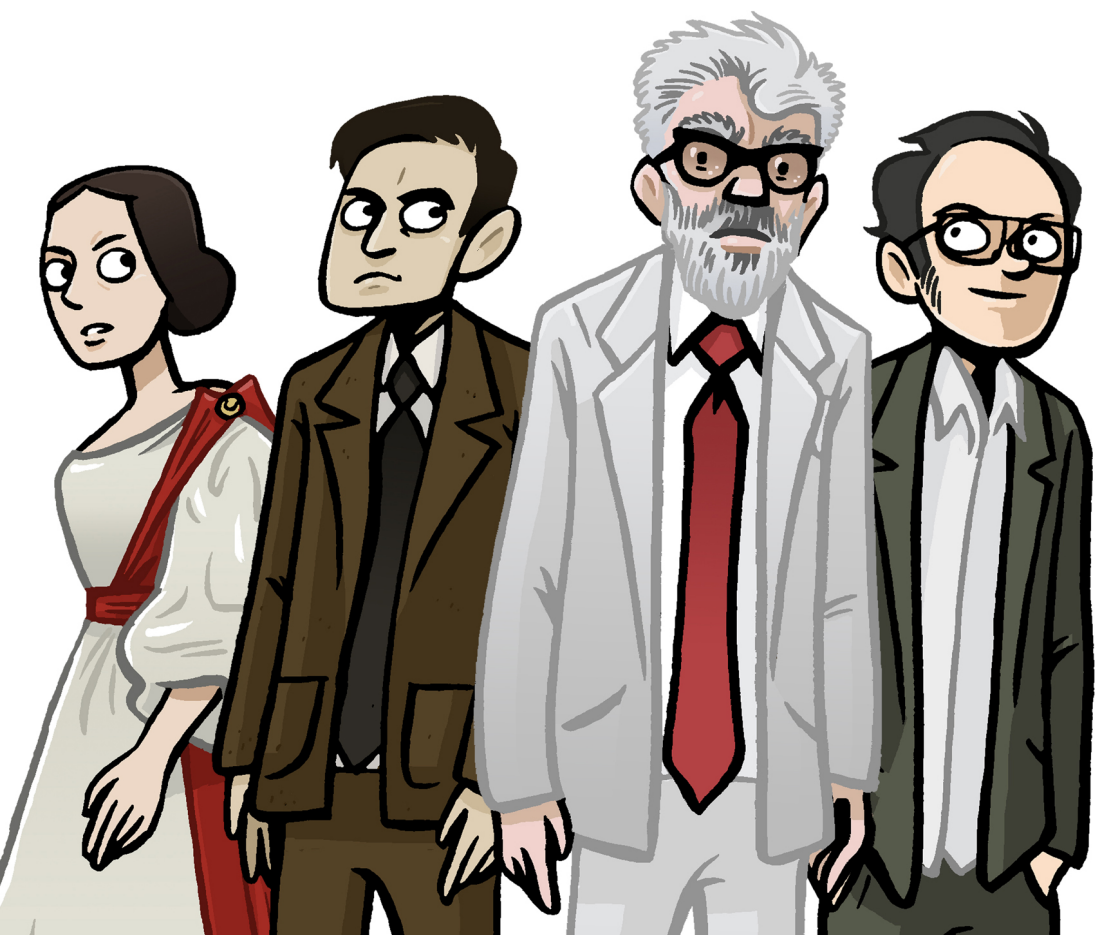


THE PROGRAMMERS GUIDE TO PEOPLE

TOM HOWLETT



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Tom Howlett

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Fear

My first real job was as an Engineer in the Merchant Navy. At sea we felt fear of fire, rocks, drowning (and being found naked trying to climb into fridge), but it was no comparison to the fear I felt sat in a cubicle in my first office job. This Kafkaesque fear radiated from the people around me. There were rules to be followed, confusion as to why they existed, yet a fear of breaking them. I rarely spoke to my comrades around me, we kept our heads down, built a bubble around ourselves, and dutifully soldiered on.

My first office job was entering data about ships' engines into an archaic mainframe database that regularly churned out reams of paper containing reports, that, as far as we were aware, nobody ever used. Pleasure came from London's bars and clubs and learning how to hack into the database when nobody was looking. My desire to code came from frustration. Working this way was unbearable and I vowed to create a better way. Although at this stage, I had no idea how.

The area of business I was in was in decline and mass redundancy was around the corner. An organisation that had, at one time, been one of the most respected in the world, was becoming irrelevant because the people were too scared to change. It seemed that it wasn't just this organisation that suffered from this paralysis, to varying degrees, the problem was everywhere. People were rewarded for following their managers rather than questioning them.

This apocalyptic unhappiness at work is unnecessary. 15 years later I'm working as part of a team who openly question assumptions, share discoveries and work together to solve problems. Nobody is told what to do and we treat each other as equals. We built a supportive team who are learning and creating better ways of working. Working with people like this is life affirming rather than soul destroying. The change requires us to replace fear-creating behaviour with openness and respect.

