FAILING WELL

A life in product management

Arun Rajappa

Clever Crow Publishing

CONTENTS

FOR PAPPA

Rajappa Ramamurthi

Apr 1938 - Jan 2022

Engineer, Dad, Hero

* * *

I wrote this book to honour my father

From whom I learnt that

Heroes are all around us:

They are the people who live their lives

In simplicity, honesty, kindness, and good humour

With a quiet courage, discipline, and willpower,

Earning the respect of those around them

By doing the right thing at all times
And showing us that we can be heroes too.

Pappa, completing the seniors run at Mumbai Marathon, 2014, age 76

DEDICATIONS

Rajiv, for caring deeply,

Prashant, for his teaching and friendship,

Mamma, for the good fights we had,

Pappa, for being my hero forever,

And to Kanchuki & Nika,

For love, and for a life worth living.

* * *
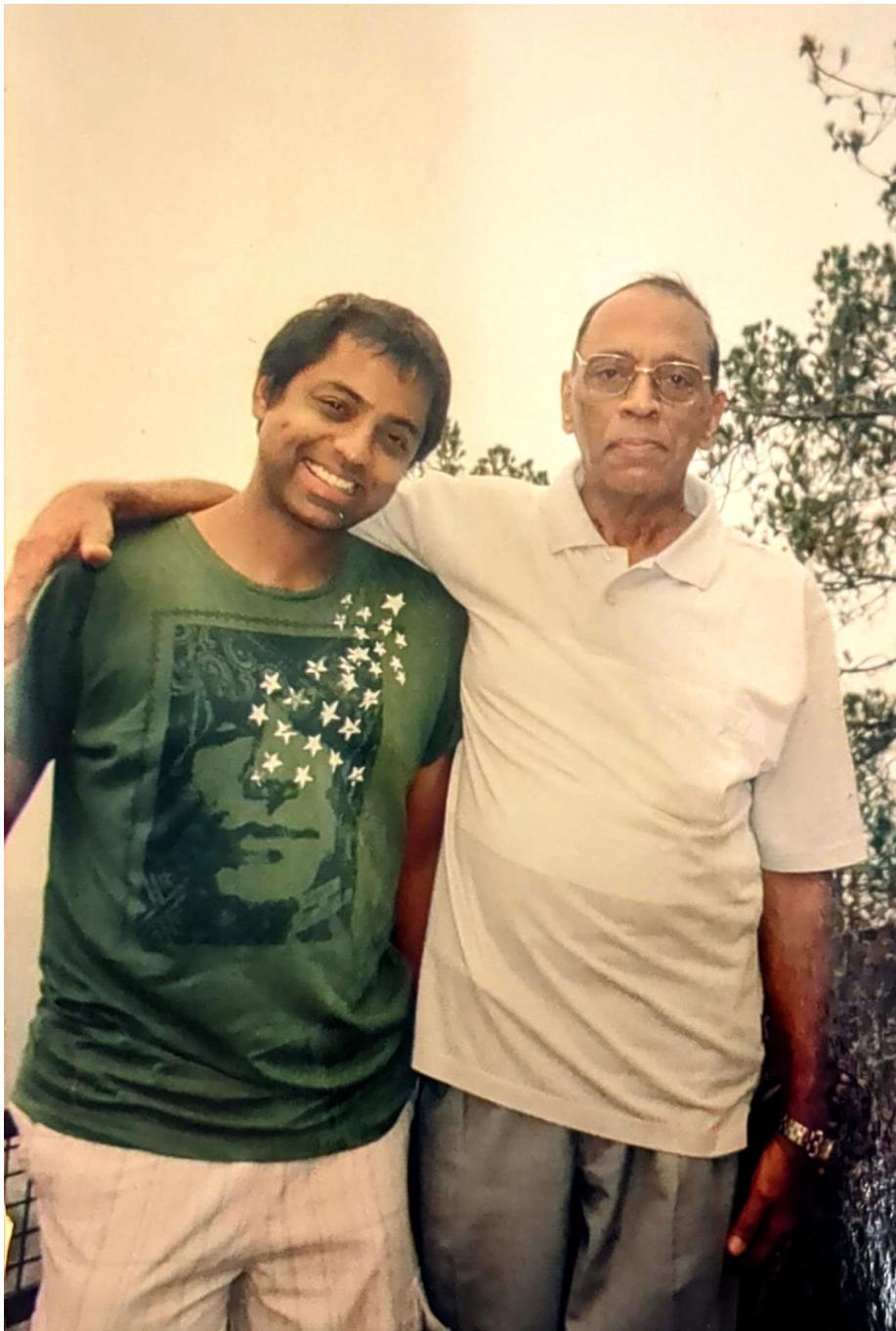
BOOK QUOTE

"All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire will be woken,
A light from the shadows will spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless shall again be king."
— *JRR Tolkien, Return of the King*

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FOREWORD

"A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty."
— Joan Didion, The Year of Magical Thinking

My world fell apart when my father died in January of '22. I had started at Google as Director of Product for Android and Play in August of '21, after

15 years at Microsoft. Two weeks later my father was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer.

My father was my hero. He was kind, gentle, and even-tempered. He had a wonderful sense of humour, loved treating us to movie outings and dinners at fancy restaurants, and enjoyed watching cricket. He had graduated as an engineer in the '50's in India, had done his masters from University of Missouri in the US after which he had worked there through the '60's and had returned to India – and married my mother – in 1970.

He was an engineer's engineer, a thorough professional, disciplined and detail-oriented, who grew into a well-respected CEO over the years. He had built, led, and grown companies, but you would never suspect that if you spoke to him, for he cared more about listening to others than about speaking of himself. He grew up vegetarian, disliked spicy food, ate little, was a teetotaller, didn't smoke, and didn't have any vices that I knew of. How could a person with such moderate tastes and tempers come down with cancer?

Cancer was not new to me. Over the past 12 years, my wife and I had lost her parents and my mother to cancer (kidney, stomach, and breast). We had cared for them through their treatment, seen them waste away to disease, and had laid them to rest. That was followed by two years of Covid-19 lockdown. In this time, I had forgotten how to smile, forgotten how to be playful, and forgotten how it was to have fun. I moved to Google, and to Bangalore, a new job and a new place, with a hope for new beginnings.

My father's unexpected diagnosis, followed by a few months of intense caregiving, and then his sudden passing in January '22 left my spirit broken. My wife and I came down with a bad case of Covid-19 the day after we cremated my father. My older brother had come down from the US for the

last rites but had to fly back in a hurry with Covid cases spiking across India. My wife and I stayed cloistered in our individual rooms for the next two weeks, my daughter in her own bedroom, each of us grieving alone, no family or friends to share our loss with.

I play-acted as normal for a few months after my father's loss, returning to work once I had recovered from Covid, trying to focus on my work. However, death stayed on my mind, with my brother's father-in-law and a dear uncle passing away over the next few months. It felt like the passing of an entire generation.

All this death and dying, and especially the loss of my father, left me unmoored. Though I was a middle-aged man, I felt orphaned. I was enveloped in dark thoughts. Life seemed pointless and without meaning. I stopped meeting anyone except my closest friends. I stopped going into work, and when I did go in, I couldn't bear to stay for more than a few hours. I went through my days with my chest tight, my breathing shallow, and my stomach cramped. I wallowed in self-pity, and gave in to maudlin sentimentality and silent tears, despite knowing that Death was part of Life. And over all of that, I put on a façade of normalcy.

This was a time when I failed badly. I failed badly at everything I have written about in this book. I stopped caring, stopped being curious, and stopped showing up for life. At work, I didn't do anything that was expected of me as a product manager: no roadmaps, prioritisation, communication, or alignment of plans. As a result, I didn't hold my team accountable for specifications, for the quality of the product, or for having a ship plan. It felt like the foundation on which I had built my life's work was crumbling away. I woke up many nights in a cold sweat, my heart pounding with anxiety.

When you are deep in a dark hole, you can't see success or even remember how it felt. You need to take on small things and Fail Well. Then, maybe, you can start to succeed at a few small things, and from there build up towards bigger wins.

Over the last few years I have worked on rebuilding my life. In the process of rebuilding, I have had the opportunity to re-examine the little things of life: my default positions, my biases, my work ethic, and what makes me tick.

