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bootstrapping an ops team



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1. Do you really need an ops team?
2. What makes a good startup ops hire?
3. How do you interview and sort for those qualities?

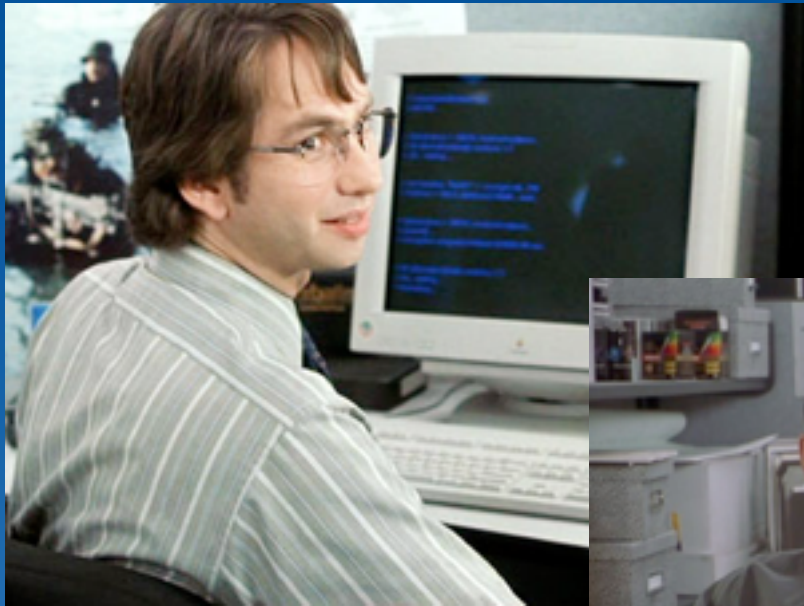
... and what comes next?





Do you really need an ops team?

the story starts here





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Operations engineering at scale is a specialized skillset.

It is not “software engineering lite”.

It is not someone to do all the annoying parts of running systems for you.



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Do you really need an ops team?

or do your software engineers need to get better at ops?

Do you really need an ops team?

you have hard operational problems



you don't have hard operational problems, but
your SWEs suck at ops



Hard Operational Problems

- Extreme reliability
- High security demands
- Rapid scaling (3x-10x year over year)
- Solving operational problems for the whole internet (platforms, services)
- Doing something genuinely new, maybe



So you need an ops team





What makes a good startup ops hire?



CoreOS



What makes a good startup ops hire?



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A good startup ops engineer is broadly literate
and can go deep on at least one or two areas.



All great operations engineers:



- Strong automation instincts
- Ownership over their systems
- Strong opinions, weakly held
- Simplify, simplify, simplify
- Excellent communication skills, calm in a crisis
- They value process
- Empathy



Things that do NOT predict great startup ops engineers:

- Great at whiteboarding code
- Any particular technology or language
- Any particular degree
- Big company pedigree



Succeeds at a big company:

- structured roadmap
- execute well on small, coherent slices
- classical CS backgrounds
- value cleanliness & correctness
- technical depth

