

# **THE ANCHOR PLAYBOOK**

*Engineering Leadership at Pivotal Labs*



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# What Is an Anchor?

**The anchor role** tends to resist easy definition. In some ways, it is more clearly described by what it is not: at Pivotal Labs, while architecture is fundamental to our practice, we don't have traditional, top-down architects. Our teams need leadership of a different flavor, so we have anchors instead. This framing raises more questions than it answers. What do we need from technical leadership and why do we do it differently here?

At Labs, we value empowered, balanced teams. We want all members of the team to own their product, contribute ideas, and act on their ideas. The ethos of the empowered team is incompatible with hierarchical forms of leadership, which stifle initiative and ownership. Our teams don't execute a plan: they own every step of the product development journey.

So what is an anchor? An anchor is the representative of the engineering practice who can explain and model the engineering practice in the same way that PMs and Designers anchor their practices in a balanced team. They monitor team dynamics, encourage best practices, and ask the tough questions needed to drive success. They will not be the only engineer or the only team member doing this, but they will make sure it gets done.

Okay, that's a little more descriptive. But what does an anchor do? What expectations do we have for anchors on our balanced teams? For new Pivots and engineers new to the anchor role, it can be confusing to figure out how to anchor, especially because there are many ways to be an anchor.

# Anchorypes<sup>1</sup>

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1 This is a pun.

**Anchorship** is often performed differently depending on project context. The type of product, the team structure, and the overall experience level of the team are all factors that influence which style of anchorship will be most effective. One team may find that peer leadership is most effective, while another team finds that a more authoritative leadership style is necessary. The variety of anchor styles can make it difficult to nail down what is and what isn't anchorship, but this variety is also what makes the role multi-faceted and resilient.

Not every Pivot will see the full variety of anchor modalities in the course of their first or first few projects. This playbook will describe the most common "anchorypes" observed in the wild. As you take on anchorship, think about the

different modes you can operate in, and consider which will be the most effective for your team and your product.

Choosing which anchorype you need for a given project can be a good conversation to have with experienced anchors as well as your client liaison (CL). You can use the anchorypes described here to help prioritize the set of responsibilities most needed for your team. As you have this conversation, think about the trade-offs and challenges that arise with each form of the role. We've listed some of them here, as food for thought, but think about the context of your project and your own unique skill set as you set expectations for the leadership style that will be most effective for you and your team.

# ANCHORTYPES

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*There is more than one way  
to anchor a project.*

## ANCHORTYPES

**Anchortypes** describe the variety of hats the anchor may wear on different projects. These are not prescriptive descriptions; the anchor role is evolving and requires the freedom to evolve. However, these classifications can help us describe the anchor role to clients and other Pivots. Anchors can use these touchpoints to discuss and determine the appropriate anchor modality to meet the needs of the client and the team.

These are the most common anchortypes seen at Pivotal Labs:

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**1**

***The Peer***

Light-touch leader of a strong, mature team.

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**5**

***The Expert***

Uses strong know-how to build trust with clients and teammates.

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**2**

***The Servant Leader***

Master facilitator and coach; can step up or step back as needed.

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**6**

***The Learner***

A Pivot or client anchor-in-training.

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**3**

***The Shield***

Wears the firefighter hat and creates a bubble for the team.

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**7**

***The Captain***

Rarely used, authoritative version of the anchor.

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**4**

***The Constant***

Keeps track of context and decisions.

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**8**

***The Bridge Builder***

Connects teams within a product program.

*The*  
**PEER**

LIGHT-TOUCH LEADER OF A STRONG TEAM



*While every team needs an anchor, the anchor role may be more or less prominent depending on the strength of the team.*



## ANCHORTYPES

Anchors often bring different types of leadership to the table: in many cases leadership is direct, and it's clear who the anchor is. However, anchors can be very effective with indirect leadership. A very successful anchor or an anchor working with a very empowered team, may find that it is possible to step back and let the engineers on the team handle anchor responsibilities like stakeholder updates and cross-team planning on a rotating basis.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- Emphasize that all Pivotal engineers have these responsibilities, anchor or not
- Promote more active feedback
- Rotate responsibilities as skilled pairs
- Give everyone on the team a chance to grow
- Give everyone on the team opportunities to win trust

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- A team of peers may find that the CL ends up being more involved in the decision-making process, and may make decisions for which they lack full context; this can be a sign that the anchor needs to take a more direct leadership role
- There is an implicit seniority around

who talks strategy with the CL. A team of peers operates best when expectations around decision making are consistent

### **CHALLENGES:**

- Clients are likely to want the anchor identified, even if it is preferable for team dynamics to take a peer-oriented approach
- In cases where context is unevenly distributed, it may be difficult to know who has received complete context and who hasn't

*The*  
**SERVANT LEADER**

MASTER FACILITATOR AND COACH;  
CAN STEP UP OR STEP BACK AS NEEDED.