I also had the chance to look closely at my life in product management: the many failures and the few wonderful successes that I had, and all the learnings through the years.

Writing these down is a way for me to get to the core of what I have learnt in building products, and to share it with the world as it may be useful to others too.

The book is also my way to honour my father. Thank you for reading.

Arun Rajappa, April 2024

<p align="center">* * *</p>

"I said: what about my eyes?
He said: Keep them on the road.
I said: What about my passion?
He said: Keep it burning.
I said: What about my heart?
He said: Tell me what you hold inside it?
I said: Pain and sorrow.
He said: Stay with it.
The wound is the place where the Light enters you."

— Rumi

* * *

FAILING WELL

"Failure after long perseverance is much grander than never having a striving good enough to be called a failure."
– George Eliot, Middlemarch

Product managers fail. They fail to discover what customers want, they fail to communicate a clear plan, they fail to build products that meet customer needs, they fail at go-to-market and growth, and they fail to learn and improve their products. It is a tough job.

> **ASIDE:** Throughout this book I use the words customer and user interchangeably, though I lean towards customer. There is a distinction, especially when building enterprise products: the customer is the one who pays and the user is the one who uses the product. In enterprise

products, often the customer is given preference to the user: this is the reason that enterprise products are so often difficult to use. While I prefer a user orientation, the term "user" seems derogatory to the human being who has such a rich life outside of using your product. Let me know if there is a better word!

However, there is a distinct difference between failing badly, like I was doing when I was down and out after my father's loss, and Failing Well.

A mentor of mine used to say, "You can build a plan to avoid failure, but success is all luck". I understand this better now.

Doing your best to avoid failure and yet failing is Failing Well.

Learning from failures and improving, and yet failing, is Failing Well.

However, not caring, not doing the work, not learning, and not growing – that's Failing Badly.

This book is all about Failing Well. Why did I write this book, apart from the need to write it for myself? There are countless books and newsletters that promise to teach you how to succeed as a product manager. There are innumerable podcasts where you can hear the success stories of others. But if success is indeed largely about luck, then what's more useful are the stories of failure, and what's more reliable are the mental models and tools to avoid failure.

Few people are comfortable in being vulnerable and sharing their failure stories. This doesn't mean they haven't failed: get enough beer into a group of product managers, and all you will hear are failure stories (of *friends* who failed!).

In this book I explore three categories of failure patterns in product management: Failing to Be, Failing to Do, and Failing to Have. Read on to know more…

What Is Failure?

(and why do product managers fail?)

Failure, in the context of product management, is to not fulfil a customer need. Sometimes it can be as simple as this…

Please <u>do not</u> turn off
the light switch.

It also operates the
elevator.

Thank You

… and sometimes it is more nuanced, like that of Zomato (a food delivery app in India), getting into trouble with this product launch recently.

I am sure a product manager in Zomato surveyed customers and found that a cohort of customers wanted a pure vegetarian delivery service only to find out after launch that in the complex food politics of India vegetarian customers would now be able to learn that their neighbours were getting delivery from the "red" Zomato and were eating non-vegetarian food. Zomato rolled back this launch shortly after launch.

Few product features or products are able to fulfil customer needs. Some come close: Amazon's 1-click purchase feature comes close to meeting the customers' need to complete their purchase fast, and WhatsApp comes close to meeting the customers' need to communicate with others in a free, fast, and reliable way.

Most products and product features fall well short of this. There are two main reasons that product managers do not fulfil their customers' needs:

change and trade-offs.

Change is the medium of work for product managers, just like code is the medium of work for software engineers. Customers' stated needs change, the market environment changes, product scope changes, engineering estimates change, partner teams commitments change, marketing requirements change, and so on. To be able to identify and navigate towards a deeper unchanging customer need while bringing along your team towards this vision requires clarity and will, and is difficult to do. Most product managers lose their way and choose the easier path of doing what is safe and known: and that will fail for sure.

The second reason that product managers fail is trade-offs. Moving a group of people towards solving a deeper customer need requires making good trade-offs, requires ruthless prioritisation, and requires sticky decision making. This is hard, and is even harder with a group of smart, talented individuals who may have a differing opinion from you on what will best meet the customer's needs, or worse, who may have completely different incentives. How do you prioritise customer needs if others in the group want to build a feature that will help them get promoted, or build a feature that will show up in an ad campaign? These are real challenges! Wanting to please the people around you and getting onto the slippery slope of not trading-off, and saying "Let's add that to the backlog!" is a sure way to not fulfil a customer need, and to fail as a product manager.

How To Fail Well?

Failing badly is outcome focused, filled with anxiety, racked by procrastination, silent to suggestions, and filled with fear. I have been there.

Failing well, on the other hand, is the opposite: focused on the process, filled with hope, energised with agency, open and adaptable to new ideas, and enveloped by safety. Failing well is grit, persistence, creativity, problem solving, risk-taking, flexibility, learning, and overcoming adversities. Failing well is the only way to succeed.

How should you build the capacity to fail well? Is it natural and can it be learnt? I believe that not only can failing well be learnt but that it is important to learn as each of us in our lives will go through phases of Failing Badly when the only way up and out is to not fall into the trap of chasing success but instead to go back to the good habits of Failing Well.

I have identified 3 broad areas of failure for product managers, with 6 anti-patterns in each area. Each anti-pattern has its own chapter.

The first area is Failing to Be. The 6 anti-patterns in this area are: failing to be attentive (caring), failing to be curious (empathy), failing to be an owner (agency), failing to be strategic (clarity), failing to be courageous (doing the right thing), and failing to be present (showing up). This is the most touchy-feely part of the book and the most important: without a good foundation in the "being" of product management, it is hard to master the other areas. Start here if you are an experienced product manager – or if you are a completely new product manager.

The second area is Failing to Do. The 6 anti-patterns in this area are: failing to do discovery (opportunity), failing to do planning (roadmaps), failing to do prioritisation (scope), failing to do communication (meetings), failing to do dependency management (alignment), and failing to do what you say (integrity). This section offers concrete examples for product managers. You can dip into this section as a mid-level product manager who is trying to solve a specific challenge.

The third area is Failing to Have. The 6 anti-patterns in this area are: failing to have PRDs (writing), failing to have meetings (execution), failing to have a sense of quality (dogfooding), failing to have a ship plan (shipping), failing to have learning systems (analytics and experimentation), and failing to have customer feedback (community). This section explores how a product manager works with their teams. You can read each chapter here independently to strengthen your foundations in product management.

Each chapter has stories and examples from my life in product management. I have changed names and details that are sensitive. The intention of each chapter is to understand the type of failure, explore what failing well would mean in the context, and offer concrete tips and suggestions on how to deal with a similar situation that you may be going through. I hope reading this helps you in your product management journey!

THE PRODUCTS I WORKED ON

"... Whatever good or bad fortune that may come our way we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value." — Herman Hesse

T hroughout this book I reference the products that I worked on as a product manager. I share details of what I got wrong, what I learnt, and what I could have done better. This section is a recap of the products that I worked on, including the context in which the work was done, the customer needs that drove my work, and what happened to each product.

I started my career in program management (as product management was called back then at Microsoft) in 2003 after graduating from business school. The product I got to work on first was Outlook Connector, or as it was officially named, Microsoft Office Outlook Connector 2003 ©! Looking back, it was a great first product to work on. I was the single Product Manager for the product in India, part of a close-knit team of 15 engineers and testers, reporting to a product unit manager (PUM). The idea of Outlook Connector was to allow people to use Outlook as their email client for the Hotmail service, and not just limited to the Exchange server that Outlook traditionally connected with. This was bundled as part of a Hotmail upgrade, where you could buy 100 MB of additional storage and get Outlook Connector for $29.95/mo.

And then, GMail launched – unlimited, free email from Google. This was my first encounter with the pace of change of the market, where our product went from being strategic to irrelevant overnight. That said, we **Failed Well** on Outlook Connector: the customer need that people wanted to use Outlook as their email client for more that just work email was "true", and we built a high quality product that allowed users to work with their email, calendar, tasks, and notes on Outlook.com (that Hotmail was rebranded to, after going through Start.com and Live.com). The testament to the fact that this insight was right was that Outlook Connector became a feature of Outlook, and our code is still around and is the way that Outlook connects to Outlook.com with millions of users still using the feature daily.

