

Engineering Leadership Workshop

GEL Program 2020-21

Case Study 3: Jessica Mckellar



In 2012, Jessica Mckellar, along side a group of friends started a real-time chat startup called Zulip. In less than 2 years, it was acquired by Dropbox where she became Director of Engineering from 2014 to 2017. Mckellar is currently the founder and chief technology officer of “Pilot”, a successful bookkeeping firm powered by software. Mckellar graduated from MIT with a degree in computer science and chemistry. Through her many accomplishments, Mckellar has gained a diverse set of management opportunities than the average engineer.

"When engineering management is done right, you're focusing on three big things," she says. "You're directly supporting the people on your team; you're managing execution and coordination across teams; and you're stepping back to observe and evolve the broader organization and its processes as it grows". Once a quarter, Mckellar will have a career growth week, where she talks one on ones with her employees. To allow for her employees to open up, she shares her own careers motivations to help starts those conversations. In addition to transparent discussions, she believes in having an explicit framework for how people can grow at the company, allowing her employees to envision their future.

As a leader, Mckellar does her best to capture all the smaller actions her team members take, spot patterns or trends, and develop a sense of the problem areas that interest her team most. At a young age, Mckellar has experienced great success due to her great leadership capabilities and ability to continuously motive the people around her to do their best.

Discuss the following questions within your group:

1. Why do you believe Mckellar is a successful leader?
2. What are the impacts that Mckellar is having on her employees and organizations?
3. Out of the 4 leadership styles which one(s) do you believe Mckellar is?
4. As a 21st century engineer, What qualities were you most attracted too?
5. Which traits would I want to emulate?