



# Building a Data Team in the Year 2020

AAS 237, ATDS 2021

Taka Tanaka—Director of Data Science

*Radish*



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## Who is this talk for?

**Those who are looking for more support from their advisors/supervisors.**

**Those who are on the job market.**

*“How will this team/company support me?”*

**Current & prospective managers, and others looking to support their teammates.**



# Outline

## Background

- Me
- The company

## Recruiting and hiring

- For the company
- For the candidates

## Work-life balance and wellness

- Logistics
- Empathy

## The work

- The day-to-day
- The big picture



# Background



# Where am I coming from?

**2004:** MS Physics (dropped out of PhD)

**2004-2005:** odd jobs

**2006-2011:** PhD Astronomy

**2011-2016:** Postdocs

**2017:** Insight Data Science (NY)

**2017-2019:** Consulting data science (→Manager)  
co-led DEI, assisted HR w/ 10k+ DS applicants

**2019:** Sr. Manager of a new data team at WW

**2020 March:** Conversations about data needs at Radish

**April+May:** Layoffs at WW; career uncertainty

**June:** Reconnected with Radish

**July:** Started as Director of Data Science





# Background

## Radish Fiction

- A mobile fiction startup offering “spicy, bite-sized stories”
- ~50 employees globally
  - Content, operations, marketing teams in N. America (mostly NY, CA)
  - Engineering + product teams in Seoul

**F** Forbes

### Meet The Korean Entrepreneur Who Just Raised \$63 Million For The 'Netflix For Serialized Fiction Stories'

Lee's curating experience was an invaluable lesson for his current startup called Radish, a mobile app for serialized fiction which chooses ...

Aug 11, 2020



**TC** TechCrunch

Serialized fiction startup Radish raises \$63.2M from SoftBank and Kakao

## The Radish data team

From 1 member to 6 in 4 months.

2019 Jan - 2020 July: 1 data scientist

2020 July: +Director

2020 Oct: +Data Analyst, +Data Scientist

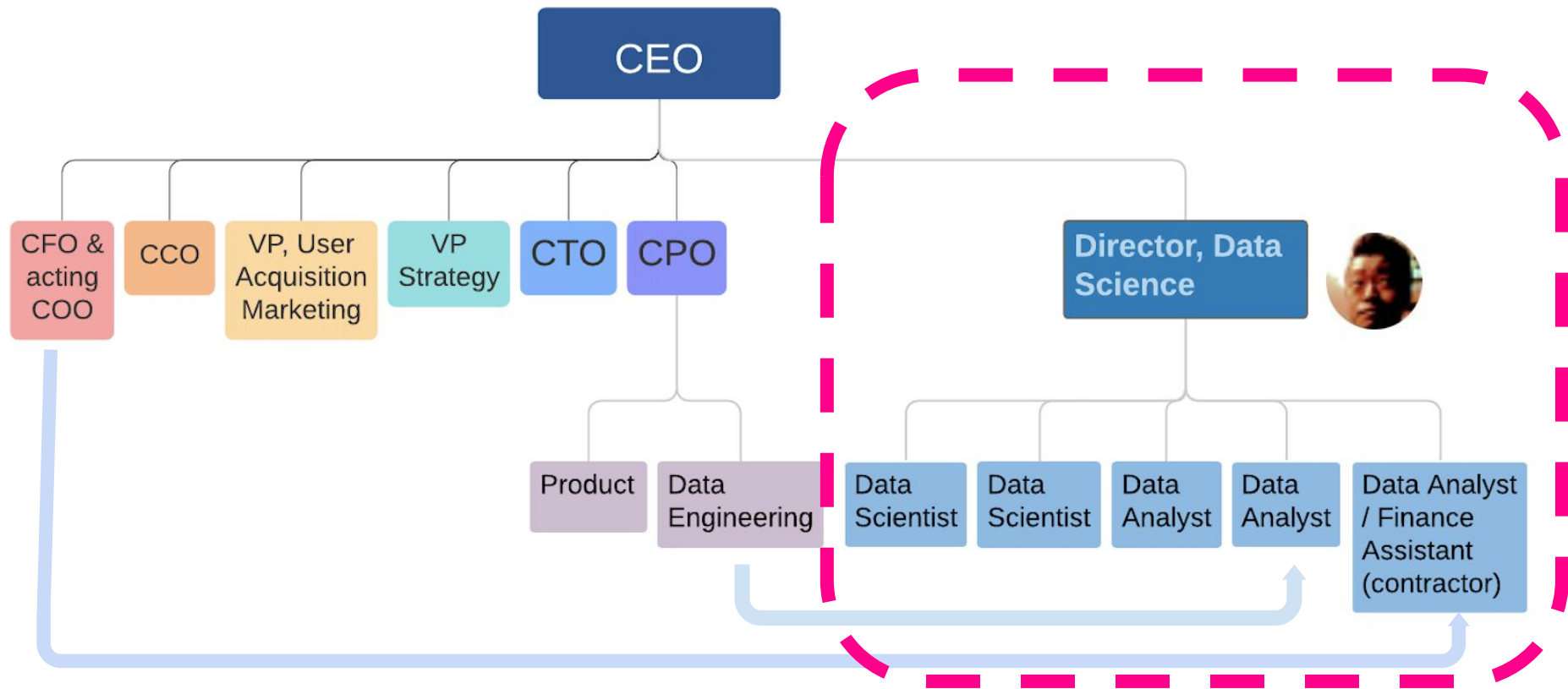
Now: transitioning +2 internal transfers