After working on Outlook Connector for a few years I moved to Seattle in 2005 to work on Office Live. Office Live was Microsoft's first dip of the toe into modern online services focused on Small and Medium Businesses, and a precursor to the hugely successful Microsoft 365. As one of the first product managers on Office Live I got to work on large parts of the product and I

learnt a lot in the time that I was there. I felt the excitement of shipping a version 1 service, working on user sign-up, the user landing page, member centre, CRM, and much more. I continued on Office Live through the growth phase where we grew both the number of subscribers and the number of people working on the team. And then I saw the decline as Office Live battled internal headwinds and inertia in moving to the cloud from Microsoft Office that led to the eventual sunset of Office Live. That was when I moved back to India. We *Failed Well* on Office Live: some of the people who worked on Office Live went on to sow the seeds of Microsoft 365, and some became the early engineers on Microsoft Azure. It was one of the finest teams I have worked on!

After moving back to India in 2009 I worked for a while on Office Live and then briefly on Microsoft SharePoint. I then moved from the Office division to Windows, as Group Product Manager for the deeply technical Caching product. The reason this was interesting was that the Windows Server cache team was trying to stand up caching as a service as part of Windows Azure (as Microsoft Azure was called then). The customer need was that customers who were building their websites and web services on Windows Azure would need a caching service, and that we would repurpose the Windows Server cache product to provide that capability as part of Windows Azure. Here too, like with Outlook Connector, we read the market wrong. We launched the cache service with the highest tier at 256 MB cache for $200/mo. Two days later Amazon AWS launched 1 Terabyte memcached hosted cache for $40/mo. We *Failed Well* on Windows Azure Cache: Amazon's announcement helped us focus on cost and performance, and created clarity for the team. However, Microsoft eventually chose to host Redis to provide caching instead of building on top of Windows Server cache.

After working on Windows Azure Cache for about a year, I moved back to the Office division. Shortly after that I left Microsoft to work on my own start-up – Twyst. At Twyst I went back to my software engineering roots learning web and mobile app development from scratch. At the time when we started Twyst, Groupon was doing well and was successful at helping businesses with customer acquisition. However, Groupon was all about deep discounts, and our thesis was that deep discounts were unsustainable, and were less than ideal, since they weren't driving the kind of traffic that would visit those places without the discount. Twyst, in contrast, was about retention rewards, with lower discounts from merchants who were looking to retain their most loyal customers. It seemed like a win-win: merchants having better margins and loyal customers getting rewarded for loyalty. Did we Fail Well at Twyst? I learnt a lot about starting up at Twyst, but I am not sure we Failed Well. We read the market wrong: customers cared much more about finding a restaurant to eat at (Discovery) and about ordering in food (Ordering) than they cared about discounts. Discounts could be tagged on to a Discovery service or an Ordering service, but could not be the head of the service. Today, you see discounts for ordering in or eating out in apps like Zomato and Swiggy. We should have pivoted to ordering in Twyst (I was opposed to this), or we should have held out till we got acquired by a Zomato or a Swiggy (we didn't). I personally got a lot wrong during Twyst and failed poorly in many ways; the biggest personal failures for me at Twyst were around clarity and communication.

After Twyst I moved back to Microsoft as a Group Product Manager for Mobile Incubations, with a focus on India. This was in 2015, and the next 4 years were a roller coaster ride of incubating many different mobile apps, picking Kaizala as the one incubation to scale, scaling it – and then going through what felt like crashing and burning in flames. On the Mobile

Incubations team, we did really good work on generating customer insights and identifying customer needs and having good solutions for those needs. We spent a lot of time on user research, and met with many small businesses in India that were "mobile only" to understand their needs. From that, we identified 3 distinct opportunities: helping businesses manage their customer leads on their smartphones (Aloha), helping businesses create brochures, pamphlets and other creatives on their smartphones (Sprightly), and helping businesses manage work with their fieldworkers and gig workers using chat (Kaizala). Of these 3, we saw an initial hockey stick with Kaizala and started to focus on this as our scaled opportunity. Over the next 2 years we scaled the number of users on Kaizala, and also scaled up the team, growing from 5 people on the team to over a 100. However, while we were working on the insight that businesses in India were using chat on WhatsApp to get work done, and that there could be a better alternative, another part of Microsoft was working on the insight that start-ups were using chat on Slack to get work done. In 2018, things came to a head, with Kaizala seeing strong growth in India, and Microsoft doubling down on Teams worldwide. Though Teams was not replacing WhatsApp in businesses (which Kaizala was), the overlap was significant, and there couldn't be two chat apps from Microsoft. We Failed Well on mobile incubations and Kaizala, identifying customer needs, building products that satisfied those needs, scaling up, having a GTM plan, being scrappy about marketing and sales, and even discovering a business model. I did my best work as a product manager during this time, with a team filled with fantastic engineers, designers, and product managers. It was exhilarating!

In 2019, I moved into a Director of Product role at Microsoft, leading multiple product teams across Emerging Markets, Microsoft 365, and Microsoft Teams. It was a strange new role for me, with many people

reporting to me, and my feeling removed from the user insights, the solution building, and the thick of product management, all during the anxiety of Covid–19. Though I was successful by traditional Microsoft parameters, I felt deeply unsatisfied and anxious.

I left Microsoft to join Google as Director of Product for Android and Play in India in 2021. This was the time that I lost my father, and fell into a deep, dark hole. Through the support I had in Google and from my family, I managed to get back on my feet with a fresh perspective and a desire to work on something new.

In the last 2 years I have moved into a different, energising role as Country Manager for RIOT Games in India & South Asia. To be representing League of Legends, VALORANT, Teamfight Tactics and other loved games in the region is a privilege! The role has offered me the opportunity to go back to learning: learning about the gaming industry, learning about our players, learning about games publishing, and learning about leading a full business unit.

Looking back at my career in product management, I went deep on 4 products, building from zero to one, working across versions and scaling up, and dealing with multiple complexities and challenges: Outlook Connector, Office Live, Windows Azure Cache, and Mobile Incubations + Kaizala. These were also the four teams I had the most fun on, and the times I learnt and grew the most. These were the products that I Failed Well on as a product manager. I will pick from these four products through the rest of the book for my stories and examples.

ASIDE: A note on spellings

I have opted for British spellings throughout this book. So, don't be confused when you see centre instead of center, or enrol instead of enroll, or colour instead of color!

FAILING TO BE

"Become who you were born to be" — Elrond to Aragorn, Return of the King, JRR Tolkien

Each day we live in a default state of being that is accumulated from culture, traditions, and our formative years of growing up. Till a few years ago I thought of myself as being cool, flexible, and free of bias.

It was only after my father's passing, when I went through a time of intense self-examination and introspection, that I realised that I held several strong positions so hard-wired that they were invisible to me. My feelings towards money, happiness, gender, politics, self-expression, and learning were all hardened and kept me trapped in the same patterns of thought and action. This realisation came with a shock and a painful openness followed. This was the

first step towards a transformation that I am still working on. The wall of ideas that held me captive are yet being torn down.

Through this process of self-examination, I realised that transformation – or **becoming** – starts with confronting your existing being and seeing the possibility of what else you can become, and seeing who you can be and then operating out of that new being.

In this section we examine the space of Being for product managers: being attentive, being curious, being an owner, being strategic, being courageous, and being present. Transforming and adopting these as your new default ways of being will accelerate your journey in product management and also give you access to a new space to create from.

FAILING TO BE ATTENTIVE

Also known as Caring

"If you take care of the small things, the big things will take care of themselves. You can gain more control over your life by paying closer attention to the little things."
— Emily Dickinson

Story

After losing my father, when I was going through the darkest phase in my life, I stopped caring. I stopped caring about my product, I stopped caring about my team, and worst of all, I stopped caring for myself. Too much caregiving had broken my spirit. I was careworn with loss and death. A

deep grief and bone-numbing anxiety meant that I could not be attentive to the words and wants of the people closest to me.

The only work that I was able to do with some attention was to meet customers. Being on the road and meeting people who used Android for entertainment or productivity is one of the things that helped me get out of the funk that I was in. Caring about users was ingrained in me as a long-time product manager, and going to meet users rekindled the attention, curiosity, and joy that comes from seeing people use what you've worked on.