*A skillfull leader doesn't make decisions in a vacuum; they make space for the team to make decisions as a group.*

## ANCHORTYPES

Many Pivots feel that anchors are responsible for assessing what needs to be done — from an engineering perspective — and making sure those tasks get done through skillful facilitation and delegation. The trick here is providing enough leadership to move the team forward without taking control of the decision making process. Much like the Peer, it may be unclear to outsiders who the anchor (servant leader) actually is.

### RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Bring the team to a higher level of situational awareness
- Facilitate conversations, especially through activities
- Keep the team moving forward
- Model values and norms for the team to imitate
- Make sure everyone has a voice in decision-making

### CONSIDERATIONS:

- A servant leader opens up the team for more diversity and safety for experimentation
- Even while growing, the team needs to be held to a standard of excellence

### CHALLENGES:

- Anchors may put unreasonable expectations on themselves and feel alone and stressed.
- Manager-anchors have little time to pair and code.

*The*  
**SHIELD**

WEARS THE FIREFIGHTER HAT AND  
CREATES A BUBBLE FOR THE TEAM



*Sometimes the anchor may want to handle  
blockers and interruptions, especially if these  
tasks create distractions.*

## ANCHORTYPES

In many cases anchors are expected to protect the team from inefficiency caused by near-term blockers, interruptions, and unreasonable requests. They tend to be the one who attends strategic technical meetings and fields questions, especially on a highly distractible team.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- Keep the CL informed of issues and action items
- Create safety for the team
- Stay firm when others get off track
- Think strategically about stakeholder enablement
- Advocate for the team
- Point out risks and harmful behaviors

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- Anchors work against unrealistic expectations and create safety for clients to not be afraid
- In larger offices, the anchor does work similar to a CL

### **CHALLENGES:**

- On projects that require frequent, tough conversations, the anchor may experience greater risk of burnout.
- Hard to test for resiliency against difficult situations

*The*  
**CONSTANT**

KEEPS TRACK OF CONTEXT  
AND DECISIONS



*Some teams require a designated Pivot to hold context; many find that most of the engineers on a stable team can share context as needed.*

## ANCHORTYPES

Many Pivots describe “The Constant” when they describe the anchor role. In fact, the role was originally added to teams at a time when many Pivots rotated projects more frequently and needed to make sure at least one engineer held context. Today, anchors often stay on projects longer than other Pivots to help carry context, explain the “why” behind our decisions, and reassure clients who have become fond of their Pivots over time. However, some teams find this arrangement problematic when the anchor leaves.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- Preserve valuable knowledge over time
- Hold and share the historical context of the whys behind past decisions
- Share information at the time it is most needed
- On-board new team members

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- On most teams, the majority of the engineers are fully loaded on context, and capable of handling most of responsibilities listed above
- Some clients are now naming their own anchors, especially on interoffice accounts, and are less dependent on the Pivotal anchor for context
- Client engineers rotate more frequently in some projects or offices than others

### **CHALLENGES:**

- Stakeholders can be very sensitive to rotating anchors
- Anchors who stay on too long may develop anxiety around holding the majority of the context

*The*  
**EXPERT**

USES STRONG KNOW-HOW TO BUILD  
TRUST WITH CLIENTS AND TEAMATES



*The anchor can help build trust by being the first – but not the only – Pivot to jump in and demonstrate technical skill and good judgement.*



## ANCHORTYPES

The consulting experience and technical chops of this anchor often catches the eye of client stakeholders. The Expert often becomes the point of contact for client stakeholders as well as a hub of knowledge for other members of the team. Among Pivots, it is typically expected that a skilled anchor will find opportunities to redirect questions and raise up their team members as fellow experts.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- Draw upon deep/broad technical experience when team is making decisions
- Readily admit when they don't know, and find out who does
- Identify opportunities for valuable team learning
- Collaborate skillfully with other disciplines
- Surface the tradeoffs of architectural decisions
- Clearly communicate our approach and generate shared understanding

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- Must use influence wisely
- Clients tend to view the anchor as the responsible point of contact
- Strong consulting skills from the anchor earn goodwill from stakeholders

- While making the teams trust-worthy, Anchors teach clients how to trust their teams
- There is a minimum ramp-up period for new anchors regardless of expertise

### **CHALLENGES:**

- Anchors can take on a significant emotional burden of making sure decisions are right
- Anchors that take on this role raise expectations similar to those of a tech lead
- It is an unreasonable expectation for an engineer to be the Expert for all of the projects they anchor
- Implicit and gender biases can determine the success an anchor has in this role, regardless of their skill