Data Engineering team of 2 in Seoul.

**I've never met anyone in person.**

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# Simplified Org. Chart







# Recruiting and hiring



# Recruiting and hiring—internal needs

- Assess your needs
  - Take the time to learn about the business, and the state of the data.
  - **How is the data infrastructure?** Is there a DE team?
  - **The data needs of most organizations will evolve as: Descriptive => Predictive => Prescriptive.**  
Where is the company now?
- Who do you need?
  - Does the work require generalists or specialists? People that can hack together solutions, or those with deep knowledge in specific tools?
  - I personally sought people—
    - with different technical skill sets and communication styles than current members
    - who were willing to ask for help
    - have thought about stress management and self-care

*"I'd happily do 15% more work than work with someone who isn't awesome."*



# Recruiting and hiring—for the candidates

**A paycheck is not an opportunity.**

Is the opportunity right for them?

- Do company prospects fit their risk/reward tolerance?
- Are they comfortable with the company's business?
- What are possible paths for career growth and personal development?  
Do they align with what they want?
- Perks and benefits? What extras can you offer? (Work out w/ HR first!)
- Can we offer them the kinds of work they're interested in doing?



# Recruiting and hiring—inclusively

- Minimize unwelcoming language in the job description.  
e.g.: “driven,” “self-starter,” “dominant,” “competitive.”
- Interrogate the experience they need vs. the things they can pick up.
- Interrogate qualifications.  
e.g.: “*Bachelor’s degree in a quantitative subject, or a demonstrated history of quantitative reasoning.*”
- Prestige of their affiliations <<< What they did with their opportunities.
- Have a diverse group of interviewers.
- Anonymize data challenges where possible.
- Give the benefit of the doubt when remote interviews go awry.
- Support candidates that you had to decline.



# How is the team coming along?

- MS in Financial Mathematics => Finance  
=> Data Scientist at Radish (Jan 2019)
- PhD in Marine Geophysics => Insight data science  
=> Data Scientist at Radish
- BA in Drama Studies => TV production => NYC Data Science Academy  
=> Data Analyst at Radish
- MS in Chemical Engineering => Korean police force => data intern at Radish => MS in CS  
=> Data Analyst at Radish [internal transfer]
- BA in Data Science  
=> Finance Assistant at Radish [contractor across finance & data]



# Work-life balance and wellness



# ~~Working from home~~ Living at work

**I believe the following three things to be true in 202X:**

- Employers have unprecedented impact on the personal lives of employees.
- Everyone is going through some sh!t every week.
- You hire people because you're excited about what their A-game and their future will look like.



