

DrupalCon

SEATTLE 2019

APRIL 8-12





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Devsigners and Unicorns

Work, satisfaction, burnout and hero culture

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BASALT

Digital agency focused on front-end development and design systems

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@chrisstrahl (pretty much everywhere)

Builder Track

<https://events.drupal.org/seattle2019/sessions/devsigners-and-unicorns>



Devsigners

Chimeras of the Web

“Wait, you know how to do that?”



- **Probably works as a developer**
Knows what a pull request is
Invited to meetings to help “translate” what designers mean
Probably a part of the dev or maybe the UX team because of the way the org looks at talent
- **Might have the soul of a designer**
Uses Sketch to do more than view files
Opinionated about design choices, and designers listen
Rolls eyes when they get assigned a ticket to “go make this pretty!”
The developer that all the designers like working with
- **Struggles to find the right fit**
Often has a misunderstood role, but fills a lot of gaps
Relies heavily on both designer and developer skills to be effective
Continually spends time explaining this to others



Unicorns

Magical Creatures

“I dunno how this works, go ask the Unicorn.”

- **People want to talk to the unicorn**

- Has at least 20 unread Slack pings asking to respond to “a quick question”
Speaks for the team around most technical decisions and is probably the one that communicates most with business stakeholders

- **Things just work out when they’re around**

- “Hey, this thing will take you 5 minutes, but it would take me an hour.”
One of the few people that can get anything to work because they likely built most of it

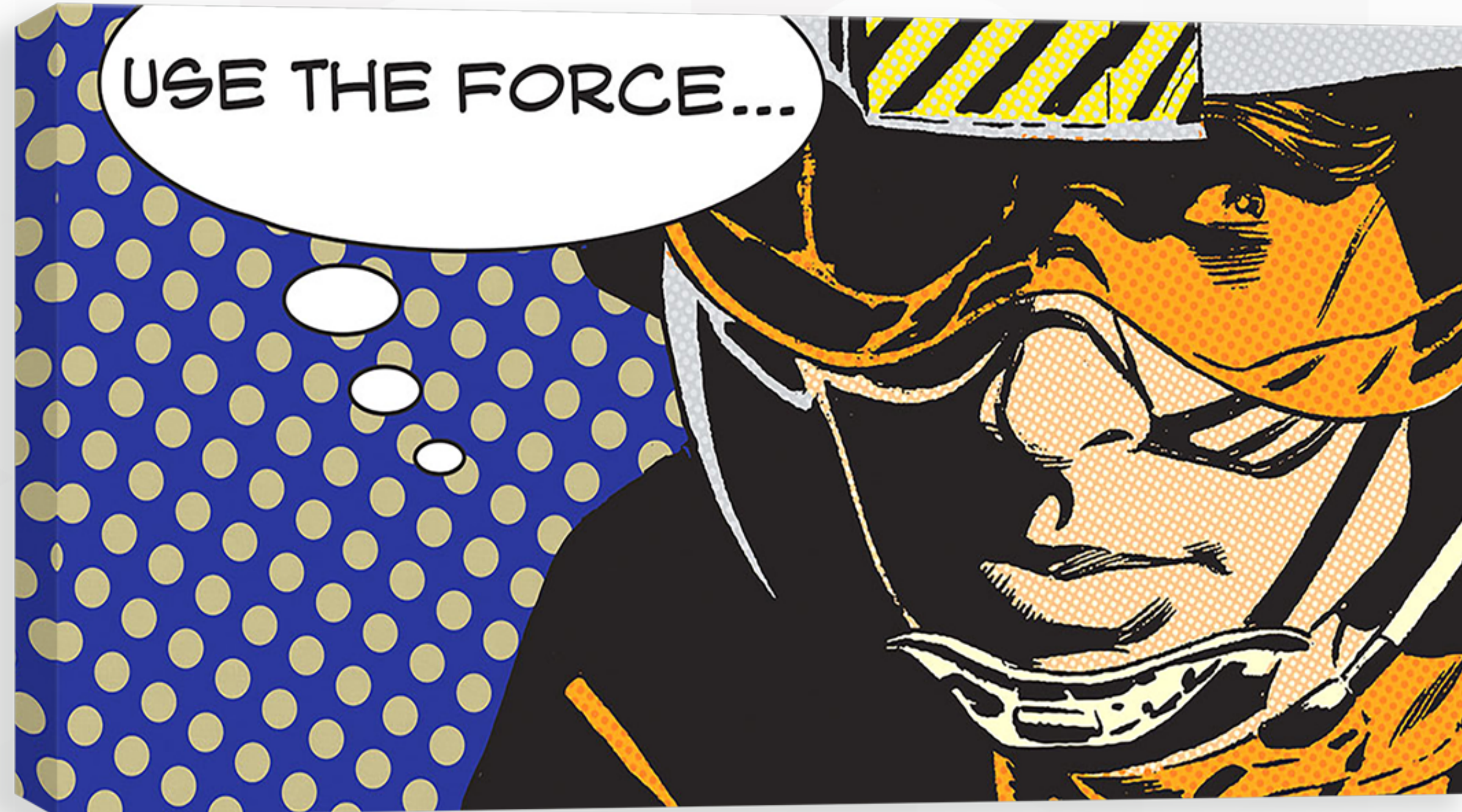
- **They’re hard to find and hard to keep**