Understanding Caring

Caring is at the heart of product management. Good product managers care deeply. They care about customers, they care about design, they care about engineering, they care about the feedback, and they care about the details. The best product managers not only care deeply, but care slowly, in a relaxed and calm way, with a light touch that includes others and makes them also care. They don't let their deep caring translate into impatience, hurry, or anxiety.

Caring leads to everything that I've written about in this book. Curiosity, agency, clarity, courage, showing up, discovery, planning, communication, quality, community all flow from the fount of caring.

Caring is foundational. It is a be-all and end-all. It is unreasonable, and reasonless. Caring is a way of being.

> **ASIDE: Who is Rajiv?**
>
> What amazed me when I got to know Rajiv, one of the people to whom this book is dedicated, and the managing director of Microsoft India, is how much he cared for everything.

He cared about the smallest details: about the quality of the T-shirt holiday swag, about wobbly chairs in meeting rooms, and about whiteboard markers that didn't work.

To care about these trivialities should not be the managing director's job; or is caring deeply what the job is all about?

What I observed is that caring gave him energy, and in paying attention to and being present for the details he generated energy for even more caring.

You will see me refer to Rajiv through examples in this book: he remains a fantastic mentor, and I learnt a lot from working with him.

Since caring is so core one might wonder if the ability to care so deeply is inborn or whether it can be cultivated. Unequivocally, not only can caring can be cultivated, it must be cultivated: and the way to do that is through attention.

How To Build Muscle For Caring?

"Attention is the beginning of devotion"
— Mary Oliver

Becoming a person with slow, deep caring begins by paying attention. However, our attention is at threat. Our attention has become more fractured and fragmented, with notifications and interruptions impairing us from paying attention for more than a few moments at a time. Our attention is also robbed from us by content and formats that promote addiction. Unlimited streaming content, multiple screens, work from home, and multi-tasking puts more

strain on our already threadbare attention spans. How can one regain a sense of ownership over one's own attention?

The path to build attention is age-old and well-known. However, like most wisdom, it is easier to know than to practice. Cultivating attention – in a rather self-defined way – requires a daily practice of sitting down and paying attention. The good news is that you can start small, and you can start now.

Sitting down is meditation. Sitting down and doing nothing (you can observe your breath if you wish) is the best way to give your brain a rest, and give it some time to unplug, cool down and heal. When I was at my lowest, I could not sit: I used to walk about restlessly, or lie down listlessly in bed. I would be distracted in meetings, doodling on my notebook, blanking out, or scrolling through YouTube reels when it was an online meeting. Sitting still with my eyes closed felt like torture and my breath would start to catch in my throat and chest.

I had to start small, sitting for 2 minutes and observing my raggedy old breath. And in just these few minutes of sitting I would feel calm, refreshed, and catch a glimpse of peace. Over time, I was able to sit and for longer in silence, observing the in and out of my breath. This building up of attention during meditation flowed over to all parts of my life in a natural way, and soon I found that I had regained my capacity to slow down and pay attention to what was happening around me. I was able to feel the sunlight on the nape of my neck, smell the rain in the air, and see the beauty of the sky. I was also able to stay engaged in meetings, notice bugs in my product, and ask relevant questions in design discussions. Through attention I had found access to caring. As I practiced sitting down more, I found that I could stay in attention for even longer and was able to at times break through into a state of flow, when time slows down and tasks get done magically without any stress or

anxiety. Sitting down in silence was transformative for me, and is a wonderful practice.

> **ASIDE:** I use the Plum Village & Prana Breathing apps to help me with my meditation. The book "Still the Mind" by Alan Watts is a classic. Whatever you may choose, consistency is key.

Starting small and being consistent is important to kick-start the virtuous cycle of attention and caring. Sit for 2 minutes and observe your breath, care for your breath. Enjoy the sitting, it is your bit of downtime. Sit daily, and let the time you sit increase naturally, without any pressure to sit for longer. Let the power of compounding do its magic and help you deepen your attention. Let the attention that you cultivate during sitting translate spontaneously to caring for all aspects of your life.

The peace that you will experience in sitting, the calm that you will experience with an increased attention span, and the joy that you will experience from the state of flow when the details all make sense and the work gets done magically by itself will keep you coming back to the meditation.

Challenges To Caring — And The Solution

There are many reasons why we fail to be attentive, and why we fail to care. However, the solution to all of these is the same.

1. Distractions and interruptions: If we haven't built the muscle for attention, it can easily be kidnapped by distractions and interruptions. Modern technologies and media with notifications and viral videos make paying attention hard; however, this is not a new problem. Before the smartphone, the internet, the television, the radio, and the book (all criticized

for robbing people of attention), we had our thoughts to be distracted by, be interrupted by, and get lost in. In giving in to distractions and interruptions, we allow our attention to be fragmented, and are not able to wholly give ourselves to any task, thus not caring well for the task at hand. Meditation allows us to build the awareness and resilience to bring our attention back to what we are trying to accomplish when we are interrupted or distracted, rather than trying to avoid being distracted or interrupted (which would be an exercise in futility).

2. Busy-ness, or being in a hurry: Through my career I have seen a lot of senior leaders who were always in a hurry: the tech industry seems to be filled with them. They were called "passionate", or "A-type personalities", and they spoke fast and were excited, and used the word "Awesome" a lot! Naturally, I emulated them, and tried to speak fast and be in a hurry, and was always busy. It took me a long time to realise that doing things fast is different from doing them well, much like the quote by Mark Twain about "If I had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter". In giving in to busy-ness and being in a hurry, we gloss over the details (caring is in the details!), we cut-short conversations, and we move on before completing anything well. Meditation allows us to cultivate mindfulness through which we can become aware of our hurry and can make the conscious choice to slow down and return to attention.

3. Mind-fullness, or having too many things on your mind: Earlier, I used to think you had to choose a few things to care for, and that caring for everything meant caring for nothing at all. However, as I observed people who care deeply and well, I noticed that they care for everything, but attend only to one thing at a time. They have a mental flexibility and focus to be caring and yet be focused on the task at hand. Many of us are in the opposite

camp, of attending to everything, and caring for nothing at all! We have too many things on our mind, and are already thinking about the next five tasks when we are doing the first. Our mind-fullness stops us from paying attention to what we are doing, and caring well for it. Meditation helps us move from mind-fullness to mindfulness. Mindfulness helps us cultivate the ability to focus on one thing at a time, while pushing everything else that you care for to the background. Mindfulness also allows us to cultivate flexibility about how long we devote to tasks. Too many of us are stuck in the tyranny of calendar boundaries of 30-minute or 1-hour long meetings, and either end a conversation before reaching a conclusion or waste time in meetings after a conclusion has been reached. Mindfulness allows us to give a whole day to do something or as little as 10 minutes, and to give each task the time that is needed to do it well, with attention and care.

4. Hurt, or being stuck in the past: I struggled to move on after the loss of my parents, for whom I cared deeply. I struggled equally to move on after Kaizala was sunset, a product that I cared deeply for. I have heard stories from many product managers of their product being cancelled the day before launch, or launching a product and then having to shut it down within a year. How can one care deeply for something, and then let go and move on when it is over? It is impossible to care for what is in the present if you are stuck in the past and wedded to your hurt. For me, my meditation practice helped me see that I was holding on too tightly to the past, and that I wanted the present to be exactly as the past was. While we all know that change is constant, it was in meditation that I was able to go deeper and sense the truth of impermanence. I could see that letting go and moving on didn't mean that one stopped caring; on the contrary, it allowed one to honour the past and continue to care for it in a fresh, new way in the present. This book is an example of that in action: it is a way for me to honour my father and continue

to care for him in the present, without holding on to the idea that he should be here now as he used to be.

5. Worry, or anxiety about the future: Worry is the opposite of hurt. While hurt keeps you stuck in the past, worry keeps you stuck in the future. It is impossible to care for what is in the present if you are stuck in the future and wedded to your worry. What is ironic is that the people who worry will insist that their worry is a sign that they care, rather than recognizing that it is what stops them from paying attention and caring well. Building products can be nerve-wracking, with having to make tough decisions under incomplete information, and the constant shadow of making irreversible choices and getting things wrong. However, painting doomsday scenarios of the future and dwelling in anxiety does not make the decision making any easier. Meditation allows us to confront our anxiety, quiet the irrational fears about the unknown future, pay attention to the work that needs doing in the present, and take action in the here and now.