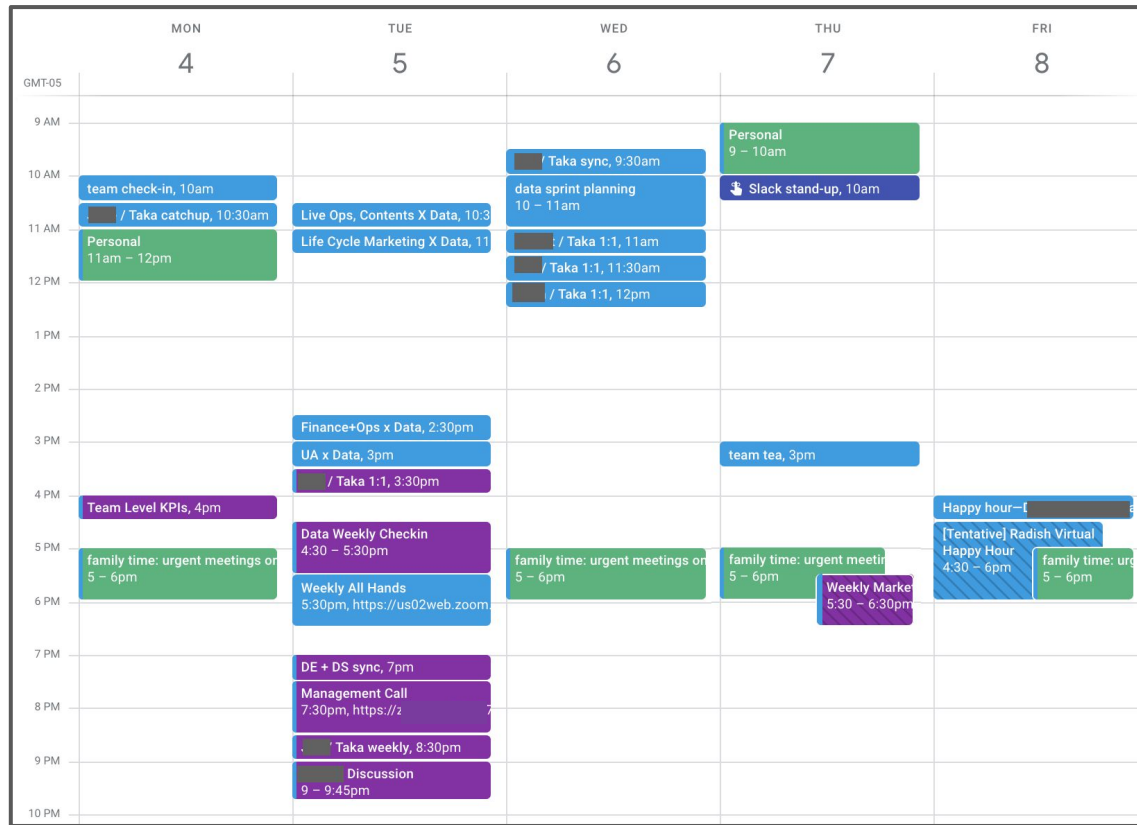
# Set boundaries between work & home

- Architect the team's schedule for predictability and flexibility.  
(Purposefully arrange for large blocks of event-free time.)  
=> can make non-work meetings more meaningful.
- Loudly & repeatedly encourage breaks.
  - No questions asked.
  - Take breaks yourself to normalize the practice.
- Protect your team's time from stakeholders & leadership.