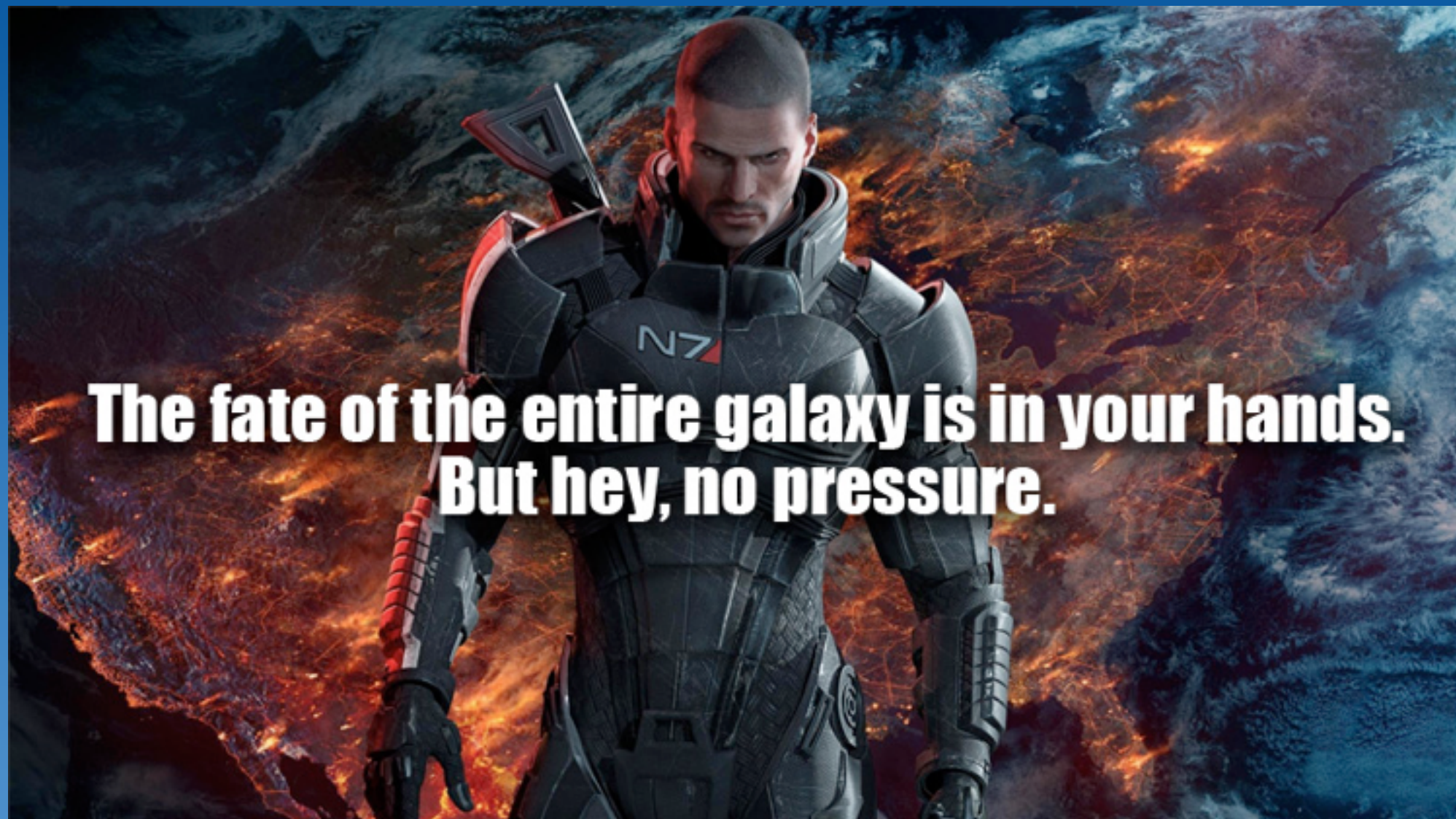


Succeeds at a startup:

- comfortable with chaos
- knows when to solve 80% and move on
- total responsibility for outcomes
- good judgment
- highly reactive
- technical breadth



Is this your first hire for the team?



Your first-hire unicorn:



33% raw engineering abilities

33% process and communication skills

33% leadership and technical judgment



How do you interview and sort for those qualities?

First, do the job yourself.



Figure out what strengths you really need

hire for those.



Figure out what strengths you really need

hire for those



... don't hire for lack of weaknesses.

Good interview questions:

- establish technical range
- probe the candidate's self-reported strengths
- related to your real problems
- leading questions with many good answers
- ask culture questions. screen for learned helplessness.