*The*  
**LEARNER**

A PIVOT OR CLIENT  
ANCHOR-IN-TRAINING



*A strong team is a great opportunity to  
let a new anchor level up.*

## ANCHORTYPES

On highly functioning teams with a deep bench of experience, or a low-risk engagement, the anchor role can be an opportunity to gain experience the Pivot might not otherwise obtain and to do so with the full support of mentors who have been there before. Creating an environment where anchors rotate more frequently can make it feel safer to assign the role to a new Pivot.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- Learn in a low risk, low stress environment
- Grow into anchoring with a current anchor as mentor
- Rely upon team for help and knowledge
- Present as co-anchors while being mentored

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- Rotating anchors intentionally breaks the fear of losing a person and reinforces context-sharing
- Often, the anchor isn't, and doesn't have to be the most technically experienced

### **CHALLENGES:**

- It can be risky to pair new anchors with a high-touch/sensitive client
- The necessity of optimizing for client problems makes continuous learning more difficult
- Anchors are expected to learn, but are likely to feel concurrent pressure to deliver

*The*  
**CAPTAIN**

RARELY USED, AUTHORITATIVE  
VERSION OF THE ANCHOR



*Sometimes it's worth making unilateral  
decisions despite the tradeoffs, but this mode is  
considered a last resort.*

## ANCHORTYPES

In difficult situations, it may be necessary for someone to make an unpopular decision, despite the desire for collective ownership. This is a delicate line to walk, and requires care/skill in doing so. Once employed, this stance is difficult to reverse. Not all Captains are remembered for modeling good behavior. In our research, tales of Captain behavior usually got results, but indicated undesirable team dynamics and/or loss of trust, productivity, and morale.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- Make a decision for a team that cannot or will not move forward
- Be willing to stand alone to do the right thing
- Rally a divided team on a common goal

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- May make it difficult to challenge and change the decisions that were made
- Observe for a while. You can be right and still be wrong
- Consider co-ownership as an anchor pair as a way to alleviate the burden and get in front of problems

### **CHALLENGES:**

- Being unnecessarily vocal can impose dominance and have negative consequences
- Making unilateral decisions leaves you open to being the single point of failure
- Anchor will need to teach the team to sustain their own buy-in

*The*  
**BRIDGE BUILDER**

CONNECTS TEAMS WITHIN  
A PRODUCT PROGRAM



*For enterprise and portfolio-style projects,  
having a strong Bridge-Builder on the team is  
highly correlated with success.*

## ANCHORTYPES

Some teams, in order to be empowered, must rely upon the work of others outside their context. The Bridge Builder makes an outsized effort to coordinate and align with other teams or strategic client relationships in order to successfully deliver. Often, these relationships are crucial to the team's outcomes.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- Leverage the relationship with the CL to influence stakeholders
- Pay attention to problems shared across teams in programs of work
- Demonstrate how to effectively work with other practices toward outcomes
- Know when to effectively engage with outside teams
- Inform the BAT and advocate for the team

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- Bring stakeholders into more of the technical conversations to inform them of decisions being made
- Carry context/collaborate across account teams
- While this anchortype is similar to the Shield, it emphasizes collaboration other with teams rather than firefighting

### **CHALLENGES:**

- Anchors in this position often don't know who to give feedback to when there are platform issues
- Different offices have different expectations for anchors, so traveling as an anchor or working on distributed project teams can be very confusing
- Anchors that spend too much time working with other project teams can become detached from pairing and their own team's codebase

## ANCHORTYPES



# ANCHORSHIP IN PRACTICE

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*Common scenarios that come up  
frequently with recommendations  
for all anchor types.*

# Introducing the Anchor

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**SCENARIO:**

A new client has begun an engagement, and the team is introducing roles and responsibilities, including the anchor role. The team wants to make it clear that the anchor has specific responsibilities, but they do not want to indicate that the anchor is the sole owner of those responsibilities or make it difficult to transition anchors if needed.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

As you introduce the balanced team to your client pairs, include a description of the anchor role. Be aware that pre-conceptions people have around leadership in engineering may color their expectations of an anchor's responsibilities. Be prepared to counter these expectations as needed (see table). In addition, be aware that the first team anchor may need to transition into another role at some point for a variety of reasons, including possibly transitioning a mentor anchor to a primary anchor role. Do not imply that the anchor is the keeper of project lore: on the contrary, the team will function best when everyone has full context and any engineer is equally capable of helping to onboard new team members.

## ANCHORSHIP IN PRACTICE

The anchor . . .

