Engineering Growth Framework

# Introduction

Our Growth Framework is a set of documents and tools that describe what we value at SoapBox, how to progress, and how we measure and reward that progress. We are attempting to build a thoughtful process that is equitable, incentivizes the right kind of work, and which encourages the growth of a robust, flexible, and inclusive team.

We recognize that all engineers are different and that each applies a unique combination of skills in their work. We understand that there are many paths to a successful career, and support and encourage the growth of different shapes of engineers that together create a robust and flexible team. We know that there are particular kinds of work that is often overlooked, which is nevertheless very important.

To recognize these contributions we have defined a set of tracks and categories to help engineers develop and progress at SoapBox. Each of these tracks represent a discipline that adds value to the organization and helps us achieve our goals.

**These tracks are grouped into the following categories:**

Building

* Mobile, Web, Foundations, Servers

Executing

* Project Management, Communicating, Craft, Initiative

Supporting

* Career Development, Organizational Design, Wellbeing, Culture Champion

Strengthening

* Mentorship, Evangelism, Recruitment, Community

Each track is weighted equally. We have deliberately tried to define tracks that add concrete value to the organization, and hold appeal to all kinds of engineering personalities.

Engineers may attempt to progress down any combination of tracks, though realistically, they will only be able to focus on a few at a time, and organizational needs may mean that they are strongly encouraged to focus on certain areas.

# Why are we renaming the Career Ladder to a Growth Framework?

This framework should be about growth, not leveling. Traditional methods of assessing people, and even the language that is used to describe them — ladders, slots, boxes, etc. — are primarily concerned with giving someone a level or categorizing them in some way. We think this is artificially constraining, and frames professional development as a competition rather than a personal journey.

Our goal is to craft a framework that centers around the growth of an individual, and supports them in the kind of career that they want to have. While we do have overall levels — which is important for ensuring fairness in compensation — they are *explicitly* a by-product of an engineer’s growth. Studies have shown that the positive feelings associated with getting a raise are only temporary, and that long term satisfaction is much more closely tied to personal development. The kinds of people we like to hire are collaborative, curious, and have a growth mindset. It is important that our framework supports and encourages that.

As a result, you will notice that we consistently refer to the framework as a Growth Framework, and that we only discuss overall levels as the result of that growth. The terms we use to describe the system help communicate that the primary intent is to support personal improvement.

# Conversation Cadence

Typical professional development frameworks assess people at fixed intervals once, or maybe twice a year. This creates a low number of high stakes moments, which induce stress and frustration as people try to prove their worth in order to gain a promotion.

Although formal assessments at SoapBox are made every 6 months, we aim to turn professional development into an ongoing conversation that helps increase accountability on both sides. This begins with a personalized growth plan for every engineer, in the form of OKRs and/or milestone goals for the next 6 months. An engineer and their group lead review these in sessions every month, which creates space for an honest conversation about progress, and any challenges or blockers. The regular check-ins are designed to ensure that no-one is surprised with the outcome of the formal assessment at the end of the cycle. We also encourage engineers to record evidence of their achievements over time to combat recency bias.

# Goals of the Growth Framework

*The main goal of the growth framework is to help engineers answer the question “How do I progress?”*

Additional goals with the framework:

* Allowing engineers to develop in multiple ways, rather than artificially reducing them to “engineer” or “manager”.
* Recognizing that roles are not static, and that people will evolve over time.
* Codifying what is expected of engineers.
* Recognizing contributions that are typically undervalued or ignored in traditional engineering ladders.
* Providing multiple ways for people to be recognized for leading within the organization.
* Giving recognition and rewarding professional development.
* Ensuring fair and equitable compensation.
* Avoiding the development of a homogeneous team, where everyone does the same kind of work.
* Connecting hiring and progression to our company values, so we hire, incentivize, and reward what we value.

# Milestones

Each track has 5 milestones, which get progressively harder to achieve. It is much harder, for example, to move from milestone 4 to milestone 5 than from milestone 1 to milestone 2. Track milestones typically range from simple individual contribution to major organizational impact. Each milestone is intended to be approximately as difficult to achieve as the same milestone in every other track for a motivated individual, assuming a start from scratch. Given the wide range of tracks, and people’s experience or natural capabilities, every engineer will find some tracks easier or harder than others.

