

When roles don't fit

Some teams are too varied for fixed ladders. A small agency where everyone wears three hats, a research group, a startup where "the role" changes quarterly — forcing a junior/mid/senior forest onto teams like these produces a map nobody recognises.

The method bends without breaking. Drop the role structure, keep everything else:

Define trees as areas to follow, not rungs to climb. The trees still map real areas of knowledge — but instead of belonging to a role's ladder, they're a landscape on offer.

Let people build their character. Each member chooses which trees to take on, video-game style. One person goes deep on two trees; another spreads across four. The forest stops prescribing a single journey and starts recording each person's chosen one — which, for the right team, is dramatically more motivating.

Manage levels across the team. Coverage, gaps, single points of failure, honest levels, monthly reviews — every team-level read from later chapters still works. You're managing a portfolio of skills instead of progress along ladders, but the map stays true and the discipline stays the same.

What you give up is the crisp promotion mechanics of ranks — "ready for senior" needs some other definition, or the question simply matters less in such teams. What you keep is everything the map is for: knowing what the team can do, seeing risk early, and giving every person a visible, ordered way to grow.

Ranks are a feature of the method, not its foundation. The foundation is skills, honestly held, on a shared map.



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