Care For Your Customers

The goal of product management is to shape products that make customers successful (I use customers and users interchangeably through the book). To do this, one must care deeply for your customers' needs and pay close attention to how customers buy and use your product.

How does one care for customers? Here are the five steps I have found useful in caring for customers:

1. Meet your customers (where they are): Caring for customers starts with being on the road and meeting customers frequently. Further, it is important to meet customers where they are. At Microsoft I often heard the story of how

Satya surprised the Silicon Valley start-ups when he became CEO by going to meet them: no previous Microsoft CEO had paid so much to start-ups in Silicon Valley, and they felt that Microsoft had never really cared for them. Meeting, listening to, and caring for customers in their context is one of the ways in which Satya transformed Microsoft: it is the best way to learn about your users' needs, and the best way to serve them well.

2. Listen to your customers: Caring for customers means listening to your customers: what they state as their challenges, the input they give you before you build your product, and the feedback they provide after using your product. Your job as a product manager is to listen to all of this customer input and use it to guide your product decisions. Too often, in listening to customers we listen only to what we want to hear: we filter out the bad, we broadcast the good, and we amplify the product capabilities that we want to build. So, listening slowly, deeply, and with a trained researcher at hand who can not only take notes but check your hearing later is the way to listen to customers.

3. Look at the data: What customers say and what they do are often different. Looking at the data to understand where customers drop-off, what customer jobs and journeys are challenging for users to complete, and where users spend more time is also caring for customers. By looking at the data you understand and address the challenges that customers struggle to articulate, and help customers be more successful. However, only looking at data or only meeting customers is never sufficient: both inform and improve each other. By meeting customers, you can get ideas of what data to look at; by looking at the data, you can get ideas of what questions to ask customers when you meet them. Do both to care for your customers well.

4. Go from "a customer" to "our customers": As a product manager, you need to care for all your present and future customers: not just a particular customer. To care for all your customers, you must meet existing customers, potential new customers, and people who will never use your product, abstract their different and disparate needs, and synthesise all the information into a single product roadmap. If you spend all your attention focusing on only one customer, or only your existing customers, you lose the opportunity to serve all the people who can benefit from the product you are building with so much thought and care.

5. Close the loop: To care for customers well, you need to close the loop on the feedback and inputs that customers give you: whether you are acting upon the input, and (more importantly) if you are not. You do not need to, in fact, you must not, act upon every piece of customer input or feedback you receive. However, as a product manager, it is your responsibility to respond to each piece of input and complete the conversation with customers on the input they provided. Closing the loop is the way you show respect for your customers.

Just like with meditation, caring for customers is something you can start small, and do daily. Meet 1 customer if you can't meet a hundred. Listen to a customer support call. Respond to a piece of feedback on the app store. Carve out 15 minutes daily to look at customer data, or to look at customer feedback.

Get started. Don't wait. Perfect is the enemy of good, especially in caring for customers. You will discover that once you've started caring for customers and paying attention to their needs, you find more purpose and joy in your work, you start to care more for your product, and the difficult decisions become easier to make.

Caring for customers will completely transform you as a product manager.

Care For Your Product

As a product manager, you are responsible for a part or whole of a product (or multiple products). In spending our days writing specifications, planning for the next release, or in meetings with engineering and design, it is easy to miss the reason that most of us took on the job in the first place: the creative rush and joy of building products. There are three steps I have found useful in caring for products and keeping this joy of building products intact:

1. Know the details: The reason your product is the way it is — with bugs and warts and all — is not because of the incompetence of others, but because of tough choices that were made by other competent people. This can be especially hard to recognize when you become the product manager for an existing product that has been in the market for a while. Learning the history of decisions made, respecting earlier choices made, and taking full responsibility for all past and present product decisions is the first step in improving the product. Even if you are a product manager for a new product, there will be tough decisions made because of constraints and challenges. Knowing the details of your product and being able to represent the decisions made is an important way to respect and care for your product.

2. Use your product daily: While we examine dogfooding in greater detail later in the book, suffice to say that using your product daily is the best way to care for it. If you are able to bring your attention and a beginner's mind to using your product, you will benefit greatly, and face the same challenges that your customers face. Through using your product daily, you will understand what changes you must make to improve your product. When you use your product from its early days, when it is buggy and doesn't have all the polish

and capabilities you want it to have, and then you use it as it improves and becomes better, you will develop a deep caring for what you are creating.

3. **Be an ambassador for your product:** It is your product: show it off, and celebrate it! Many times, especially early in a product's life, you may feel embarrassed to talk about or show off your product. What if people scoff, or even worse, what if there is no reaction? Never mind. It is your product, and you can't help but talk about it all the time! Let the joy you have in creating something new spill out of you, and tell everyone about it. Being an ambassador for your product is a wonderful way to care for what you are building.

Care For Yourself

"If you get tired, learn to rest, not to quit"
— Banksy

Product management can be all consuming. Earlier in my career, I used to tell people that as a product manager I have a day-job and a night-job: in the day-job, I am an energetic optimistic person who meets customers, writes specifications, and make decisions to move the product forward, and in the night-job, I am an anxiety-ridden pessimist, tossing and turning in bed worrying if any of the decisions I made are right, and if customers will ever use the product we are building. I wore my workaholism and sleeplessness as a badge of honour of caring deeply for the product, not seeing that this was doing damage both to my product and to my own well-being.

Over time, I saw that the best product managers are like athletes. Athletes know that to have peak performance over many years is an outcome of taking care of one's health, consistent training, high quality rest and relaxation, and

rejuvenation and reinvention. They also know that success is not an individual pursuit, and that having the right team to support you is essential to achieve one's goals. Let us examine each of these in the context of product management:

1. Taking care of one's health: There is a tremendous amount of research linking health with performance. Do not ignore this, and create the time to focus on your health early in your career. Over time, and after much experimentation and trying many fads, I've settled on keeping it simple: eat healthy (less carbs and sugar, eat more vegetables, drink water, avoid alcohol), exercise daily (walk, yoga, tennis), and sleep well (I get about 6 hours at night, and I take an afternoon nap!). I turn to meditation for my mental and emotional wellbeing.

2. Consistent training: Product managers need to understand customers and stay current about the latest in tech. In the last year, I spent time understanding the needs of Gen Alpha users, researched the advances in autonomous driving technology, went down the Web3 rabbit-hole, and got into using Obsidian in a big way. I did these on my own time, and out of my own interests and enthusiasm. Doing this over the years has helped me understand the evolving needs of users. Find time to read, research, dabble, and tinker with emergent tech, the latest design patterns, and the evolving needs of customers. This is how product managers train.

3. High quality rest and relaxation: Scheduling daily downtime and relaxed weekends are important to recovering from the anxieties and challenges you will face in your job. Find time to unplug daily, and to have restful weekends. The quality of your rest and relaxation matters: drinking, binge-watching Netflix, and doom-scrolling Twitter are not restful for me. I have found that aimless conversations with friends, reading a good book, and

cooking while listening to music help me relax deeply. Discover your own ways to rest and relax well during your downtime.

4. **Rejuvenation and reinvention:** While consistent training helps you stay abreast of the latest trends, taking time to examine the longer arc of history and thinking about how you want to participate and contribute towards deeper change is important to rejuvenation and reinvention. Taking a few weeks of vacation each year and a sabbatical every few years is a good way to do this. In this time, I travel to new places, re-read the classics, and journal what I have accomplished and what I would like to do: this has helped me rejuvenate and recommit to what I am working on, or reinvent myself in the direction of what I would like to commit to anew.

5. **Build your support team:** Early in my career, I was proud of the fact that I was doing well and growing in my product management career without any guidance. However, I recognize that this was a mistake. The best product managers cultivate mentors, allies, and sponsors to assist them. A mentor is someone in your organisation but outside your team who can guide you on how to approach organisational challenges and help you brainstorm product approaches. An ally is someone on your team who can watch out for you and provide candid feedback and input. A sponsor is an executive in the organisation who can nudge along the initiatives you want to take. Thinking about, and building these connections, can go a long way in getting the help you need to perform well. In addition to these, later in career, a coach can add immense value in helping you think through your approach to leadership and growth. A good support team can help you avoid failures, and help you bounce back faster when you do fail.