We fear criticism so follow, it take courage to lead

Stockholm Syndrome leaves scars that last a lifetime. I learnt to love those who repressed my creativity and worked hard to please them by excelling at the mundane. I flattered my managers by imitating their controlling ways and ignored others need for self expression, endorsing a dysfunctional mindset.

In a later job, I worked with a team leader called Chris, who would dutifully code review all the code the team would write. He would require us to print out the code, and would get his red pen out, like a teacher, and mark the code, focusing on indenting and capitalisation. The fear of this banal teacher-child relationship caused us all to delay code reviews by not finishing things for weeks, if not months. As a child I learnt not to question my teacher's logic and the red pen had a similar effect.

In an attempt to reduce my fear, I sat next to Chris and allied myself with him, supporting rather than questioning his methods and alienating other members of the team with condescension and sarcasm. I sought to overcome my frustration by getting pro-

moted to a position where I could be just like Chris. Luckily for the team this never happened. I was learning to gain recognition by following rather than leading.

The best leadership I have seen hasn't come from designated leaders, but from those willing to challenge them. Anyone can do this, you don't need permission, only courage. People lead by sharing new ideas and questioning the status quo. Working in teams where anyone can lead at any time is exciting. In the absence of fear everyone has the courage to share their ideas.

Fear stops us from feeling, Empathy takes courage.

Despite Chris being a nice guy, friendly and in many ways helpful, his methods created fear. I imagine that others in the team felt the same but I was too consumed with myself to notice. Why didn't we talk about it? I took fear for granted, unaware of the effect it was having on my behaviour. Did ignoring the feeling of fear lead to ignoring other feelings too? Is it fear that explains our lack of compassion? The quest for individual success blinds us to the feelings around us.

A preference for elegant code over people's messy behaviour encouraged me to create a protective bubble around myself. My bubble consisted of a pair of headphones and technical language designed to alienate rather than communicate with clarity.

My bubble protected me from feeling the fear of others. An organisation of bubbles slowly bursting remains rigid and bulky losing liquidity and adaptability. As the team grew together we

learnt how learning needs to flow effectively, both within and outside the team, and we began to shed our bubbles.

Fear stops us from listening

Chris's quest to spend the maximum amount of time "doing the work" gave him little time to listen to others. When nobody listens there is no reason to share ideas or concerns, so we just carried on, digging ourselves into a pit of technical debt. I imagine Chris feared what people would think if his team wasn't coding furiously. At the time there was little understanding of the cost of poor quality. Was he also scared that he might be shown up by not thinking of the ideas himself?

I question the purpose of my listening. Is it to learn from the speaker or discredit them. If they discover the next big idea, they will be seen as a hero, so why would I encourage others to speak openly? When I fear what will be said, I am not listening at all.

In a team free of fear I listen with an open mind. Ideas emerge and strengthen with each contribution. Creativity bonds us. We grow together.

Fear kills thought, freedom nurtures it

Chris's leadership style was designed to encourage "his" team to conform to his static beliefs. Fear and frustration leave no room for clear thought or creativity. My purpose was to please and to be rewarded with green pen not the red pen. Although the process was profoundly demotivating the only way out seemed to be to gain promotion by following the company way. I played

games and politics that created an illusion of superiority over others, for me at least, I'm not sure others were so easily fooled.

Chris's way of doing things hardly changed in the 3 years I worked "for" him. Did he fear that change would show that what he did before wasn't good enough? I remember being frustrated by the way we worked without thinking about how to improve it. There wasn't much thinking going on at all.

Without fear our minds are free to find better ways of working. We do it every day, all day. We do "the work" as we discover the method to do it and the way we work improves continuously.

Fear makes us abusive,

Eventually Chris left, but his influence stayed through the years that followed. I was given some freedom, but without shedding my fear, it was a long time before I was able to work differently and it was business as usual. I've given the people I work with a hard time over the years. As an outlet for my frustration, I've criticised, lectured and shouted. I've been distracted and disinterested in an attempt to communicate my displeasure at the status quo. Whilst I expected other people to change when I told them how stupid they were being I did nothing about shaking off the abusive behaviour I had learned through years of fear.

Ask me and I'll tell you about my strong belief in equality; step inside my head and I'm deciding whether I should look up to or down on you. This is status anxiety. I crave a respectable position in my own imaginary hierarchical organisation chart. What is its effect? When I listen to someone, what I hear depends on their standing in my mental hierarchy. When I consider them above

me, I'll absorb whatever they say as the truth, when below I am rejecting the things they say.

Equality means listening to everybody with an equally open mind. There are moments when I don't feel insecure about my position in society. I wish there were more. Treating each other equally and with respect allows us to think together and grow.