# Cleaner work schedule ⇔ Easier to do life

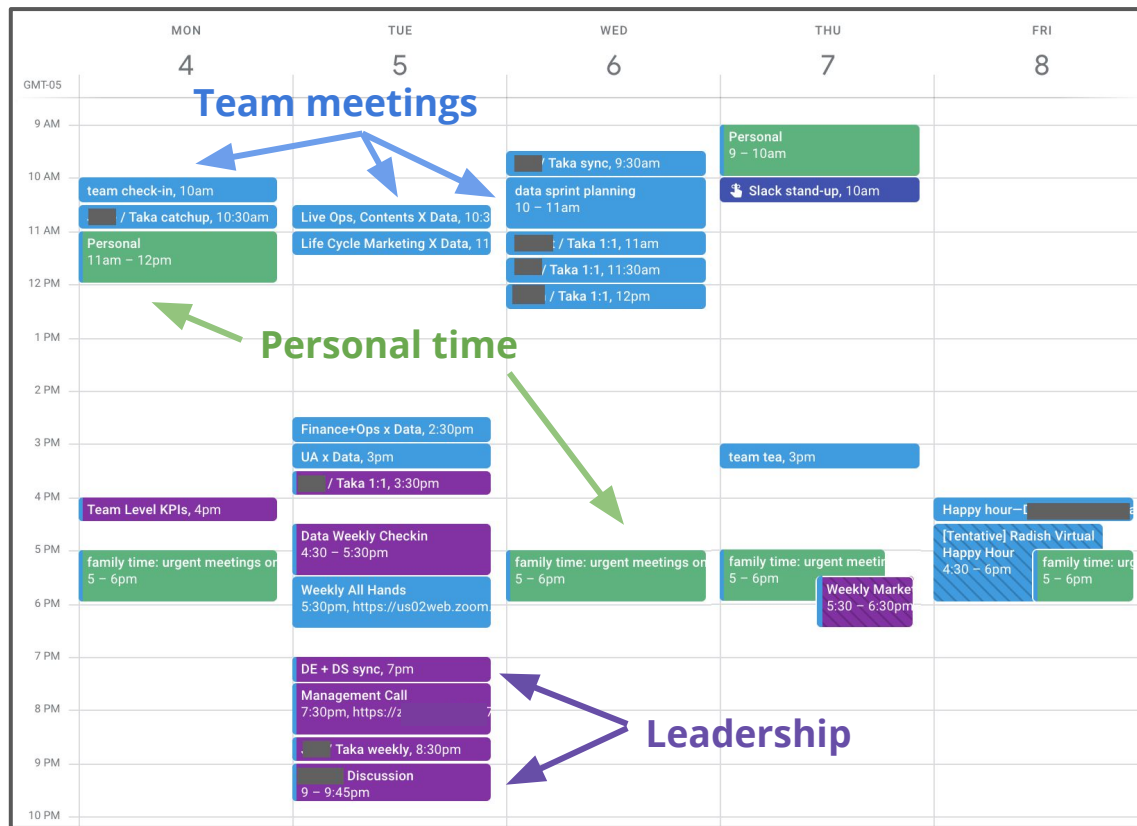


- M** • sync in morning
- T** • stakeholder meetings (every other week)
  - US All-Hands meeting
- W** • sprint plan
  - 1:1s
- R** • Slack stand-up, team tea
- F** • Free!

- **Consolidate meetings (stakeholders => sprint plan)**
- **Normalize blocking off time for personal life.**
- **Visualize team's schedule.**