FAILING TO BE CURIOUS

Also known as Empathy

"Wisdom begins in Wonder" — Socrates

Story

One of the mobile incubations that I led product management for when I went back to Microsoft was called Connections. Connections was a lightweight mobile only customer management solution for very small businesses, including *kirana* (grocery) stores, salons, plumbers, electricians, and so on. We noticed that most such businesses in India made note of their conversations with customers in a physical paper notebook, and when the

customer would call back with a query – say, to check about the order they had placed – the owner would scramble, looking through the notebook till they found the relevant notes that helped them remember the promise they had made to the customer.

We wanted to make this easier to manage, using a smartphone. Our solution was a pop-up that came up during and after your phone calls, where you could take a photo or type a note of the conversation, along with setting a reminder; the next time you got a call from the same phone number, the note would pop-up and you would be able to easily review the previous conversations you had with the customer.

We started to beta test the Android app with a small group of small businesses in early 2016, and we observed something curious. We saw that the engagement with the app in the first few weeks was high, and a large number of notes were being taken by users. Then, we saw that the usage for most of our users started to drop. Now, the curious thing was that when we spoke to users, they said they loved the app! The feedback was positive, and people said that the app was useful for them, as it helped them remember the promises they had made to their customers. However, as the weeks went by, we saw that our new user cohorts were active, and old cohorts became inactive, even though our old users continued to tell us that they loved the product.

Given that our new users were using the product, and our old users still liked the product, I made the decision (despite the warning bells) to come out of beta and launch the product. Over the next 6 months, we saw organic growth for the product through word-of-mouth recommendations, a high app store rating of 4.6, and yet this persistent half-life of users of 3 to 4 weeks, with older cohorts' usage dropping off.

What was going on? It was inexplicable! We continued to speak to users and asked them if they were taking notes and viewing the notes, and all of them promised that they were using the app regularly, eyes slanted! Our aggregate metrics showed that note taking was dropping, but not one user told us why. What was even worse, most of our users told us that they liked the product and that they recommended it to their friends, even though we sensed that they were not using it themselves.

We continued to meet users, and finally had a breakthrough when one user nailed it with what she said (which I remember after all these years!). She said, "Connections is great if I am good" – that is, the product gave back value if she was disciplined about taking notes after each customer conversation, which she found more tedious to do on the smartphone, and so she reverted to her notebook. The gratification for taking a note was the next time the user called – and who knew if they would call? It was just easier to note it down on paper… There was a sense of guilt at not doing something that she knew would be valuable, which is why most people were not owning up to not taking notes. However, everybody felt that someone else could benefit from it, and so they continued to recommend the app!

We realised then that we had built the equivalent of a gym membership. It was something that people used for the first few days; when asked, they promised that they still used it; they knew that it was good for them, but the effort threshold was too high: and they heartily recommended it to others.

This insight helped us come to the conclusion that Connections could not survive in its current form, despite the capabilities we were adding to it. We decided to sunset Connections and focus our efforts on another of the mobile incubations, Kaizala, which was seeing hockey-stick growth. While the decision was hard for the team, it was not a difficult one to make: through our

curiosity we had come to understand the DNA of the product that constrained it from ever being a breakout success. I wonder what would have happened without the curiosity to find out: the worse outcome would have been to continue our investments into a product that never scaled despite its popularity and high ratings.
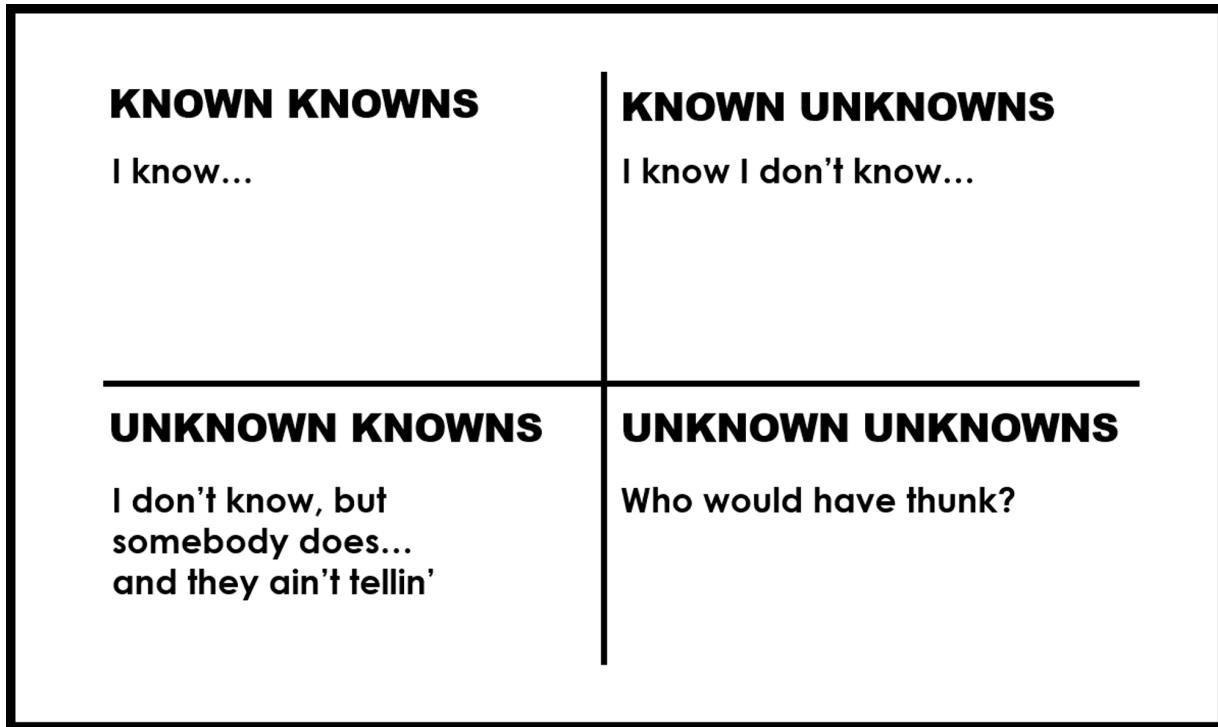
Understanding Curiosity

Curiosity is the way to build empathy: it is impossible to become empathetic without first caring to understand the particular context and challenges of the people around you. Now, the way to understand someone else's context and challenges is by being curious, asking questions, and listening to both what people say and what they don't say in response to your questions.

Listening attentively and reflecting on what people say and what they don't say over multiple conversations and with several people will create a tapestry of understanding and insight about the human condition, making you more empathetic, kind, and patient towards everyone around you.

ASIDE: My mother was filled with questions. She would pepper me with questions about my day when I got back from school, would interrogate every new person we met about their history and background, and would be the first person to stand up and ask a question at any talk we went to (I would cringe in embarrassment!). She would keep nudging me to ask more questions, asking me, "What questions did you ask at school today?", nodding appreciatively with "That was a good question" or more often "You should ask more questions, better questions". Her favourite aphorism was "*Vaay il irruku vazhi*", translating to "Inside your mouth is the way": meaning that only by asking questions could you forge a path forward.

Now, below is a familiar mental model to many people, that of known knowns, known unknowns, unknown knowns, and unknown unknowns.

KNOWN KNOWNS	KNOWN UNKNOWNS
I know…	I know I don't know…
UNKNOWN KNOWNS	**UNKNOWN UNKNOWNS**
I don't know, but somebody does… and they ain't tellin'	Who would have thunk?

For the things that you know that you don't know, there are books that you can study, classes you can take, and people you can speak with to learn and move this to a known-known. For the things that you don't know that you know, it is by speaking with friends and mentors and self-reflection that you come to the realisation that you know and this moves to a known-known.

How does one access the unknown unknown, the vast area of things that you don't know that you don't know? It is by asking good questions that don't have answers — the questions that hang in the air in front of you and shimmer with the possibility of bringing forth new understanding in the world — it is through such questions and the quest to finding the answer to such questions do we access the unknown unknown to transform the world. Such questions, the best of all questions, are called inquiries. Inquiries are open-ended, they are "What if?" questions, they are "How would it be if …?" questions,

"What does it look like if …?" questions. The answer to an inquiry may take many years and could be a life-long quest for a person and an inter-generational one for a society.