Each milestone has a description, which provides a high-level overview of the milestone, and 6 example behaviours and tasks. These examples are descriptive, not prescriptive. They are designed to be read together with the milestone description to paint a picture of the kind of person we would expect to see at that milestone.

# Points

Each milestone achieved earns points. Because successive milestones are harder to achieve, they are worth more points. The chosen point progression slightly favours specialization over generalization. Organizationally, it is important that people develop and are rewarded for mastery of certain skills so we have the ability to innovate at the leading edge. However, we recognize that strong generalists provide great flexibility and are foundational to a robust and antifragile team.

Points at a given milestone replace points earned at an earlier milestone. For example, moving from milestone 3 to milestone 4 earns an additional 6 points, not an additional 12 points.

With 16 tracks, each having 5 milestones, there are a total of 320 points available. We do not expect anyone to come close to achieving that number.

# Levels

Every point earned contributes to an engineer’s overall level. There are 5 overall levels, each divided into 3 sub levels. Successive levels require more points and are harder to achieve.

We may add more levels over time as we grow as an organization. The highest level is currently defined at 135 points out of a possible 320, which gives us plenty of room to grow should it be necessary.

# Salary

We care very much about fairness and recognizing equal contribution with equal compensation.

Level-based salary and equity is the same for all engineers at the same overall level. There may be rare occasions where this is not the case due to external factors or exceptional extenuating circumstances, such as acquisitions.

SoapBox offers equity refreshes based on tenure, so it is not necessarily the case that everyone at the same overall level will have the same equity.

Although we reserve the right to retain this flexibility, we work very hard to ensure that people performing at the same level are compensated equally, regardless of gender, race, or any other unimportant factor.

# Titles

Titles typically serve three purposes — helping people understand that they are progressing, vesting authority in those people who might not automatically receive it, and communicating an expected competency level to the outside world.

The first two needs are met by the level number itself, and so internally, to the extent that we refer to them at all, we will use the level numbers to communicate seniority and capability.

In standard industry parlance the 5 major levels are broadly comparable to Engineer I, Engineer II, Senior Engineer, Staff Engineer, and Principal Engineer, but externally the levels don’t mean much without context. Therefore, we allow people to choose a title from a restricted set at each overall level, for external use on their resume, bio, or LinkedIn profile. For example, an engineer focusing primarily on Supporting tracks at Level 3.3 might choose Engineering Manager, while an engineer focusing on Building tracks at the same overall level might choose Senior Engineer.

Tracks

# Building

Building software is at the core of any engineering organization. These tracks are concerned with building expertise in the development of high quality production features and supporting infrastructure. We expect engineers to demonstrate empathy for their clients — whether users or colleagues — to understand complex and subtle problems thoroughly, and use their creativity and experience to design appropriate technical solutions.

**Mobile**

*Develops expertise in native mobile platform engineering, such as iOS or Android*

Native apps allow us to provide better, more tailored experiences to users on the go. To build those, we need engineers with expertise in iOS and Android, who can help us deliver feature parity across all the platforms we support, and build first class products that blend in seamlessly with platform conventions using the latest features available on these platforms.

**Web Client**

*Develops expertise in web client technologies, such as HTML, CSS, and JavaScript*

We need to provide our users with a modern, responsive web product that renders well across all major supported browsers. We need engineers with expertise in web client technologies to help us continue to build industry-leading technology like our editor and take advantage of new opportunities like AMP.

**Foundations**

*Develops expertise in foundational systems, such as deployments, pipelines, databases and machine learning*

A strong infrastructure provides a solid and stable foundation on which to build great products. Organizational excellence here lets us deploy rapidly with confidence, and be robust to systems failure. Engineers with strong database or machine learning skills give us the ability to model and process data in ways that allow us to deliver great experiences to our users.

