Tech lead vs engineering manager vs architect: which path fits you?

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Three roles are often confused because they overlap. Each is a different kind of work, and picking one is mostly about what you want to spend your days doing.

TL;DR The short version

- A tech lead guides one team's technical direction and stays close to the code.
- An engineering manager owns people and results; an architect owns how systems fit together across teams.
- Choose by which problems you enjoy most, technical, people or system-wide, and where you add the most value.

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Tech lead

Guides the technical direction of one team, stays close to the code and unblocks colleagues. You still build, and you also set standards, review designs and help others grow.

Engineering manager

Is responsible for the people and the team's results: hiring, feedback, careers, priorities and delivery. The work is conversations and decisions about people and process, more than code.

Architect

Is responsible for how systems fit together across teams: boundaries, standards and long-term technical decisions. The work is design, influence and communication more than direct delivery.

How to choose

- Which problems do you enjoy: technical, people or system-wide?
- Where do you find you add the most value?
- Try a stretch: lead a project, mentor, or write a design that crosses teams.
- Remember that moving between these paths is normal.

Related credential: Certified Technical Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. IICTP. TPBOK, People Leadership in Engineering. iictp.org/standards/tpbok.

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