

Roadmap to Staff Engineer & Beyond

FROM IC TO IC LEADERSHIP

At our latest roundtable, we brought together Senior Engineers on the path to Staff and Principal roles, a step that's less about writing better code and more about influence, breadth, and amplifying others' impact. The session unpacked real challenges and lessons from those stepping into IC leadership.

SESSION LED BY:



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GROWING INTO STAFF+

- Be clear about why you want the next step: learning / influence / compensation / recognition. Your motivation will shape your next move.
- Shadow or reverse-shadow senior leaders to fill knowledge gaps & learn how they make decisions.
- Build cross-functional influence by showing technical leadership, even on smaller projects.
- Every company defines "Staff" & "Principal" differently, pick an environment that aligns with your goals & scale of impact.

CREATING GROWTH OPPS IN FLAT OR SMALL ORGS

- Separate title from behaviour. Act like a Staff IC before you have the title by spotting problems, driving initiatives & demonstrating ownership. Recognition tends to follow demonstrated behaviour.
- Seek impact beyond your immediate team. e.g. driving engineering standards or mentoring peers.
- Shift from independence (doing the work well) to entrepreneurship (finding the work that needs doing).



INTERVIEW TIPS

- Show depth (clear reasoning) & introspection (what you learned from mistakes).
- Go beyond what you built – explain why you made certain choices, what alternatives you explored & how your decisions drove business outcomes.
- Understand and own your risk profile – what your career story says about you & how you've balanced stability & adaptability.
- Show you've done some research on the fundamental shift from IC to 'Change agent'
- Interviews are two-way. Don't be afraid to push back or explore how the company handles things like decision-making & learning from failure.

You'll get the most value from others when you're clear on what you need from them:

- **Sponsor:** Advocates for you & opens doors.
- **Coach:** Builds your skills with feedback & guidance.
- **Mentor:** Offers perspective & a sounding board.

INFLUENCING DECISIONS

- Senior ICs evolve from "problem solvers" to "influencers." Progression depends on your ability to **align, communicate & persuade**, rather than control.
- **Disagree & commit:** Voice your opinion early, align on decisions, then deliver with full ownership.
- Focus on **alignment over consensus**. Clarity and follow-through matter more than everyone agreeing.
- Build relationships outside your team: PMs, design, leadership. Influence begins with trust & informal conversations can build lasting alignment.
- Be an **accelerant** rather than a barrier by building on other people's ideas.
- Learn to listen to business priorities and **connect engineering goals to commercial & business impact**.
- Persistence pays off – influence grows over time through **consistent input, curiosity & collaboration**.

DEALING WITH CONFLICTING OPINIONS

1. Understand your team's views & potential detractors.
2. Define measurable outcomes: how will you know if the direction chosen is working?
3. Shorten the feedback loop: propose quick, low-risk trials (e.g. a 30-day closed test) to validate ideas faster.

LEADERSHIP MINDSET

- **Zoom out** to outcomes. Focus on solving the right problems, not just the most technically interesting ones.
- **Don't be afraid to say you don't know.** Show curiosity and confidence in how you'll figure things out – it builds trust and sets the tone for learning.
- **Be the bridge** between technical design and company strategy.

To learn about our future software engineering events, reach out to Tom at thomasp@burnssheehan.co.uk