**Servers**

*Develops expertise in server side engineering, using technologies such as PHP, NodeJS, or Python and creating performant REST APIs.*

Excellent clients are no use if they don’t have a fast and responsive server to communicate with. We need engineers that can help build efficient application services that respond quickly to requests, and provide clean interfaces that can be accessed from multiple different clients including bots platforms and third party integration services.

# Executing

The best idea in the world is worthless without great execution. Delivering great software products in teams requires rallying people behind an idea, strong technical leadership throughout the project, a focus on quality, and excellent communication to keep everyone aligned.

**Product Management**

*Delivers well-scoped programs of work that meet their goals, on time, to budget, harmoniously*

There is a limit to what people can achieve individually, and coordination of multiple people on a project is very important. We need people that can take large projects, break them down into achievable milestones, manage and delegate scope effectively, and ensure that deadlines are met.

***Communication***

*Shares the right amount of information with the right people, at the right time, and listens effectively*

Great communication is central to everything we do at SoapBox, and without it, most non-trivial efforts would fail. Whether discussing approaches, giving presentations, listening attentively, or managing stakeholders, excellent communication is a key skill. The ability to communicate an idea, and to understand communicated ideas is of critical importance to ensure a well-aligned, agile team.

**Craft**

*Embodies and promotes practices to ensure excellent quality products and services*

*We want quality to be at the center of everything we do, and strive to create well-built products that provide a polished and intuitive user experience. We want engineers to take pride in their work and sweat the details. We need them to produce well-written, well-tested code that is easy to maintain, and easy to remove when no longer needed.*

**Initiative**

*Challenges the status quo and effects positive organizational change outside of mandated work*

We want engineers to take ownership of the product, focus on fixing issues when they see them, get the details right, and improve things as they go. We need people that effect change, champion new ideas, and work hard to move the company forward, even when there is organizational resistance.

# Supporting

We believe in a model of servant leadership that exists to develop team members, advocate for them, support their well being, and ensure an environment conducive to enabling effective work. Effective, formal people management is crucial to getting the most out of our team, building for the future, and providing stability during organizational change.

**Career Development**

*Provides strategic support to engineers to help them build the career they want*

Personal and professional growth are very important to us, and to support this, we need our group leads to be aligned with group members on the importance of career development. We want our group leads to be intentionally working to support an engineer’s growth, whether by putting together career plans, finding new opportunities for them, or providing formal training.

**Org Design**

*Defines processes and structures that enables the strong growth and execution of a diverse eng organization*

Too much structure and process can slow a team down, but too little can also be debilitating. As an organization, we need to be continually focusing on how the team is executing, finding ways to do things faster and better, and ensuring that the appropriate systems are in place to foster a diverse and inclusive team.

**Wellbeing**

*Supports the emotional well-being of group members in difficult times, and celebrates their successes*

The psychological safety of our team is of paramount importance. Individuals cannot take risks if they are afraid of the consequences of failure, and the ability to take risks is a significant part of innovation. We need our group leads to support the health and wellbeing of our people, ensure that they feel safe, help them work through interpersonal difficulties calmly, and promote a culture of empathy and self-awareness on the team.

**Culture Champion**

*Inspires day to day excellence by living the Soapbox values and encourages the team to hit their full potential by helping them raise the average of those around them*.

We need leaders who understand that the culture of the company determines how effectively the business strategy gets implemented, how effective and motivated the engineering team is. A culture champion embodies the values, is the pulse of the team and leads us to success.

# Strengthening

Many engineers do other work outside their primary responsibilities which strengthen the team, but are often undervalued. We explicitly recognize the importance of these contributions, each of which are important to building the kind of team we want, even though they may not be celebrated as widely or as often as product releases.

**Mentorship**

*Provides support to colleagues, spreads knowledge, and develops the team outside formal reporting structures*

While Career Development is about formal planning, mentorship is equally important. We want to continue our culture of learning and teaching, and incentivize engineers to help develop each other, whether through internal posts, support groups, team presentations, programming curricula, or some other medium.

