

- f .
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

- Co.Design
- Tech
- Work Life
- Creativity
- Impact
- Audio
- Video
- News
- Recommender
- Subscribe**

things I've learned working with a women-dominated engineering team

Fairygodboss's chief technology officer shares his lessons learned from managing a team that is 70% women.



[Photo: Flickr user WOCinTech Chat]

BY MICHAEL HARROUN
5 MINUTE READ

In the summer of 2017, a male software engineer published a 10-page anti-diversity manifesto that gained notoriety. He inferred, among other things, that [men are naturally more suited](#) to careers in tech.

Three months later, I joined a female-led company, [Fairygodboss](#), as its chief technology officer. One of my tasks was to build the engineering team from scratch. In the end, I had a team that is 70% women. The makeup of my team may be uncommon, but it happens to be particularly beneficial to my company—a career community for women—and to our mission to advance gender equality in the workplace. In the past year, we have rebuilt 90% of our core engineering platform while still accomplishing all of our goals on time, within budget, and without sacrificing any product quality.

Despite the success of my team, the tech industry as a whole continues to be mostly male-dominated. Women who choose to pursue STEM careers face [an uphill and continuous battle](#) as they enter the workforce. As Jane Porter [previously reported for Fast Company](#), these problems include a sense of isolation, lack of mentors and sponsors, and a hostile work environment that is not conducive to their success.

Facing gender biases in tech has its toll, which is why a high number of women in STEM jobs leave [10 years into their careers](#). During my career, I've noticed about a 10:1 ratio of men to women in the tech startup space. But after a year of managing a team made up of mostly women engineers, I've found

his makeup has uniquely positioned our products for success.

I'm not saying it's been a smooth ride. Anyone who has the mandate to implement significant changes in a startup (and in a short amount of time) will come across challenges with their work and their team. But I can tell you that the positives outweigh those obstacles. Here are a few of my key learnings:

1. WE COLLABORATE BETTER THAN THE MAJORITY OF MY PAST TEAMS

When I interviewed candidates for our engineering team—I'd hear one "concern" again and again. The majority-female makeup might lend itself to "catty" comments. Of course, this thinking directly ties into age-old gender stereotypes about the way women are primed to treat each other. Interestingly, these kinds of comments typically came from female candidates.

But the data shows otherwise. Research indicates that having more women collaborate on teams helps women advance. In a recent [Harvard Business Review](#) article, researchers found that "when another woman was added to a company, it increased the likelihood a woman would progress from year to year by 2.5 percent."

At Fairygodboss, the presence of several women on the engineering team has only had a positive influence on the company and individual team members. Because my staff is uniquely invested in and proud of our platform—as they are its target audience—we're able to have unusually honest conversations about product decisions. Our team's inclination to collaborate rather than to silo themselves has made our workflow more seamless and made our output more cohesive with that of the rest of the company.

2. WE COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY

Simply put, the communication I see at Fairygodboss—between my team members and across other verticals of the company—is the best I've seen throughout my career. They're willing to be transparent, and they also have the desire to communicate openly in the first place.

For me, this emphasis on positive, productive communication speaks to the genuine investment team members put in seeing the company—and, more specifically, in helping each other—succeed. An example of this is the way we navigate User Acceptance Testing (UAT); unlike teams I've worked with in the past, our engineering team gathers together and tests new features as a group, identifies bugs, self-assigns work on them, and then reconvenes when they've addressed those bugs. It's a connected process that allows us to tackle challenges as a team.

3. THE WOMEN SOFTWARE ENGINEERS ON MY TEAM HOLD THEMSELVES TO EXTREMELY HIGH STANDARDS

It's abundantly clear to me how seriously the women engineers on our team take their contributions to the site. Sometimes, I've seen this manifest as a tendency for people to be [too hard on themselves](#), as they believe they must succeed at something on the first attempt.

Although this diligence has overall had a positive influence on our workflow—they complete tasks better and faster—it's something I've had to keep in mind from the standpoint of a manager. Previous teams I've worked with tended to take things less seriously, which required me to be quick and direct when explaining issues or handling emergencies, which brings me to my next point:

4. I'VE HAD TO ADJUST MY MANAGEMENT STYLE ACCORDINGLY SO THAT MY TEAM MEMBERS CAN DO THEIR BEST WORK

My team at Fairygodboss truly does care about their work and product, both on a professional and personal level—meaning I've had to adjust my communication style to avoid having urgency be interpreted as criticism when a bug arises, for example. When you have a dedicated team, it's unnecessary to overemphasize the importance of fixing something.

5. IN THE END, WE ARE PRODUCING A QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF WORK THAT CONTINUES TO EXCEED MY EXPECTATIONS

Having a team that mostly consists of our target Fairygodboss user—professional women—has had a tremendously positive impact on our department's and the company's success.

While engineers at most companies primarily focus on technical quality and output, our team is also sincerely invested in the vision and goals of the company from a product and mission perspective. Frequently, this interest—and the tendency toward collaboration—has led people on my team to provide feedback or suggestions that have resulted in improved product features that are better aligned with company goals. The women on my team, in particular, have been able to conceptualize and implement what they would want to get out of Fairygodboss as a user—and the results speak for itself. Since the engineering team at Fairygodboss first assembled, traffic to the site has grown by nearly 500%.

Women are users of tech platforms, so tech companies can only benefit by actively making sure that they're represented on the engineering team. No one can deny that having a greater understanding of your customers will lead to a better product, and that a better product will improve the bottom line.

My ultimate takeaway? The next time anyone wants to dismiss the value women can (and do) add to engineering teams, they might also consider attempting to explain away the success of teams like my own. In the meantime, they can find us hard at work, propelling our companies to hit—or even exceed—our goals.

Michael Harroun is the chief technology officer at Fairygodboss.

You Might Also Like:

[3 simple habits that can protect your brain from cognitive decline](#)

[A shockingly large majority of health news shared on Facebook is fake or misleading](#)

SPONSORED CONTENT
FROM OUR PARTNERS

f



FROM MERRILL LYNCH

5 Easy Steps to Downsize Your Stuff (or declutter).



CHOOSE YOURSELF FINANCIAL

How to Generate 1k Per Month Without Touching The Stock Market



NYU STERN EXECUTIVE MBA

NYU's Top-Ranked Executive MBA Program Is Offered In Washington, D.C.



THE TRADING LETTER

The Next Wave of the Lithium Boom is Coming

IMPACT

IMPACT

This new IBM recycling tech makes brand new plastic from dirty bottles

IMPACT

Can plant-based burger startups reframe the masculinity of meat?

IMPACT

This origami screen turns your windows into solar panels



CREATIVITY

CREATIVITY

Google and Apple brought the emoji arms race to the Grammys

CREATIVITY

Grammy Awards 2019 highlights: Cardi B makes history, Drake gets cut off, #GrammysNotSoMale

CREATIVITY

Is SNL parodying how we tweet about women in Congress? Or perpetuating it?

CO.DESIGN

CO.DESIGN

Forget glamping, these pop-up hotel rooms are the new rough luxury

CO.DESIGN

Tokyo's Olympic medals are made from 47 tons of recycled electronics

CO.DESIGN

The anti-plastic movement is coming for your bathroom

WORK LIFE

ORK LIFE

Why you should stop trying to have "the best" of everything

ORK LIFE

Do these things to build the mindset that lets you focus on your goals all year

ORK LIFE

For these angel investors, diversity means more than just white women