ASIDE: When I worked on the mobile incubations at Microsoft, we had a powerful inquiry that guided us along our journey: "What does productivity mean for a mobile only user?". To understand why this inquiry was so powerful, it is important to understand the context: we were part of the Microsoft Office team and in 2015 "productivity" at Microsoft was synonymous with Word, Excel, and PowerPoint on a desktop-PC, with the smartphone being at best a companion device. The inquiry was controversial, for it started with the fact that there were hundreds of million mobile-only users for whom Microsoft Office was not relevant, and yet who were productive and used the smartphone in ways that helped them get work done. When we asked this question, we had no idea of what the answer was. Putting the question out and acknowledging that we hadn't the faintest idea was powerful: it meant we could take the next step, of meeting mobile-only users, asking questions of them to understand how they used the smartphone, which then informed the products that we built. Asking the question opened up a sea of possibilities that didn't exist for us before the question was asked: till then productivity for us meant Word, Excel, and PowerPoint.

Starting with an inquiry, and then following your nose to find out the answer to the inquiry by meeting people, doing research, looking at data, and asking more questions: that is how research is done, it is what sparks innovation, and it is how paradigms shift. It all starts with an inquiry.

How To Build Muscle For Curiosity?

How should one get curious? There are 3 ingredients for curiosity: asking a good question, letting the unanswered question create the interest in you to discover more, and having the time to follow what you discover and integrate what you are learning into a coherent whole.

Asking good questions is hard. To take an example, a question like "What is the capital of India?" has a definite and known answer. The answers to these questions can be found a search away. A question like "What are the causes of global warming?" is better since there is no definite answer: but the question can still be answered to a sufficient degree of completeness through reading and research. Now, a question like "How would India change if Mumbai became the capital?" or a question like "What would life on Earth be like if average temperatures went up by 5 degrees Celsius?" are open-ended questions with no correct answers, and they can provoke creative responses.

Once you have such a question — an Inquiry — let this hang out in front of you without attempting to answer it. Let the question turn into an itch in your mind, something that you feel the need to scratch, let a genuine interest arise in you. As this happens, you will automatically start to have further questions on how to address the inquiry: who should I speak to, what should I read, what I should learn that will help me answer the question, and so forth. Once you start to answer some of these questions, you will start to discover more questions to ask. Say you learn that the polar ice-caps would melt if temperatures went up by 5 degrees Celsius, the natural next question may be to think, "Hmm, that may affect our coastal areas: I wonder which cities would be submerged?".

Following the trail of discoveries can be fascinating, and can take time. "Oh, Mumbai would be underwater in 15 years if average temperatures went up

by 5 degrees Celsius, I wonder what that would do to India's economy...", and then you are off chasing that rabbit. As you chase these different leads, you will start to have clarity and understanding of the different aspects of the problem. Integrating all of what you are learning into a coherent picture that you can communicate to others can take time, often months or years. It is hard to hurry the process, and what is more important than the answer is the discipline to stay with the question and keep researching it for the time it requires for the answer to emerge.

It is through your inquiry and persistent curiosity that you will discover the Truth, and the quest for Truth is never quick or easy. At the root of this is the Inquiry, and in your own life you may have just a few such inquiries: once you find one that motivates and captivates you, latch on to it with your teeth and don't let go. Let the Inquiry take you to Truth.

> **ASIDE:** It is common to hear the advice to "Find your purpose", and hearing how finding one's purpose will transform one's life. When I heard this advice, I found it very hard to know *how* to go about finding my purpose. I tried many things: journaling, writing down my values, and examining what brought me joy. However, I found it hard to find my purpose.
>
> What I did find through my self-examination were Inquiries. A few such inquiries that have motivated me are: "How does one transform themselves, is change really possible?", "Why is it that we often know what is good for us, but we are unable to act on it?", and "What sets apart great performers from just the good performers?".
>
> These inquiries that have no clear answer have been like an itch that I keep coming back to, and have motivated me. So, rather than saying "Find

your purpose", I say to you, "Find your inquiries!"

Challenges To Curiosity — And The Solution

There are several challenges to curiosity. The most persistent ones that I have seen are:

1. Dismissing open-ended questions: Many of us have spent 18 formative years in educational systems that prefer close-ended questions that have known and definite answers. Years of answering questions such as "In which year did World War 2 end?" or "What is the formula for Calcium Carbonate?" stunt our naturally curious minds. Many workplaces too have the under-current of asking only questions for which answers are already known. We must break this chain! Dwelling in imagination and wonder for questions that don't have answers is what helps us overcome this challenge. We must encourage our children and give ourselves the permission to day-dream, ensure that we have sufficient time for boredom, and start to make-up stories: imagination and creativity is sparked by following the question with the unknown answer.

2. Knowing all the answers: After Satya became CEO at Microsoft, he spoke repeatedly of the importance of having a learnt-it-all mindset rather than a know-it-all attitude. Cultivating humility to know that you don't know, and then taking the steps to discover the answer is a healthy approach to curiosity. Knowing the answer, and piping up in every conversation with "I know…" is not only overbearing and irritating, but it kills curiosity in yourself and others around you. Related to this is to rely on reports from consultants or existing past research for all the answers; learners know that to create something new, they have to find new answers to questions that may

have been answered incorrectly before. Don't be a know-it-all: become a learn-it-all.

3. Politeness: Curiosity challenges the norms, and can lead to controversial conclusions. It is polite to not challenge existing norms and traditions. However, in being polite we fail to chase the Truth with the vigour and velocity we need to catch a glimpse of it. I have seen product managers who have been over-coached to "listen to customers" failing to ask any questions during a customer research session. It is better to be rude and interrupt and ask many questions, than to come away from meeting a customer with no new information. If you cultivate politeness, you will focus more on giving safe answers, pleasing those around you, and being agreeable, and this kills all curiosity about discovering the true answer. Politeness is just dismissal in disguise.

4. Not creating the space for answers to emerge: Answers to inquiries require space to emerge. Even in conversation with customers, having a sense of space allows them to respond better: when you don't bring in judgements, when you listen and nudge them along with "Uh-huh" or "And then?" or "Tell me more", and when you ask "How would you like it to be?", you allow the customer and you to be in a dance in which something beautiful may emerge. Our hurry, our quick surveys, and our rapid research allows us only to confirm what we already know, rather than discover what we don't.