# Cleaner work schedule ⇔ Easier to do life

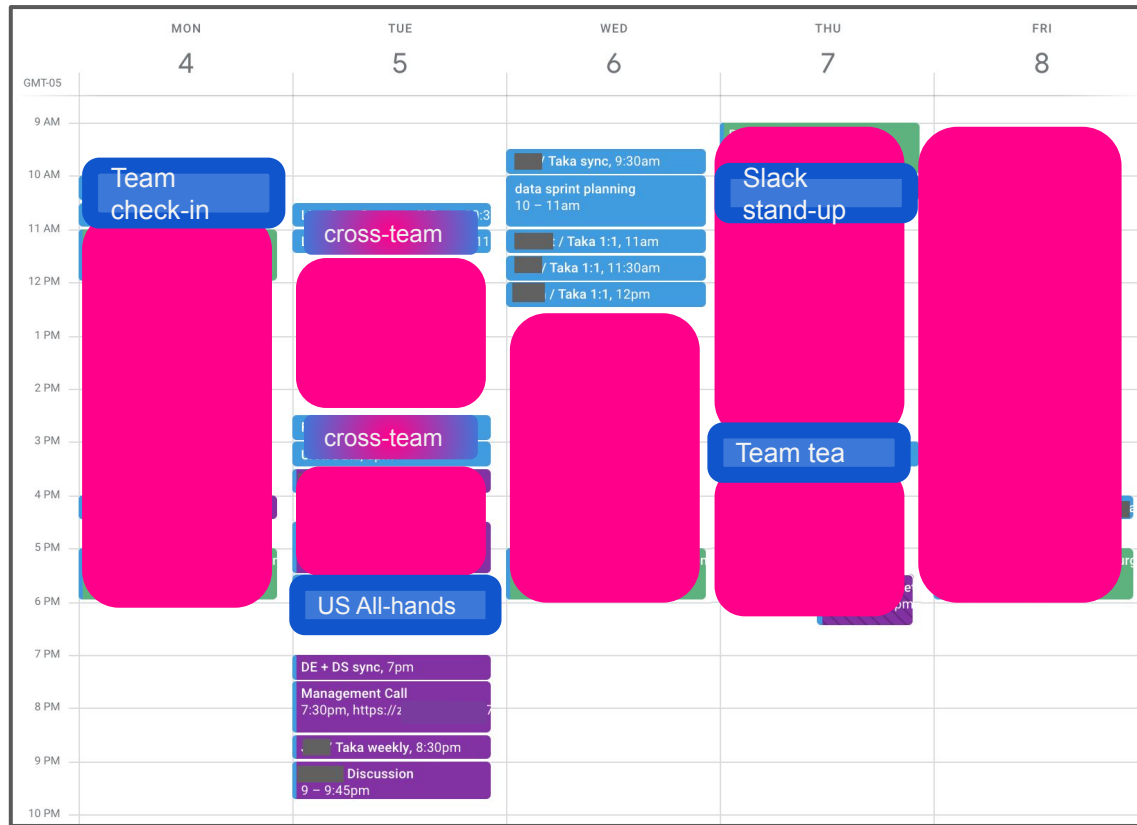


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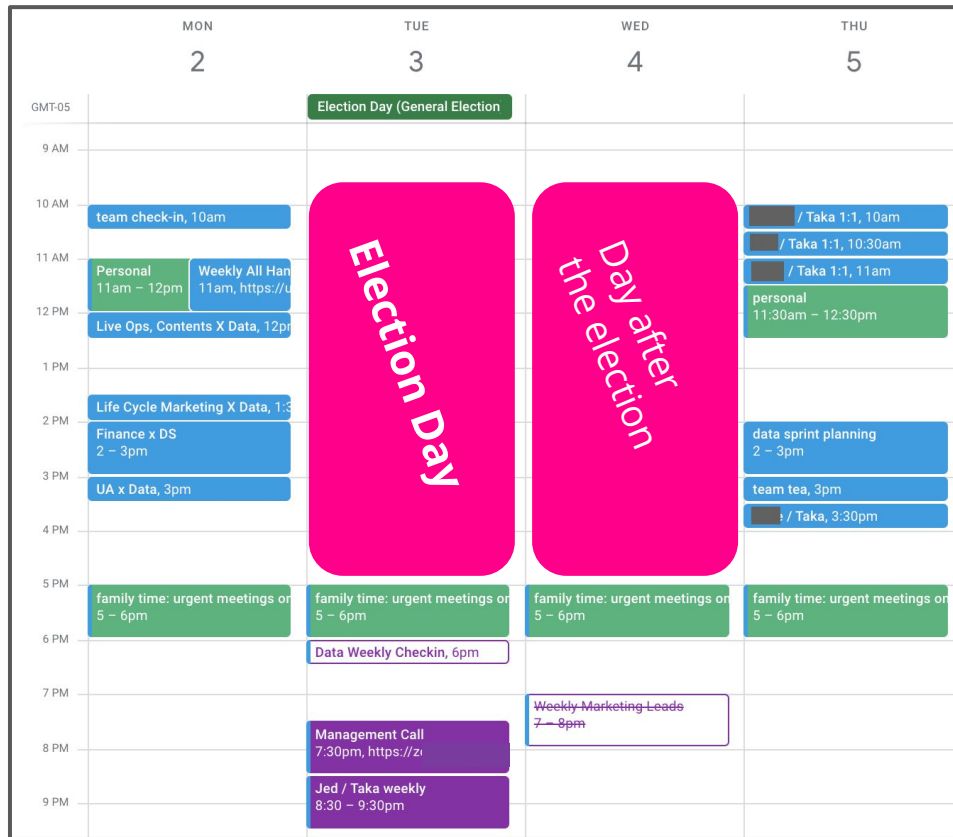
# Cleaner work schedule ⇔ Easier to do life



- M** • sync in morning
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    - US All-Hands meeting
  - W** • sprint plan / project sync
    - 1:1s
  - R** • Slack stand-up, team tea
  - F** • Free!
- **Consolidate meetings (stakeholders => sprint plan)**
  - **Normalize blocking off time for personal life.**
  - **Visualize team's schedule.**

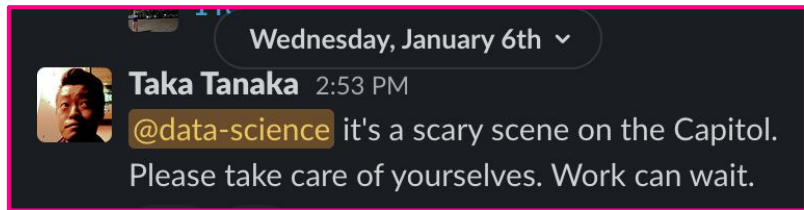


# Work should happen around Life



The world is scarier than at any point in most of our lives.