**Evangelism**

*Promotes SoapBox to the outside world and establishes it as an attractive and thoughtful place to work*

SoapBox devotes a lot of intentional thought to all its endeavours, whether our technical innovations, the cultural impact of our choices, or how we design our organization. We strive to create a healthy, balanced, and mindful workplace, build exceptional products, and engage with the outside world in a responsible, inclusive way. We want our people to be communicating these efforts externally, representing SoapBox well, building partnerships with other organizations, and encouraging people to get to know us more.

**Recruiting**

*Strengthens SoapBox’s team by bringing in excellent staff members*

Recruiting is one of the most important things that we do as an organization. We need engineers to bring candidates into the pipeline, think about how we build a diverse team that covers our blindspots, evaluate candidates purely on the criteria that we deem important, and ensure that we only bring in new people that believe in our company values.

**Community**

*Builds community internally, gives of themselves to the team, and champions and extols company values*

We are not trying to build a family, but we are trying to build a high performance team where people trust and support each other, and work hard to build something together. We highly value those people who always pitch in to help, who do tedious refactoring for the good of the team, or who work to build a culture of collaboration, community, and togetherness.

Assessing Skills

At first glance, the growth rubric can be a little overwhelming. There are lots of tracks, and lots of examples. Engineers may be uncertain as to whether they qualify for a given milestone. It is important that everyone be clear on how we judge these milestones as they will directly affect an engineer’s level, and ultimately compensation. We must establish trust in the process and be as consistent as we can, judging people solely on the merits of their contributions.

This guide is designed to explain how to read the rubric, how to assess progress towards milestones, and how to discuss the framework.

Before that, some important points:

# Subjectivity vs objectivity

Ideally, we would have a completely objective rubric, with simple Yes/No decisions made about clear, concrete tasks. Of course, this isn’t really possible.

Even in a team that is as mission-driven as SoapBox, if we are prescriptive about exactly what counts for credit, human nature says our people will do precisely those actions, and not focus any energy on tasks not defined. We can’t possibly define all the tasks that we want our people to do, and we cannot predict the tasks that we will need our people to do in the future. A fully objective rubric would be brittle, and would encourage the growth of a team with homogenous skills.

There are also more intangible behaviours that, while incredibly valuable to the team, cannot adequately be captured by tasks alone. One of the central challenges of valuing knowledge work is that, though the output of building products in teams is actually quite measurable — does the product do what it’s supposed to do? — many of the skills necessary to do so aren’t easily measured. How do you capture communication objectively? How do you capture selflessness?

Of course, subjectivity invites the possibility, and likelihood, of bias. We have to be constantly vigilant and take steps to ensure that we’re applying the rubric evenly. This includes reviewing the overall distribution of level increases made during formal growth assessments, ensuring that the review panel that makes those assessments is broadly representative of the team, being as transparent as possible without compromising privacy, and providing an appeals process.

# Developing a conversation

One of the key ways we hope to reduce the problem of bias is by moving away from all-or-nothing, twice-yearly assessments. We have observed that these are frequently opaque, frustrating and stressful for engineers, who see them as one of a limited number of high-stakes opportunities to demonstrate progress. SoapBox’s growth framework instead encourages and requires an ongoing conversation between an engineer and their group lead, where growth plans are created and discussed together at regularly scheduled check-ins. To facilitate this, we created an [interactive growth tool](https://growth.soapboxhq.com) that helps visualise how different kinds of progression will affect an engineer’s overall level.

It is important that the group lead establishes a long-term, trusting relationship with their group members, and takes the time to understand each one’s career goals and personality. Group leads should leverage this understanding to advise them on appropriate tracks for growth. From time to time, they may also have to guide engineers more firmly, either for business reasons, or because they recognise a latent capability that is not being realised. While engineers are in principle free to choose their own path, the realities of building a team and product will sometimes require compromise on their part. This is a healthy thing to discuss as part of career planning.