Bad interview questions:

- depend on a specific technology
- look for a reason to deny a candidate
- designed to trip them up
- deny candidates the resources they would use to solve something in the real world



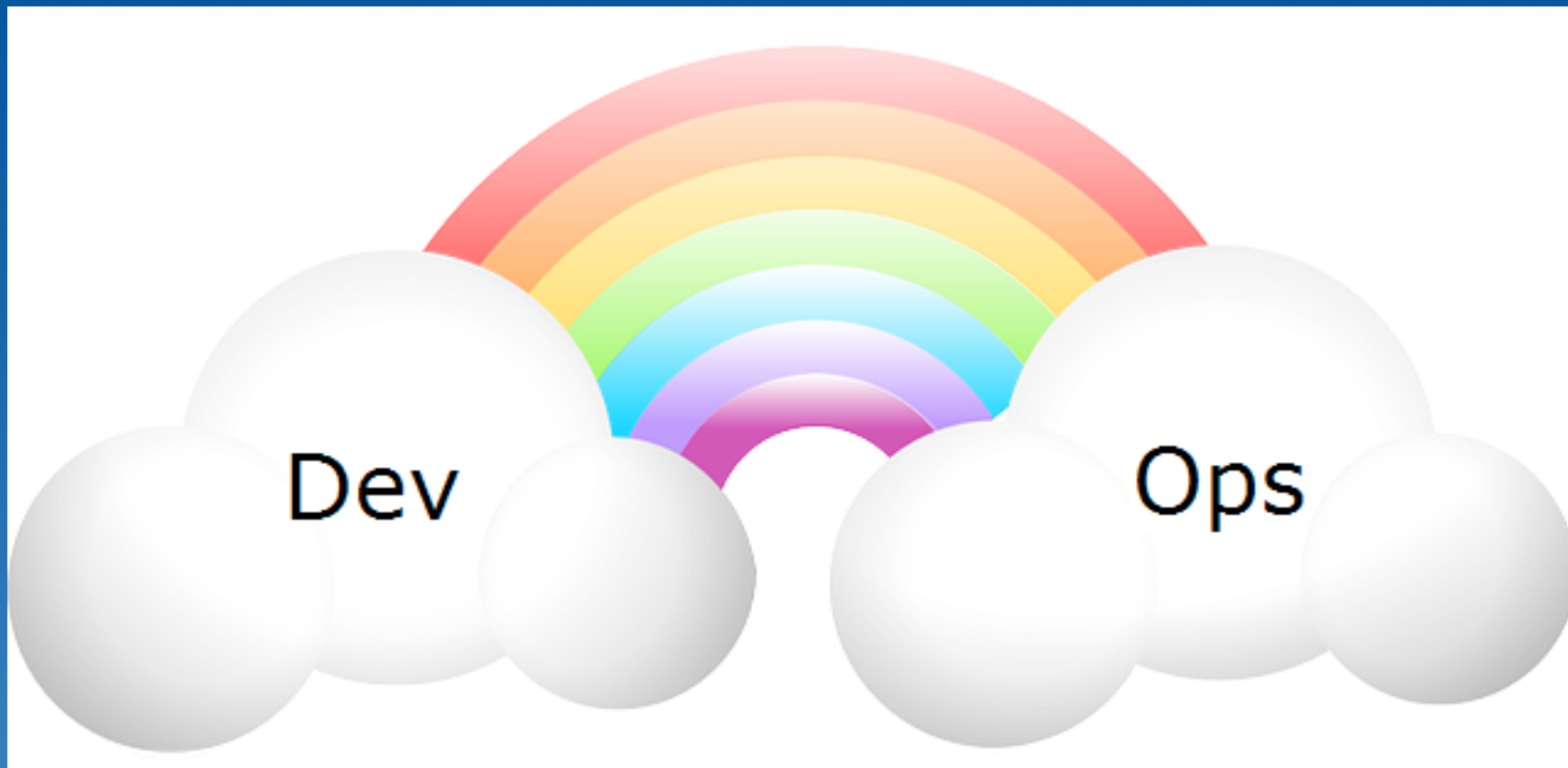
ask culture questions. screen for learned helplessness.

learned helplessness is like startup kryptonite





You hired an ops engineer. Now what?



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devops



magic

How to spot bad ops people

- Tweaking indefinitely & pointlessly
- Walling off prod from developers
- Adding complexity
- Won't admit they don't know things
- Won't own up fast when they break things
- Not caring about customer experience



fire them.

How to lose good ops people

- All the responsibility, none of the authority
- Give them all the small shit
- Blameful culture
- No interesting operational problems



they will quit

Treat your people well.





having people who want to work for you
is a superpower.

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