

Shift Down

How Developer Autonomy in Open Source
Delivers for Your Customers

Automotive Open Source Summit 2026
Stormy Peters



You downshift when
you need power.

In Open Source ...

Shift decisions down the org — to the engineers closest to the code and the community

Less top-end control, more actual pulling power



For years, we have all been
operating under a myth.



Passion

Free software rights

Software to help your kids speak



More and more ... it's work first.

And passion grows.

Note on the data

June 2026 study of 29 Open Source Maintainers

Experience with companies

Personal anecdotes

Work path to maintainer: Madelyn Olson

Joined AWS

Manager said: "Go upstream our changes so we don't have to maintain them."

Five years later: one of five Redis maintainers in the world



People are employed, given freedom, grow into maintainers - and then become believers.

Your next maintainer already works for you.
If you are brave enough to grow them.

The Myth vs. The Data



The Myth

Passionate hobbyist

- Contributes nights and weekends
- Becomes a maintainer
- Maybe gets hired

The Reality

48.7%

of FOSS contributors
paid by employer

84%

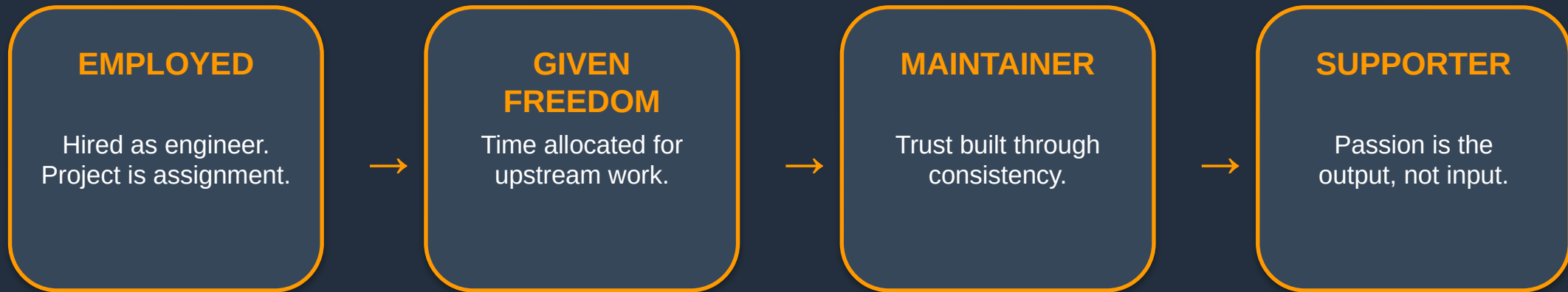
of Linux kernel code
written developers
employed by
corporations

1,780+

organizations
contributing to Linux

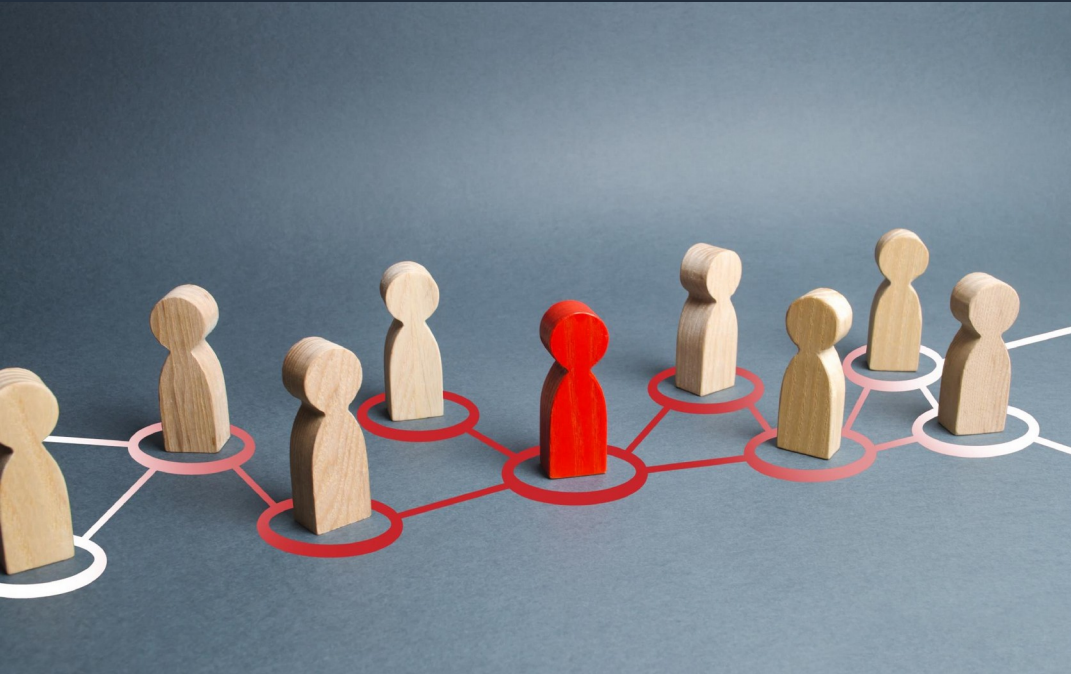
**Did they all start as
passion projects and then
get hired?**

The Real Pipeline



It's not **HIRING** maintainers,
it's **EMPLOYING** maintainers.