# Impact and opportunity

Our tracks are framed as increasing in impact, whether that mean complexity, scope, or responsibility. However, impact is very strongly tied to opportunity. In many companies, it is much easier to progress, for example, if you’re directly making the company money. Those not in a position to do so are at a disadvantage. **The company may require you to focus your efforts in one primary track for the needs of the business, which may be at odds with what you want to achieve your personal goals.**

Group leads at SoapBox should be working hard to ensure that members of their group are presented with opportunities to progress, but understand that the needs of the business to supersede the needs of the individual. To emphasise this, group leads are specifically incentivized to do so with the Career Development track, which aligns their goals with their group members’.

We believe that people management is an active endeavour. At the same time, we want our engineers to make their own opportunities. By providing many tracks for progress, we hope they take the initiative to lead in areas that interest them and which are underserved. Engineers are strongly encouraged to instigate change to do so on behalf of both themselves and the company.

Should they struggle with this, engineers are expected to advocate for themselves in the regular check-ins, and raise any concerns they have around a lack of opportunity to showcase and develop their skills.

# Assessment

Each track has an overall description, and five milestones. Each milestone has a description, and a set of example behaviours and tasks.

The examples are only examples. It is not required that an engineer do the listed tasks, or exhibit all the listed behaviours. The examples and descriptions are intended to be read together to paint an overall picture of what we might expect from an engineer that has accomplished this milestone.

We do not wish to promote box-ticking, or to incentivize everyone to do the same work. Engineers should feel free to substitute tasks of equivalent complexity or scope, and group leads should help set expectations as to what qualifies, in consultation with domain experts, using the examples as a guide.

**Conscious, Consistent and Continuous**

To achieve a milestone, the review panel must have a good faith belief that the engineer has been performing to the appropriate standard. In general, the engineer must have demonstrated a conscious, consistent and continuous competency, defined as follows:

* **Conscious**: Employee has devoted intentional effort to this endeavour which meets the desired criteria
* **Consistent**: Employee performs the endeavour reliably without being overly stretched
* **Continuous**: Employee performs this task over a reasonable period of time, not just one time

***As a natural consequence, an engineer does not achieve a milestone the first time they demonstrate relevant behaviours or tasks.***

Overall, if it is not clear that an engineer is at a given milestone, they are at the previous milestone.

Some engineers may find that they exhibit some of the example behaviours at a later milestone without exhibiting all of the example behaviours at an earlier milestone. This is to be expected. At the earlier stages of an engineer’s career, they are limited to simple contributions. Engineers with more experience can typically contribute in higher leverage ways which supersede those simpler tasks, meaning they no longer do them. It is assumed they could do them, should they be required to.

However, there are certain fundamentals which engineers should not grow out of. It’s hard to imagine someone progressing very far along the Communication track if they aren’t Collaborating with empathy, even if they are facilitating the communication of entire teams and dozens of people. Writing tests for every patch, for example, is an important behaviour that every engineer should be exhibiting. If there are noticeable gaps at lower levels, engineers should use these as an opportunity for introspection, reflection, and improvement. At senior levels, role modelling becomes very important, and authority, respect, and credit gained from demonstrating the right behaviours is stronger than that merely based on tenure.

# Cycle

In order to minimise the overhead in convening review panels, and on our people and finance teams, we will continue to make formal milestone and level changes at discrete six monthly intervals. However, in the intervening periods, it is expected that group leads will conduct informal progress check-ins with their group members about every month. These check-ins should discuss the tracks along which the group member would like to improve, the kinds of projects and behaviours that would reasonably demonstrate improvement, and ongoing progress towards achieving them.

The aim should be that when the formal assessment is made, neither the group lead nor the engineer are surprised by the outcome. To ensure this, group leads should also regularly check-in with other engineering leaders to help understand whether significant enough progress is being made. Of course, the final assessment will still be subjective, but the provision of examples, good cross-team calibration on milestone requirements, and the regular discussion of progress should help alleviate stress around those decisions.

Formal assessment will be made by a review panel of senior staff. Group leads are expected to advocate on behalf of their engineers, and make a proposal for milestone and level adjustments, if warranted. The review panel will consider the supplied evidence to support these adjustments, and may — based on their experience, and company knowledge — recommend lower or higher milestones than those suggested.

