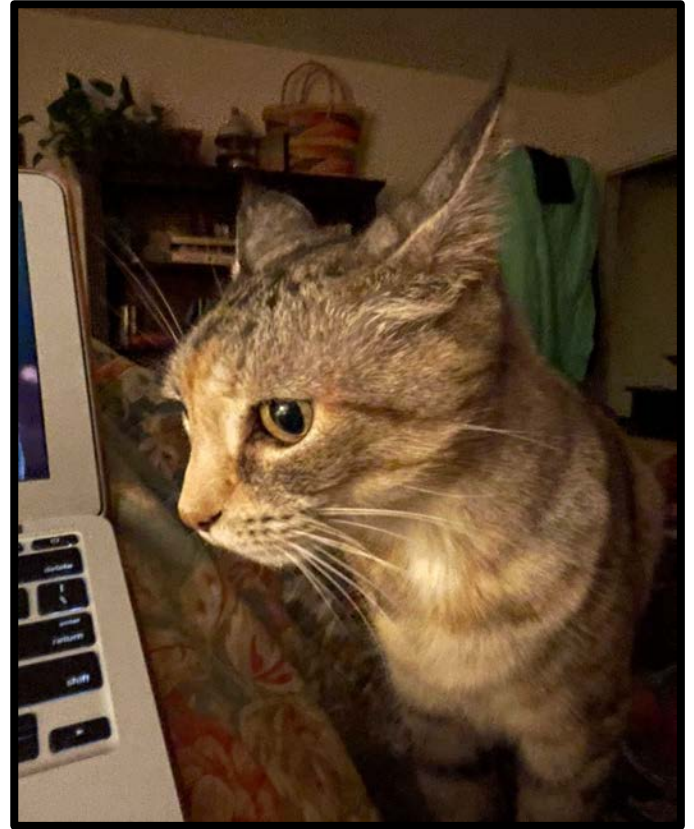


Walking away in disgust

# Why Leadership Matters

A manager has a lot of control over many of the reasons employees leave:

- Toxic work environment
- Lack of opportunity
- Do not see how their job relates to corporate mission/goals
- Lack of autonomy
- Lack of recognition / support
- Boring work



My cat Noel is unhappy with the work she's been assigned.

# Gaining Respect

- **Have integrity**
  - Take the high road even if it costs you in the short term
  - Accept responsibility (even if it's not your fault)
  - Apologize without making excuses
  - Never throw anyone under the bus
- **Be honest**
  - If there are things you can't talk about, simply say so
- **Be fair**
  - Don't play favorites
  - Divide up the work no one wants to do
  - Do some of the that work yourself
- **Be strong**
  - Grace under pressure
  - Have courage of conviction

# Gaining Trust

- Be genuine
- Communicate openly
- Be empathetic
  - Learn the art of listening
- Be vulnerable
  - Don't be afraid to make fun of yourself
  - Tell stories about mistakes you've made



# Know your Team

- Meet with each team member regularly
  - You will not find out what's going on if you are not meeting with your team
- Find out what they care about -- what's their passion?
  - How can you motivate someone if you have no idea what motivates them?
- Encourage casual conversation
  - It's how people get to know and trust each other
- Show that you care

# Support your Team

- Protect your team from unwanted interference
  - Extra work
  - Extra hours
- Remove roadblocks
- Provide tools and assistance
- Create opportunities for learning and advancement
  - Dedicated time for learning
  - Classes, conferences, etc.



My brother learning how to herd cats.



# Give Feedback

- Give positive feedback as often as possible while still being genuine
  - Find something positive to comment on for each one-on-one
  - Be as specific as possible
  - Hand out kudos and compliments in meetings also
  - Be on the lookout for opportunities to give positive feedback on-the-fly
- Give constructive feedback carefully
  - Never give negative feedback in public
  - Plan what you will say ahead of time but be timely in your feedback
  - Be as specific as possible
  - Can often couch feedback in terms of “tips”



My daughter's cat giving feedback

# Corrective Feedback

For serious discussions, I use this model:

- Have a separate meeting just to discuss the specific problem
- Be specific - what is the behavior you observed that is not acceptable
  - Be direct and factual
  - Never complain about the individual, complain about the behavior
  - Do not judge
- Why is the behavior unacceptable
  - Explain the negative consequences of the behavior
- Get buy-in that the behavior is unacceptable
- Brainstorm together ways to avoid a repeat performance
  - It helps to have thought of some ideas ahead of time, but let them throw out ideas first
- End the discussion on a positive note with a firm plan of action

# Team Dynamics

- Create a positive work environment
  - Allow space in daily interactions for casual conversations and laughter
  - Work should be fun
  - Encourage constructive criticism of process, etc. but not people or other teams
  - Discourage gossip, backstabbing, etc.
- Eliminate bad actors from the team
  - People who don't do their part or, worse, take credit for other's work
  - People who are unfit in temperament, skillset, etc.
- Celebrate successes
  - Team outings don't have to be expensive
  - Team outings should be inclusive
  - Hand out stickers!
- Celebrate failures
  - It really helps to have space and time to vent, learn, and move on



# Managing Change

- Don't wait until everything is a done deal before you let people know change is coming
  - People want to feel they have input into the decision making process or at least that their concerns are heard
  - People don't like surprises
  - If it's a big change, they will likely hear about it from the rumor mill
- Provide as much information as possible
- Explain the Why
- Listen and sympathize with dissension, but support the change
  - Especially if it's a done deal
- Put a positive spin on the change
  - Even if you yourself don't agree with it -- but don't be disingenuous



# Building a Team



# Building a Team

If you focus on hiring instead of retaining employees, you will get stuck in a perpetual hiring cycle.\*

- Hire for aptitude and attitude
- Hire for diversity of perspectives, skill sets, and strengths
- Look to “fill in the gaps” in the team
- Be prepared for your interviews; put your best foot forward
- Give existing team members the opportunity to interview new potential teammates

\* Bucketlist: [\*The True Cost of Employee Turnover in Tech\*](#), Jason Lindstorm

# Summary

- Good people leaders are worth their weight in gold
- Good leaders:
  - Gain respect
  - Gain trust
  - Know their team
  - Support their team
  - Know how to give effective feedback
  - Learn how to manage change
  - Hire for aptitude, attitude, and diversity
- Have fun!

## Recommended Resources

- *Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer*, Margot Morrell, Stephanie Capparell, Alexandra Shackleton
- *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey
- Bucketlist: *The True Cost of Employee Turnover in Tech*
- Harvard Business Review: *Why People Leave their Jobs*
- Cybersearch: *Why Retaining Top Tech Talent is More Important than Hiring Them*
- Emergenetics International: *The Connection Between Vulnerability and Trust in Teams*

“Without trust we don't truly collaborate, we merely coordinate or, at best, cooperate. It is trust that transforms a group of people into a team.”

-- Stephen Covey



## Building a Team

# I'm Hiring!

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## Herding Cats



My brother finally got all his cats in a row -- sort of. He went on to an illustrious career as an XO on nuclear submarines.