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Creating a Remarkable Career in Software Development

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PRAGMATIC LIFE

THE PASSIONATE PROGRAMMER

CREATING A REMARKABLE CAREER IN SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

CHAD FOWLER

FOREWORD BY DAVID HEINEMEIER HANSSON

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Tip 4

Be the Worst

Legendary jazz guitarist Pat Metheny has a stock piece of advice for young musicians, which is “Always be the worst guy in every band you’re in.”[2]

> Be the worst guy in every band you’re in.

Before starting my career in information technology, I was a professional jazz and blues saxophonist. As a musician, I had the good fortune of learning this lesson early on and sticking to it. Being the worst guy in the band means always playing with people who are better than you.

Now, why would you always choose to be the worst person in a band? “Isn’t it unnerving?” you ask. Yes, it’s extremely unnerving at first. As a young musician, I would find myself in situations where I was so obviously the worst guy in the band that I was *sure* I would stick out like a sore thumb. I’d show up to a gig and not even want to unpack my saxophone for fear I’d be forcefully ejected from the bandstand. I’d find myself standing next to people I looked up to, expected to perform at their level—sometimes as the lead instrument!

Without fail (thankfully!), something magical would happen in these situations: I would fit in. I wouldn’t stand out among the other musicians as a star. On the other hand, I wouldn’t be obviously outclassed, either. This would happen for two reasons. The first reason is that I really wasn’t as bad as I thought. We’ll come back to this one later.

The more interesting reason that I would fit in with these superior musicians—my heroes, in some cases—is that my playing would transform itself to be more like theirs. I’d like to think I had some kind of superhuman ability to morph into a genius simply by standing next to one, but in retrospect I think it’s a lot less glamorous than that. It was more like some kind of instinctual herd behavior, programmed into me. It’s the same phenomenon that makes me

[2] Originally spotted by Chris Morris at http://clabs.org/blogki.

adopt new vocabulary or grammatical habits when I'm around people who speak differently than me. When we returned from a year and a half of living in India, my wife would sometimes listen to me speaking and burst into laughter, "Did you *hear* what you just said?" I was speaking Indian English.

Being the worst guy in the band brought out the same behavior in me as a saxophonist. I would naturally just play like everyone else. What makes this phenomenon really unglamorous is that when I played in casinos and hole-in-the-wall bars with those not-so-good bands, I played like *those* guys. Also, like an alcoholic who slurs his speech even when he's not drunk, I'd find the bad habits of the bar bands carrying over to my non-bar-band nights.

So, I learned from this that people can significantly improve or regress in skill, purely based on who they are performing with. And, prolonged experience with a group can have a lasting impact on one's ability to perform.

Later, as I moved into the computer industry, I found that this learned habit of seeking out the best musicians came naturally to me as a programmer. Perhaps unconsciously, I sought out the best IT people to work with. And, not surprisingly, the lesson holds true. Being the worst guy (or gal, of course) on the team has the same effect as being the worst guy in the band. You find that you're unexplainably *smarter*. You even speak and write more intelligently. Your code and designs get more elegant, and you find that you're able to solve hard problems with increasingly creative solutions.

> The people around you affect your own performance. Choose your crowd wisely.

Let's go back to the first reason that I was able to blend into those bands better than I expected. I really wasn't as bad as I thought. In music, it's pretty easy to measure whether other musicians think you're good. If you're good, they invite you to play with them again. If you're not, they avoid you. It's a much more reliable measurement than just asking them what they think, because good musicians don't like playing with bad ones. Much to my surprise, I found that in many cases, I would get called by one or more of these superior musicians for additional work or to even start bands with them.

Attempting to be the worst actually stops you from selling yourself short. You might belong in the A band but always put yourself in the B band, because you're afraid. Acknowledging outright that you're not the best wipes away the fear of being discovered for the not-best person you are. In reality, even when you *try* to be the worst, you won't actually be.

Act on It!

1. Find a "be the worst" situation for yourself. You may not have the luxury of immediately switching teams or companies just because you want to work with better people. Instead, find a volunteer project on which you can work with other developers who will make you better via osmosis. Check for developer group meetings in your city, and attend those meetings. Developers are often looking for spare-time projects on which to practice new techniques and hone their skills.

   If you don't have an active developer community nearby, use the Internet. Pick an open source project that you admire and whose developers appear to be at that "next level" you're looking to reach. Go through the project's to-do list or mailing list archives, pick a feature or a major bug fix, and code away! Emulate the style of the project's surrounding code. Turn it into a game. Make your design and code so indistinguishable from the rest of the project that even the original developers eventually won't remember who wrote it. Then, when you're satisfied with your work, submit it as a patch. If it's good, it will be accepted into the project. Start over, and do it again. If you've made decisions that the project's developers disagree with, either incorporate their feedback and resubmit or take note of the changes they make. On your next patch, try to get it in with less rework. Eventually, you'll find yourself to be a trusted member of the project team. You'll be amazed at what you can learn from a remote set of senior developers, even if you never get a chance to hear their voices.