- Probably worked all weekend on a “critical issue” that saved someone else
Gets a far away look in their eye when they talk about side projects, going on a vacation, or opening a bar
Organizations often build them a “unicorn grove” to try and keep them happy



These People are Powerful

They aren't just good at their jobs, they're force multipliers



Businesses rely on them, and they're held up as heroes inside most organizations



Hero Culture

Organizational Hero Culture

Valuable people are hard to find, and those people become a disproportionate focus

- **Cultivates addiction**

Creates a feedback loop of recognition and a sense of feeling special
By nature, is exclusive

- **Hides real problems**

Reliance on heroes typically means something else is broken (scale, process, training, quality, etc)
Organization becomes reactive instead of intentional

- **Hero culture doesn't scale**

Often makes others feel un-empowered
Time is spent being a hero instead of sharing knowledge or elevating others

- **Nurtures dependency**

Hero culture is a vicious circle of dependency
Heroes have a tendency to perpetuate a culture that rewards them by hoarding information

Being a Hero has a Dark Side

Eventually, unanticipated extra commitments lead to burnout and dissatisfaction



- Excessive workloads create stress on personal and professional situations
- People rarely join organizations to fight fires
- Job security isn't a substitute for satisfaction
- Real progress becomes a byproduct, not a goal
- Self-worth is derived from fixing things (instead of innovation)

Dependency is a massive organizational problem

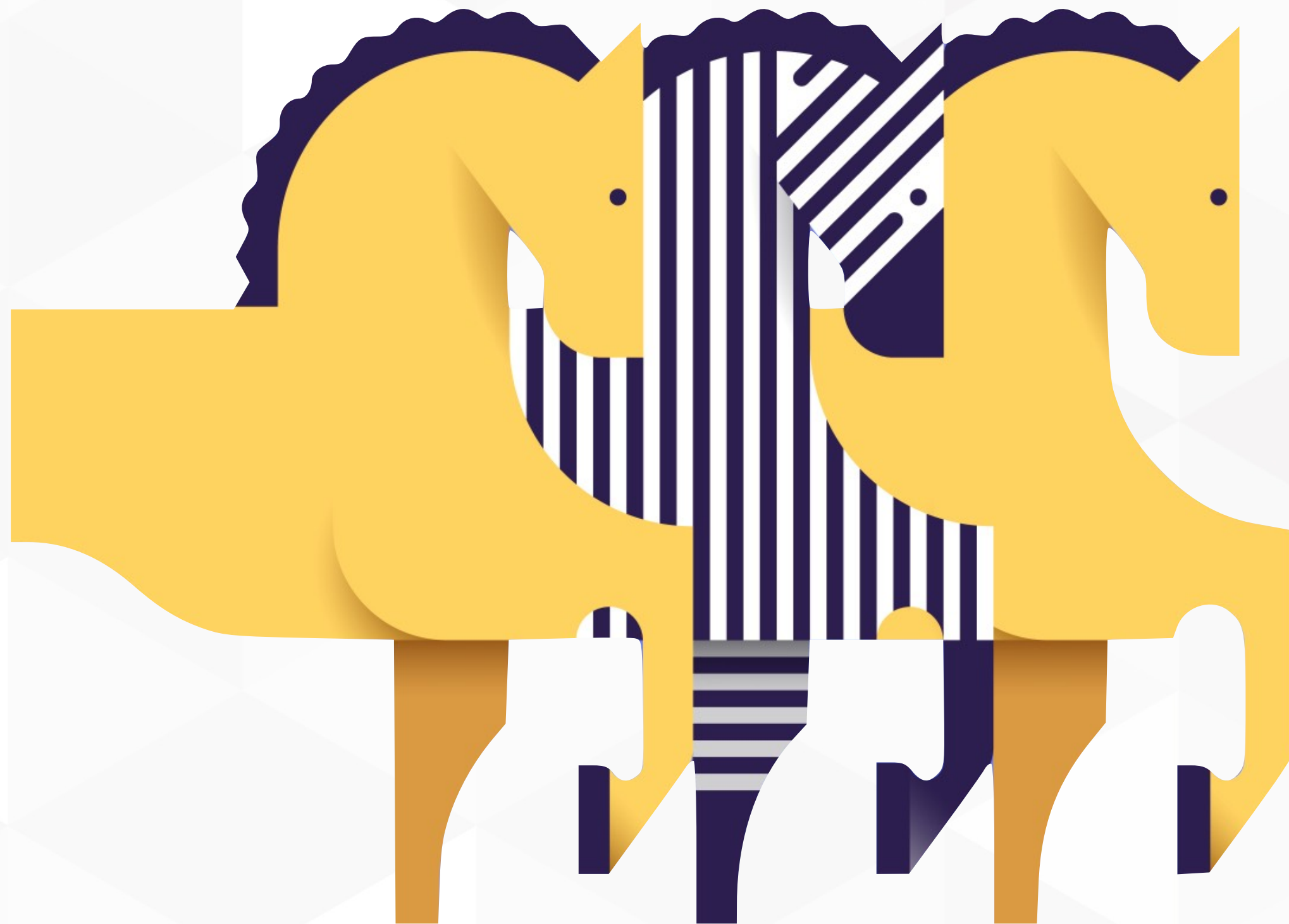
Organizations become dependent on a handful of heroes and push them toward generalization