Work should not add more fear.



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# Support the heck out of your team





# Support the heck out of your team

- 1:1 TIME 🙌 IS 🙌 NOT 🙌 FOR 🙌 PROJECT 🙌 TALK.
- Reassure them. Tell them how much you (and others!) appreciate their work. Share good feedback from rest of the company.
  - “New job jitters” is real!
- Tricky things to balance:
  - Human connection vs. zoom/Slack fatigue
  - Being stuck vs. having other things going on vs. micromanaging
- Are they excited? What would get them more excited? How can you help them bring their A game?

*“I treat everyone fairly, but I don’t treat everyone the same.”*



# The work



# What we do, broadly

## Data infrastructure & integration

(Data Engineering in Seoul does the heavy lifting)

## Ad hoc analyses

## Dashboards

## Clustering (behavioral patterns)

## Predictive models

- Story performance
- Churn & conversion indicators

## Recommender models

(A/B test — built into product / LiveOps workflow)

**Descriptive**



**Predictive**



**Prescriptive**







# Onboarding

- **Learn about the company**
  - Team lead intros
  - Stakeholder meetings
- **Documentation**
  - Lists of tools & contacts
  - Data infrastructure, schemata
  - Work guides, checklists
- **Co-learn**
  - Buddy-up!
  - Walkthroughs, pair-code sessions
  - Team lessons & journal clubs
- **Work/Home**
  - Do they have the equipment they need?
  - Insurance? First paycheck?
- **The right first project**
  - Achievable challenge.
  - Build business context.
  - Get familiar with team's toolbox & data schemata.



# Chart the course and navigate it

- **Clarify priorities—million-dollar impact vs. nice-to-haves.**
  - Asana/Jira boards and stand-ups to confirm priorities and when to ask for help.
  - Talk openly about what stakeholders & leaders are trying to achieve.
- **Make sure they're feeling accomplished and on-track.**
  - "Ask for feedback when you're 20% done, not 80% done."
  - Deliver feedback at the right time and in the right way.
  - Teaching vs. giving them time to work it out.





# Big picture

## For leadership:

- Clarify objectives and how the data team can help.
- Set and manage expectations.
  - What takes time? Where are the outcomes uncertain?
  - Step up for your team; protect them from excessive work.
- Provide guidance on where precision is needed, where they need help making a binary choice, and where a data product needs to be built.

## For the team:

- Do they understand the company objectives, and how their work ties in?
  - Err on the side of giving too much business context.
- Does their work align with their personal goals and interests?
  - Is this the kind of work you were hoping to do when you signed on?
  - How can I/company help them excel & grow?

# **Connect the team with the rest of the company**

**The team has weekly USA all-hands, ~monthly global all-hands, stakeholder meetings. What more can we do?**

- Lift up their work to rest of company.
  - Monthly data share-outs.
  - Highlight great work at leadership meetings & All-Hands.
- Give teammates opportunities to speak about their work.
- Ask other teams to tell us more about their work.
- Organize virtual meet-and-greets & happy hours (alcohol optional).
  - “New to Radish” Slack channel => newbie virtual chats
  - Virtual holiday party
  - Communication about office space conversations.



**Phew. I've been talking a lot...**

## 🔗 In summary...

- **Understand company goals**, the data work that can help, and the skill sets you need on the team.
- **Find amazing people** whose goals align with the company objectives.
- **Support the heck out of your team**
  - **Logistics:** protect their time & wellness
    - Build predictability & flexibility into their schedules.
    - Encourage breaks & set an example.
  - **Empathy:** Show your appreciation & trust; let others see the great work they do.
- **Help them get the work done.**
  - Make sure they don't feel alone or lost. ⇔ Give them the space they need.
  - Communicate often about how their current work aligns with their personal goals, and fits in with broader company objectives.
- **Meet with leadership often to track progress, direction, and expectations.**



**Thank you!**