<b>IS NOT</b>	<b>IS</b>
Is not a tech lead	Is our answer to the “tech lead”
Is not the decider	Is a facilitator for good team decisions
Is not a boss	Is a teacher
Is not an architect	Is the initiator of architectural conversations
Is not a manager	Is an advocate for growth and empowerment
Is not responsible for client decisions	Is responsible for due diligence with regard to technical excellence

# Program Onboarding

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**SCENARIO:**

In a program with multiple projects, it is often true that one team — for instance, the initial team in an expanding portfolio — holds more context than the new team. In these cases the team(s) closer to a core group of stakeholders or technical approvers is responsible to ensure this context is shared across the program.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Dedicate time for the program CL and a versed anchor to onboard new anchors as they join the program.

1. Working with the program CL, the appropriate team's anchor schedules some one-on-one time with the onboarding anchor to provide the lay of the land and make sure that valuable context is shared.
2. The onboarding anchor is responsible to ask questions, make sure they are on the same page, and possibly raise areas of inquiry for both teams. Fresh eyes are generally valuable.
3. The anchors may decide that a more frequent cadence of anchor planning meetings (APMs) would be a useful way to carry on the conversation.

# Anchors Away

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**SCENARIO:**

It is not always possible to keep a much loved anchor on an engagement. Removing an anchor can cause stress for a client, who has come to trust and rely on the anchor. However, it's not always possible or desirable for an anchor to see a project through to its conclusion.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

ADs and LDs should feel free to rotate the anchor to another project, either to support a new client or to provide opportunities for the Pivot that they might otherwise miss. In order to do this safely:

1. Avoid setting the expectation that anchors always remain with a project until the end.
2. Either provide time for a new Pivot to work with the outgoing anchor until they fully understand the context and issues, or reframe a shadow anchor who has already built trust as the anchor.
3. Try to avoid transitioning the anchor, PM, or designer at the same time.
4. Encourage teams to maintain lightweight architecture decision records (ADRs) to support continuity during a transition.

# Cross-Team Neural Network

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**SCENARIO:**

Pivotal engagements are more likely than ever to require multiple teams, which may spin up in different offices or regions. Teams are using Slack channels, but communication is light, asynchronous, irregular and targeted (e.g., Slack is used to pose and answer specific questions, but it's not a good venue for exploratory conversation). Teams need a way to communicate cross-cutting concerns, vet technical decisions, and align on shared direction in real time.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

For logos that have more than one parallel effort, use anchor planning meetings (APMs) to surface issues relevant to all portfolio teams.

(Note: There is precedent for this activity within Pivotal R&D.)

1. The program CL, with input from the relevant customer Journey Lead, initiates and facilitates this meeting so that they are aware of program level decisions and are well positioned to provide support, if needed.
2. Anchors are responsible for recognizing and initiating topics relevant to the program.

## ANCHORSHIP IN PRACTICE

3. Planning questions:
  - a. Who needs to be present? CLs and balanced team representatives are needed. Does the BAT team need to be involved? Do you want to invite client pairs? What makes sense for your teams and your program?
  - b. How often do you want to meet? Meeting regularly enough to surface emergent issues is advisable, but cadence can be tailored to the frequency of change and/or the maturity of the project.

# Learning Anchorship

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**SCENARIO:**

Anchors use a variety of skills depending on the context they are operating in and the problems they are trying to address. The different modes in which the anchor operates (the modalities described in the previous section) can be difficult to see and learn in the course of one project. Learning the many facets of anchorship over the course of several projects can contribute to role confusion and overall stress.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Identify prospective anchors and create an opportunity to learn from an experienced anchor as both work together on the same engagement. If the shadow anchor is introduced as such to the clients, it may be easier to switch anchors in the course of the project, thus making it easier to transition the senior anchor to a new project if needed. This practice is good for both the shadow, who has the opportunity to learn anchorship from an experienced Pivot, and the anchor, who will be reminded to keep anchor responsibilities top of mind.

1. The prospective shadow anchor's manager informs the team anchor that their report is particularly interested in learning anchorship during the course of the project.



## ANCHORSHIP IN PRACTICE

2. When they begin working together, the anchor and their shadow anchor should discuss their goals for the project. After this, they can continue a dialogue with regular 1:1's.
3. Both anchors should participate in Anchor Planning Meetings and stakeholder update calls.
4. The anchor can help find other opportunities to practice anchor skills (e.g., tee up a stakeholder conversation), provide back up as needed, and offer feedback.
5. Both anchors look for an opportunity to swap roles, with the shadow anchor providing support until the original anchor is allocated to another effort, or a new shadow anchor is identified and rolled onto the team.

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*If you want to learn more about our practices or  
start a journey with us, visit:  
[tanzu.vmware.com/labs](https://tanzu.vmware.com/labs)*