- If you can't explore and learn in your chosen discipline, you fall behind
- If a business is dependent on just a few key people, it will struggle to scale and manage risk



Heroes Don't Last

Hero culture sucks the life out of the best people

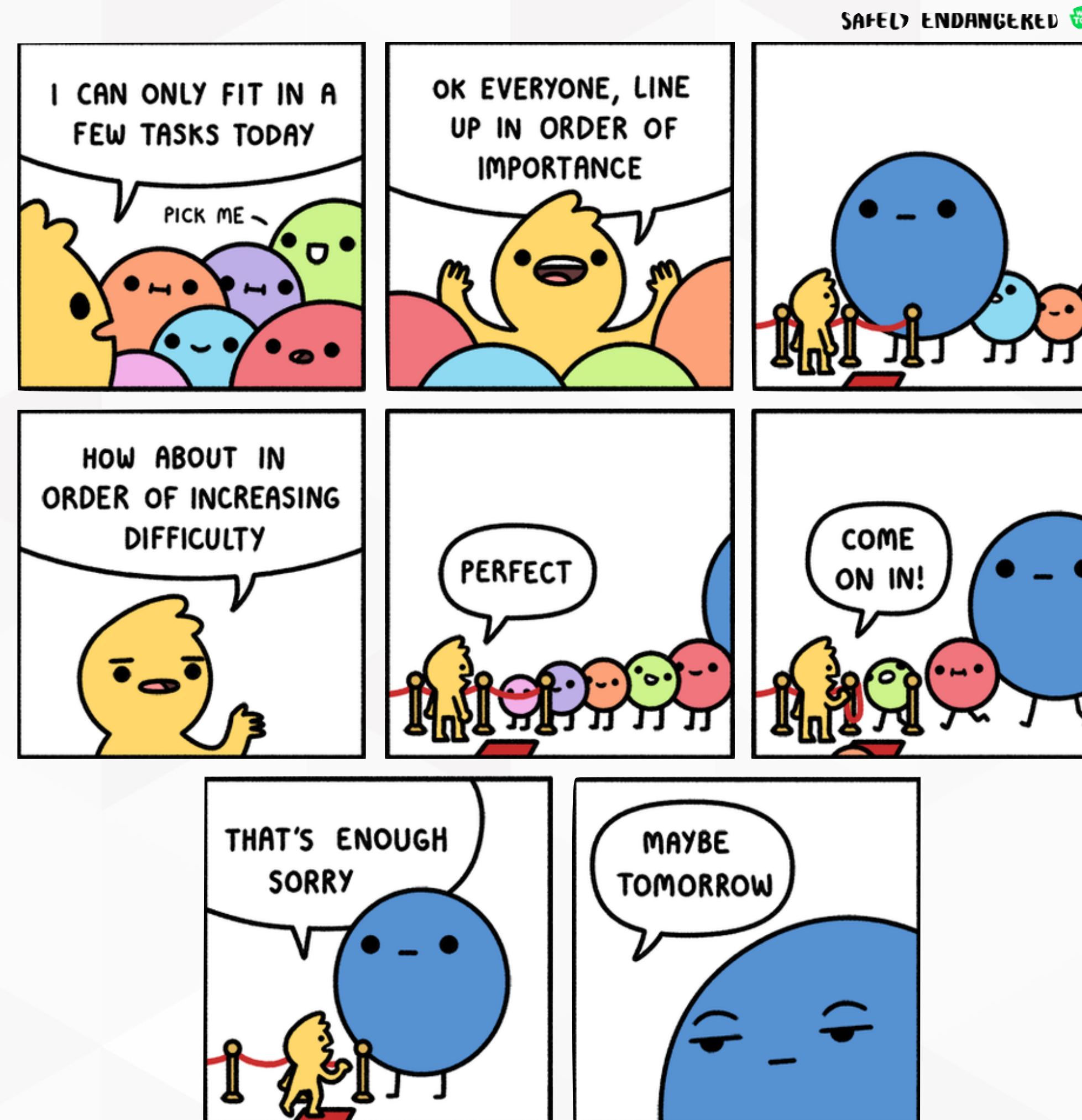


- This feeds imposter syndrome - “They will discover I’m not as great as they think I am”
- You spend yourself solving other people’s needs - “The art of busy”
- Exploration and mastery become secondary

How do we Fight This?

Companies Working on Hard Cultural Problems

- Better processes
- Better rewards
- Better tech



Individuals working hard on their point of view

- Build empathy
- Self-determination
- Redefine success



Ideas on Changing Culture

Better Process

Build processes that support sharing and enforce a balance

- If work gets added, something else gets removed
- Dedicate time to mentorship and coaching
- Build a successful delivery model and use it for almost everything
- Track risks and work to mitigate them
- Have awesome information sharing integrated into workflow
- Build meaningful metrics for success

Better Rewards

A bad reward system is worse than no reward system

- Reward systems are incredibly difficult to get right, and they take a lot of time
- Reward systems are often informal (you probably have one even if you think you don't)
- Don't make the rewards trivial, but also don't make them feel like a necessity
- Tout team rewards, but keep individual rewards personal and private
- Look at how rewards shape behavior, and be willing to cull or iterate

Better Tech

We have tooling that helps relieve pressure

- We meet people where they already work, reduce repetition, and look for things that can be replaced without major disruption
- We review tools every quarter focusing on **satisfaction** and **adoption**
- We've replaced tools every quarter: Jira / Confluence / Trello, Basecamp, Google Docs, Hangouts, Xero, several hosting platforms
- Notion - Information management
Workast - Task management
Zoom - Video conferencing
Slack - Chat (and a ton of integrations)
Harvest / Forecast - Time tracking and planning
iCloud - Document collaboration
GitHub - Project management and tracking





Ideas Focused on People



Build Empathy

Change your idea of what positive contribution means

Don't fall into traps:

“This isn't just a 9 to 5”

“We're like a family, and everyone is chipping in”

“You're the only one that can get this done”

“You'll get great exposure and experience”

These are as ridiculous as:

“Don't you want to make some text files you'll pass on to your children?”

“Let me take advantage of your good nature”

“You have a hard time saying no, and I'm going to abuse that”

Represent the value of mentorship and help distinctly

Make a business case for exploration and learning

At agencies, **enable people to create initiatives that you treat like projects** with a scope, timeline, budget, forecasting and resourcing

