

Do You Understand What I Do?

In 1980, as part of Apple's Lisa hardware team, I was responsible for developing a local area network and supervised a very capable hardware engineer named Bob.

I believed that engineers require their managers to be able to do the engineer's job. If they don't think you can do their jobs, they don't follow your direction. Or so I thought, until I met Bob.

After one session where Bob was showing me his work, I told him I was impressed with his creativity. He looked puzzled. "But I had to explain to you how this circuit works," he said. "I'm just curious—why didn't you understand it just by looking at it?"

I explained to him that I had never designed computer logic as part of my job since I had started working. And it wasn't a big part of my work as a graduate student in computer science, even though I specialized in computer architecture—the big picture in computer design. "Computer science!" he exclaimed. "I thought your degree was in electrical engineering! No wonder you're not a guru in logic design."

Something changed in my relationship with Bob at that moment. Afterwards, he didn't mind explaining his designs to me. Somehow, to Bob, a computer scientist is competent to grasp the significance of superior logic design, even if he isn't capable of doing it himself.

Top-notch individual contributors require their managers to be able to appreciate their work—appreciate it in a deep way, knowing what it is worth in relationship to the product and relative to less-creative design work. This is a particular form of credibility that is worth cultivating when you are managing creative individuals.

From Chapter 4 of
Get Out of the Way!
How to Manage Development
of Timely, Innovative, and Relevant Products
by John V. Levy, Ph.D.