

# Volume 2 PragPub The Second Iteration

IN THIS ISSUE

## Contents

### FEATURES

### DEPARTMENTS

## New Manager's Playbook ..... 1

by Marcus Blankenship

The code from the new programmer gets the job done, but she'd hoped for so much more ...

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# New Manager's Playbook

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## Giving Feedback to a New Developer

by Marcus Blankenship

You're a developer, but you're at a point in your career where you find yourself managing others. Marcus shares tips on how to be as good at managing as you are at your "real" job.

This month he explains how to deal with a new programmer who needs course correction.



Here's a short story, then a quiz.

Jessica hires a new rock-star developer, Jason. Jason is a skilled software developer and an expert in the technologies used by the team. He also appears to get along great with the team! The first day is filled with setting up his accounts, doing the paperwork, and briefing Jason on the project.

Before Jessica leaves for the day, she assigns Jason a small, simple item as his first task. Jessica's intrigued to see what Jason will deliver and eager to get him off to a good start!

When Jessica comes in the next morning, she see's a pull request from Jason. Hooray! With excitement, she clicks to review it ...

... and frowns.

It's not bad, but it's certainly not great. I mean, it gets the job done, but she'd hoped for so much more ...

She leans in, hoping she just didn't understand something. Reading it again, she sees only disappointment staring back at her.

The thought of conflict makes Jessica's stomach ache and her heart race. This wasn't supposed to happen, again . . . She'd sifted through dozens of résumés, conducted multiple interviews with Jason, checked his references, and looked at code samples. *Sigh*.

The Quiz: What should Jessica do? What would you do?

Here are three things Jessica might be tempted to do . . .

1. Jessica could internally take the blame for the problem, assuming she gave poor directions and promising herself next time to do a better job of communicating.
2. Jessica could quietly improve the code, commit the changes, and hope Jason's next efforts will be better.
3. Jessica could express her initial frustrations about Jason to her senior developer, and ask him to keep a close eye on Jason's work.

As you might guess, all of these approaches are wrong.

So, what should Jessica do?

While there are many approaches that she could use, they all have one thing in common: Jessica must talk to Jason as soon as he comes in.

Here's a simple phrase that will solve 80 percent of the problem:

“I want to give you feedback about your work. Let’s take a look at it together. First, tell me your understanding of the task . . .”

Let's break this down a bit more. I want to point out the underlying beliefs and decisions that go into giving this feedback . . .

1. Jessica has bravely decided not to avoid a potential problem, or *hope* it will go away. She’s decided to give Jason feedback and assume that Jason wants to improve his work (This is especially hard for those of us who have a tendency toward avoiding conflict, like me!)
2. Jessica knows she’s creating trust and behaving like a leader when she gives Jason feedback, and receives his feedback. This feedback loop is the key to creating a great environment where Jason and Jessica can both thrive.
3. Jessica doesn’t expect Jason to read her mind, and she accepts that one of her jobs is to communicate context so Jason can make better decisions about projects.
4. Jessica knows that her instructions may not have been perfect, so while she’s going to give feedback she’s also going to listen closely. She’s willing to take her part of the blame, and she needs Jason’s feedback to improve her management performance.
5. Jessica knows that her team members appreciate feedback, both positive and constructive. They know they aren’t perfect (nor are they mind-readers!) so creating this feedback loop is key to growing Jason into a great member of her team.
6. Jessica knows that how Jason responds to the feedback is his decision. She knows that the first feedback she gives is an important milestone, a test to reveal if Jason is a coachable developer. If he takes it well, it will build trust between them and he will improve. If he takes it poorly, he may not be a good fit for the team. While she hopes that’s not the case, she’d prefer to know that sooner rather than later.
7. Jessica starts by assuming Jason wants to do a great job, and that he’s put the proper effort and thought into the task. This assumption allows Jessica to give Jason the benefit of the doubt, which is a great place to start the discussion.
8. Jessica knows if she doesn’t say something now, she loses the right to talk about it later. Perhaps she remembers long ago working for a manager who used her annual evaluation to bring up all the ways she disappointed him during the year. She remembers thinking, “Why didn’t you just tell me when I messed up, so I could fix it then?” and has vowed not to inflict that style of management on her team.
9. Jessica doesn’t want to get in the habit of “keeping score” of Jason’s errors and allow resentment or frustration to build up. This might be small items, but she knows that how she feels about Jason, and how he feels about her, is the cornerstone of their working relationship.
10. Jessica knows the message she’s sending by silently accepting the work: “The work you submitted was fine. Keep doing the same thing.” As

Jason gets used to his role, his habits and behavior will solidify, making them harder to change.

11. Jessica wants Jason to become comfortable with feedback and correction, understanding that the feedback loop is a natural part of the relationship. If she waits until something really bad happens to give feedback, Jason will more likely react negatively, feeling like he's "in trouble" for something.

Without this discussion, Jessica and Jason start off on the wrong foot immediately. Yikes!

Ok, next month I'll show you the framework the Jessica uses, and we'll listen as she talks with Jason.

To your success.

#### **About the Author**

Nearly 20 years ago I made the leap from senior-level hacker to full-on tech lead. Practically overnight I went from writing code to being in charge of actual human beings.

Without training or guidance, I suddenly had to deliver entire products on time and under budget, hit huge company goals, and do it all with a smile on my face. I share what I've learned here in *PragPub* and [here](http://marcusblankenship.com) <sup>[U1]</sup>.

#### **External resources referenced in this article:**

<sup>[U1]</sup> <http://marcusblankenship.com>