At product companies, factor in risk as an **additional development cost**

Self-Determination

Be willing to understand your own value and fight for it



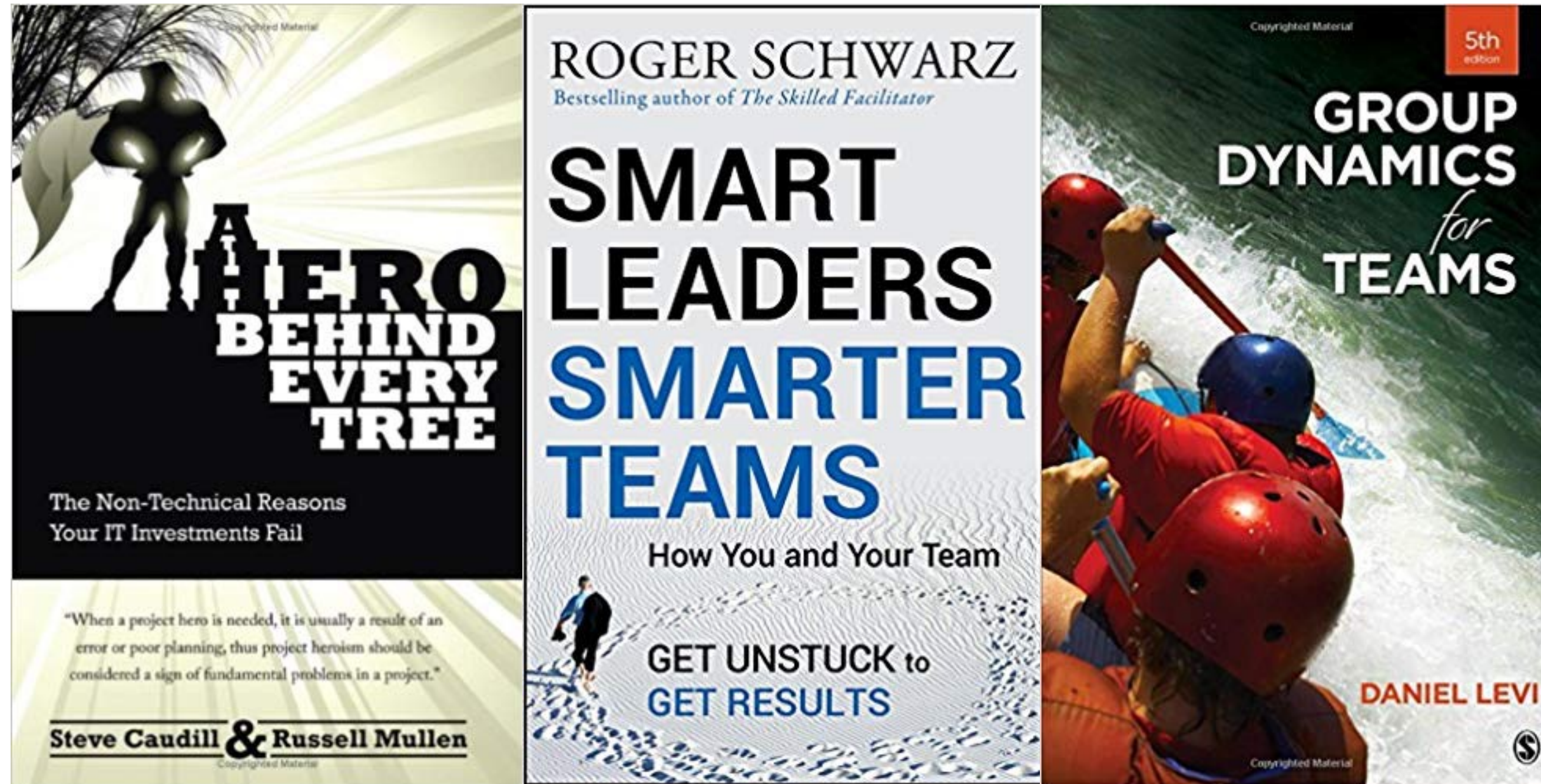
- Keep your curiosity and spend at least some time focused on exploration of new ideas
- Find places where you have autonomy and personalize your ownership of them
- Look for opportunities to collaborate and share knowledge with your team

Redefine Success

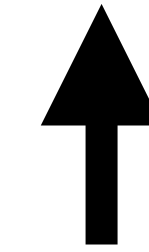
Understand how your values are shared



- Be mindful of the impact your decisions have, and the associated risk
- Keep and encourage a reasonable pace
- Support members of your team by sharing information, mentoring and collaborating



Approachable



Dense!

Additional Reading



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Join us for contribution opportunities

Friday, April 12, 2019

Mentored Contributions

9:00-18:00
Room: 602

First Time Contributor Workshop

9:00-12:00
Room: 606

General Contributions

9:00-18:00
Room: 6A

#DrupalContributions



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Thank you!