Why This Is Good News for This Room



Maintainers are key for upstream influence

Every engineer you have is a potential maintainer

How do contributors choose projects

Purpose

Community

Career Value

**Why is this important to
Automotive?**

S-CORE: The Industry Is Moving

32

companies signed
(expanded from 12
in 6 months)

40%

less effort on
non-differentiating
software

30%

faster
time-to-market

**An agreement gives you a seat.
Maintainers give you a voice.**

What Happens When You Don't Invest

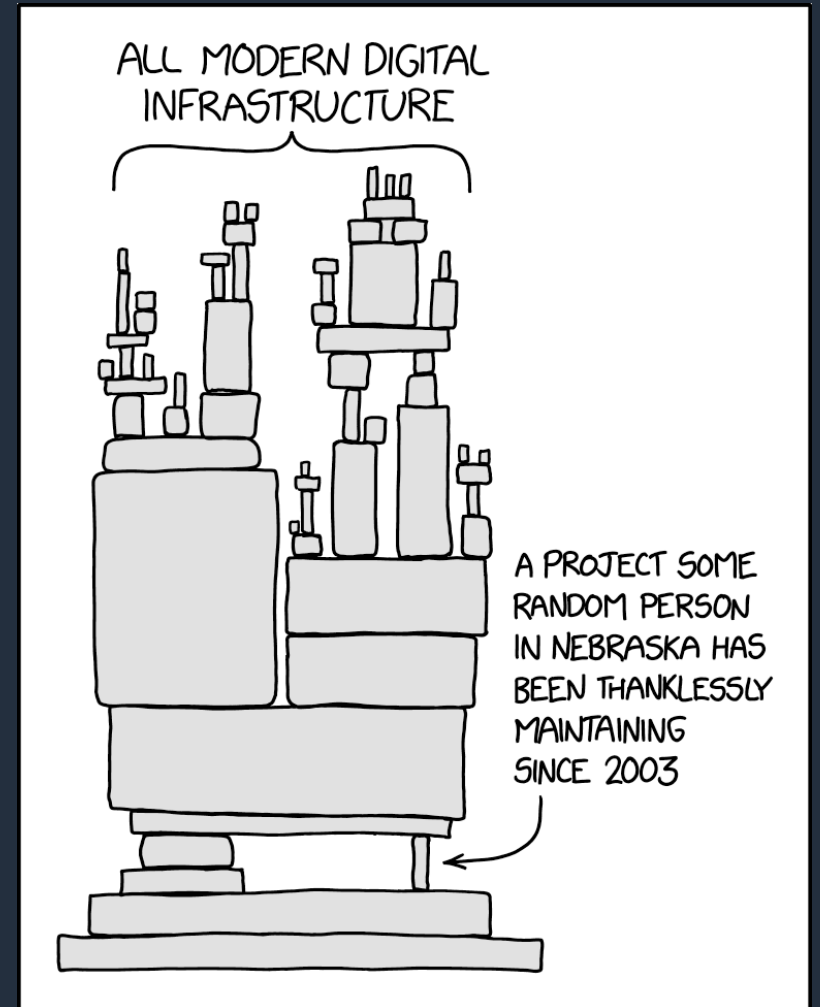
The Valkey/Redis Cautionary Tale



The Maintenance Gap

User base growing faster than maintenance layer

Code without maintainers is inventory, not infrastructure



**How do you earn the
communities' trust and grow
maintainers?**

**Trust Is Earned by
Individuals**



Two Kinds of Participation

Embedded

Performative



When every upstream decision routes through management, your engineer becomes a messenger instead of a maintainer.

Autonomy Unlocks Authority





An engineer who routes decisions through management can't be part of the conversation

The Investment Playbook

Seven Moves

1. Make it a role, not a hobby
2. Make sure everyone understands the customer problem
3. Delegate decision authority
4. Contribute to projects you don't control
5. Reward work
6. Be transparent about the hard parts
7. Plan in years, not quarters

**Make It a Role, Not a
Hobby**



Delegate Decision Authority

**Make sure everyone knows the
customer problem**

Contribute to Projects You Don't Control



Reward work



Be Transparent About the Hard Parts

Plan in Years, Not Quarters



What Your Maintainers Do for You

RECRUIT — Best engineers want to work where upstream work is real

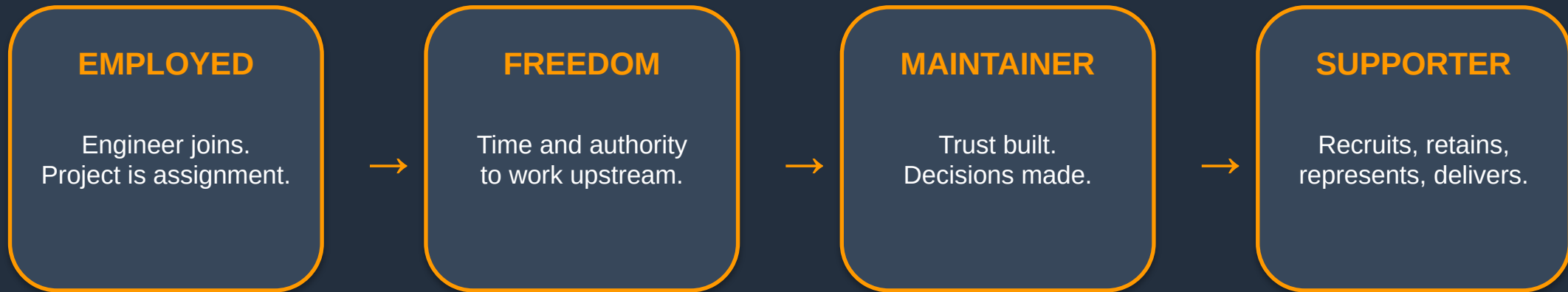
RETAIN — Maintainers with autonomy stay

REPRESENT — Trusted maintainer > press release

DELIVER — Upstream fixes in days, not quarters



The Flywheel



The software-defined vehicle will be built by maintainers.

The only question is whether any of them work for you.

Pay attention to the humans



Shift Down.

You don't downshift because you've lost control —
you downshift because you want power exactly where the road demands it.