Fear stops us from acting, openness requires us to act

I thought I knew what was wrong and had some idea of how things should be, but felt incapable of acting. To change things, I would have to challenge the beliefs of those who employed me, and I really couldn't find the courage to do that. I put up with the frustration and did the minimum required to not be the worst. We plodded along, missing deadlines and producing mediocre work. As in most organisations at the time, the expectations of what software developers could produce was low. Any attempt to improve productivity was made through coercion creating more fear and more unproductive behaviours. We were stuck and scared to change.

Slowly the fear began to dissipate. After a brief flirtation with outsourcing, the management turned to the team for answers. They asked "How can we become more productive?" Perhaps unintentionally, they had given us permission to decide for ourselves how we would work. I'm not sure they were prepared for the series of events that followed. We stopped working as individuals and came together. With daily stand-ups and retrospectives we started to identify the problems that were

frustrating us. When problems are hidden we fear revealing them, once they're out in the open we're obliged to fix them. We began to help each other to find better ways of working.

Fear stops us from communicating, learning depends on communication

The prospect of conversation with someone I rarely speak to or consider higher in my mental hierarchy than me, makes me nervous. I like to think I'm always at ease with others, but in reality I avoid talking to those I don't feel close to. I fear that what I have to say is unimportant, that they will have something better to do. I fear they are going to outsmart me.

When I do talk to someone I don't normally talk to I'm usually surprised that they value what I have to say. This feels liberating and some of that fear evaporates. My wife works in sales, she calls people she doesn't know every day. I quake in fear at making one call like this, that's why I chose to make a career communicating through code.

To develop software I need to understand more than code. I need to learn about the needs of the people who use and sell the software. I need to learn from others and share the things I know. The less we connect the more fear we feel. The more I find the courage to talk with those I avoided, the easier it becomes.

As we became more open we grew in confidence as a team. All learning gets shared daily in the stand-up, through constant pairing and unplanned discussions. The team grows smarter together and because the learning is shared, less time is spent on disagreements caused by lack of understanding.

Fear stops us from changing

Once “the way things are done around here” has been established, proposing a change takes courage. I’ve spent years thinking change isn’t possible, when in reality I’ve lacked the courage to make that change myself. Finding better ways of working requires me to be honest about problems with the way I work now and not just blame them on others.

I’ve spent a long time thinking about better ways of working without having the courage to share them openly. It takes a special leader, with no fear of failure, to stick their neck out in the conservative world of business. Waiting to be asked about my ideas proved to be a long and frustrating wait.

Once problems are visible to all, the fear of change is overridden by the fear of not changing. When we’ve taken time to find a better way, the only thing we have to fear is missing the opportunity to change. We support each other as we encounter new difficulties.

Fear stops us from learning

In the quest to create the “wow factor” in our user interface, we invested in a 3rd party control that added a plethora of whizzy features to our forms and grids. Buying the licences was a big up-front investment, and once the decision had been made we feared the embarrassment of it turning out to be a waste of money. As we started using it, we spent more and more time fixing bugs around it’s hundreds of configuration options, and turning off features that didn’t really work for us. But nobody questioned

whether we should be using these controls. Why? Because we feared embarrassment, when it turned out these controls weren't such a great idea after all, rather than learn from the failure, we carried on quietly ignoring the problems and they became an elephant in the room.

Knowing to keep testing assumptions isn't enough. It takes courage to overcome the fear that stops us. It's easier to test other people's assumptions because there is no fear of embarrassment yourself, but this can be threatening. How can we learn better ways of working without fear? One way is to make shared choices as a team by reaching a consensus. When the team makes a choice that leads to failure, and can share the learning without blame or embarrassment, the fear of experimentation evaporates and creativity can flourish.

My fear makes others fearful, openness encourages trust.

Nelson was a team lead who loved to spread fear. He would nervously whisper stories that I never quite understood. Questioning these stories would be met with a shocked, disapproving look. Fear is infectious and stories are powerful, we like to believe stories are true when they substantiate our fear. A story told openly can be tested and challenged. When I hear a story told in hushed tones I try to question the motives of the teller.

There's nothing here to hide behind. In a pathetic attempt to support my position in my own mental hierarchy, I've been guilty of propagating fear with sarcasm and condescension. Without the support of a team my fear created fear in others.

What shocks me now is that, despite my friends telling me I did this I continued, ignoring the effect on others. This behaviour only stopped when we came together as a supportive team.

As we grew closer and free from management interference, dysfunctional behaviours caused by fear started to evaporate and be replaced with supportive and empathetic ones. When someone is having a problem they feel confident to ask for help and help is freely offered. With nothing to hide the only fear is in the consequences of not asking for help and building the wrong thing, or writing code that will be brittle and hard to maintain. Fear breeds fear, openness breeds openness.

Conclusion

Fear can utterly dominate our behaviour, although we are so used to it we hardly notice. We take fear at work for granted, but it stops us thinking, helping, learning, discovering and sharing, the very things that we need in abundance. We can replace fear with openness by encouraging collaboration instead of competition. When we work together and understand and respect each other, dysfunctional fear evaporates and we can start fearing the real threat to our organisation: stagnation.