At this time, there is no plan to lower milestones established in a previous growth assessment, but we reserve the right to change this — with plenty of notice — in the future, if necessary.

# Progress

**It is not expected that every engineer will have an overall level change in every cycle, especially given that each milestone and level becomes successively harder to achieve.** In situations where an overall level change is not warranted, we hope that formal recognition of improvement along some tracks may still be motivating for engineers, and will encourage them to keep up the effort. This is more likely for senior engineers, for whom overall level changes are typically much harder to achieve than for someone early on in their career.

Group leads should use the regular check-ins to effectively set expectations, so a senior engineer doesn’t wonder why they appear to be making no visible progress, even as they believe they are improving.

Appeals Process

In rolling out our growth rubric, we’re starting a more formal conversation about growth at SoapBox. This gives engineers the opportunity to understand the progress they’ve made, how they can progress in the future, and how that translates to their overall level. This is the beginning of our efforts to have more ongoing and intentional conversations with engineers about their growth.

Using the growth rubric, a review panel determines the current progress measurements for each engineer. This group will formally assess milestone progress every 6 months. The panel is designed to ensure that progress isn’t determined by a single individual — instead, a group of people holistically review an individual’s progress, and determine what milestone they have achieved in each of the 16 tracks.

We recognize that while the review panel will consider many different inputs and behaviors, its assessment may still sometimes be inaccurate— whether due to a misunderstanding of a project’s complexity, or differing interpretations of a milestone’s requirements. We understand that the framework isn’t perfect, and we will continue to iterate on it over time. With this in mind, it’s important that we provide space for engineers to ask questions, get more context, and request a second consideration of progress and level.

To support this, we’ve created an appeals process. We think it’s important to have this in place from day one of the new framework, to ensure we start off in the right place, and so that engineers feel empowered to advocate for themselves if their perception differs from that of their initial assessment. In the future, growth will be an ongoing conversation engineers have with their group lead, which we hope will make appeals less necessary. The aim is to have a transparent process where engineers are engaged and involved every step of the way.

**Appeals Panel**

Appeals will be reviewed by an appeals panel, some of whom may be on the review panel, but some of whom will not.

**Material Change**

The appeals panel will only review cases where a change in milestones would lead to an overall level change. This is to avoid overburdening the appeals panel with minor changes that will not have a material impact on level or salary. Depending on the volume of appeals, we may review this rule in the future.

# Appeals

Appealing your assessment is a 5 step process. The window for lodging an appeal is end of day, 3 business days after your assessment is communicated to you. We will try to make allowances if external events prevent you from submitting an appeal within that timeframe.

1. Once assessments are made, you’ll have a conversation with your group lead about how your milestones and level have changed. This is a space for you to raise any initial questions or concerns. Your group lead will discuss these with you, provide you more context if necessary, and give you advice on whether an appeal has a realistic chance of success. After that conversation, if milestone measurements still don’t feel accurate, and a favorable outcome would impact your overall level, you can make an appeal for your assessment to be reviewed. You can lodge an appeal, without penalty, even if your group lead doesn’t think it will be successful.
2. Gather as much evidence as you can, and fill out this form. This will help highlight information that showcases your achievement in the track(s) you’d like reviewed. For example, you might point to projects you’ve completed and what type of work you contributed. Or, you might point out relationships you’ve developed, and processes you’ve improved. Include anything that contributes to your progress in the track(s). The more specific the better.
3. Confirm with your group lead that you’d like to make an appeal. Include the additional info and context you gathered. If you do not feel comfortable raising this with your group lead, you can reach out directly to the head of engineering or HR representative instead. Doing so will have no negative impact on your appeal, but we encourage you to work with your group lead first, if you can.
4. The appeals panel will take another look at your progress, taking into account the additional information you submitted. We’ll also confirm that both HR and your group lead know that your assessment is being reviewed and has the potential to change.
5. The appeals panel will make a final decision and will share the outcome with you and your group lead. We will aim to have appeals completed within 1 week of the close of the appeals window, though this may vary with the volume of appeals and the availability of an external industry expert.