5. Fear: Fear kills curiosity fast. Having a safe space for all manner of questions is the best petri dish for curiosity to grow. If, on the other hand, you think "People will laugh at my question", or "People will be offended by my question", and you stay silent, this silence will grow into a quiet apathy in
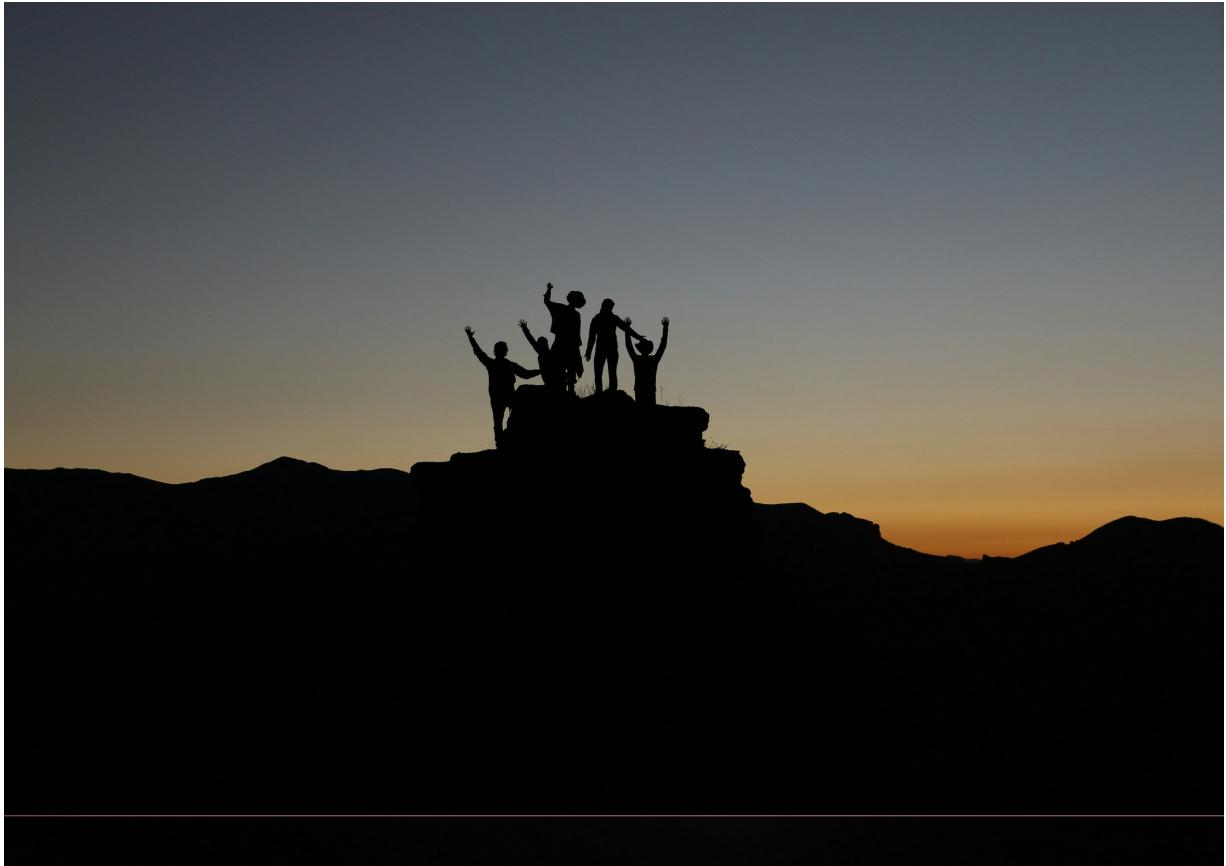
you that cannot be overcome. So, be brave, beat that fear, and ask all the questions that you have!

Curiosity Leads To Empathy

Empathy is the child of caring and curiosity. When you care about someone and ask questions to understand them better, after some time you will start to relate to that person in a complete way where there is no you and the other, but just one. This is empathy.

My mentor, Rajiv, used to call this "Being one with the customer", that state where you have met so many customers, have walked in their shoes, and have lived a day in their lives when you can speak for what your customer wants with conviction and power. This is different from the apathy and laziness of the know-it-all; this is the power that comes from having spent time in discovery and learning, and having a grasp on the Truth.

When you have this powerful sense of empathy for customers, it can motivate you into action, create clarity in your decision making, and help you be courageous in standing up for what customers want. Spending time with customers with a deep curiosity for their needs and wants is what creates empathy, and is one of the best investments of time a product manager can make.

FAILING TO BE AN OWNER

Also known as Agency

"What is a fear of living? It's being pre-eminently afraid of dying. It is not doing what you came here to do, out of timidity and spinelessness. The antidote is to take full responsibility for yourself, for the time you take up and the space you occupy. If you don't know what you're here to do, then just do some good."

— Maya Angelou

Story

T he clocks stopped ticking for me in September 2017. The year had been challenging till then, and it had also been exhilarating. I was in flow, doing what I needed to be doing without being interrupted by negative or celebratory thoughts.

At work, Kaizala had found product-market fit after making a pivot to focus on field-workers in large enterprises, from the earlier focus on small businesses. We had started to see scaled growth, sustained usage, and had also figured out an enterprise sales model with Microsoft 365. I spent my time meeting customers, planning the roadmap, working with design and engineering, and building strong partnerships with our enterprise sales team. I was constantly occupied by trying to figure out what needed to be done so that Kaizala could continue to grow, and then doing it. I was demonstrating a high degree of ownership and agency.

At home, my mother and mother-in-law were with us, both waging their wars with cancer. My wife was in a demanding job with a long commute. We had a rotating door of nurses and attendants at home for the mothers. My wife and I spent our time in the chemo ward, doctor consultations, cooking dinners, and what free time we had left with our daughter. While it sounds dire, and it was, both of us knew what had to be done and we focused on doing it. There wasn't much time or need for thought. In the rare moment of drinking *chai* together, my wife and I would speak wistfully about the holidays we hadn't taken together or worrying about how the home environment would affect our daughter. We were constantly occupied by trying to figure out what needed to be done to prolong our mothers lives and keep them comfortable, and then doing it. We were demonstrating a high degree of ownership and agency.

In September, my wife and I lost our mothers within 2 days of each other, my mother-in-law passing away at home, and my mother alone in an ICU under a ventilator. At work, there were increasing calls to resolve the growing

confusion of having both Teams and Kaizala, two widely different apps with chat as the common core. The future of Kaizala as a standalone product seemed doomed. Over the course of the next month, I went from being in action and high agency, believing that I could get things done, to feeling like a victim, regretting my luck, and wallowing in self-pity. I felt that all my decisions and actions led to despair and failure. It felt safer to make no decisions and take no action than to decide, to act, and to fail.

Rajiv, in his caring, tried to shake me out of this attitude. "It's been 3 months since your mothers passed, you aren't showing up at work, we have to do a lot more for Kaizala" he said, but I rebuffed his caring as undue criticism and callousness. I struggled through 2018, a fear of decision making and a fear of action in my heart, and filled with guilt at not being able to prolong my mother's lives, or even something as simple as saving the product I loved.

Understanding Agency

"The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones that do" — *Steve Jobs*

Agency is the belief that you can change the world for the better, and having the will, optimism, and energy to create a future that doesn't exist. It is doing all work with the sense of being an "agent" of a higher purpose.

People with high agency do not think of themselves as victims of circumstances ("*things happen to me*"), and rather think of themselves as owners of their destiny ("*I make things happen*"). They demonstrate a growth mindset, and see themselves as capable of learning and adapting themselves to solve the problems they encounter and the challenges they face. They have a mindset of abundance and an optimism and confidence in the future that allows them to take effective risks that improve their outcomes. At

its core, people with high agency believe that they can make their own luck through their efforts, irrespective of what the conditions may be.

ASIDE: There were less than 200 people in Microsoft India when I joined in 2003, and less than 20 product managers. One of the up-and-coming product managers was Karan, a young intern who was doing his undergrad in IIIT next door. All of us other product managers had graduated, had worked for a few years, and some of us even had MBAs, but all of us knew that Karan was someone special, a superstar in the making. He was humble, didn't waste time in banter or gossip, and most of all, you could see the self-belief and confidence in his eyes. Karan personified high agency for me: here was a person who would get things done, even if he had no idea about the area he was tossed into. His manager used to joke that all of us would be working for Karan someday soon. Karan is now the Chief Product Officer at one of the most exciting fintech companies: his success a happy sign that everything is alright with the world, that it is still a place where the good guys win.

Agency shows up as a whole, all integrated in an individual who is in action. It can be difficult to see the different strands that make up agency. What goes on in the minds of a person with high agency? Let us unpack the different threads that make up agency, and examine how a person with high agency sees the world:

1. "This is a problem": having the attention and caring to identify a problem
2. "This is my problem": making the choice to take on the problem, and giving themselves the ownership and responsibility of the problem

3. "I can address this problem": having the optimism and confidence in one's ability to address the problem

4. "This is how I am going to address the problem": taking creative action to think through the steps needed to address the problem.

5. "These are the people I need to bring together": having the humility to recognize that you may not be able to solve the problem alone, and having the dynamism to bring together a team that also wants to address the problem.

6. "Let us solve this problem": generating the will and energy required to lead a team.

7. "Let us not give up": having the grit to learn from mistakes and adapt to change, without giving up on the goal to solve the problem

8. "We have addressed the problem": celebrating success as a team

People who are in high agency embody all of these traits in their being, it is like they are lit up with a fire from inside. Working with people who have high agency is exhilarating, and you feel privileged to be able to come along for the ride.

How To Build Muscle For Agency?

I have seen people of high agency demonstrate and practice 3 traits consistently:

1. "Be a player on the court", be in action instead of being in thought: People of high agency are playing on the court. They aren't caught in thought, sitting on the side-lines watching or reporting on what is happening in the game. They are playing the game, being in action, making decisions, moving the needle forward, trying to get things done that will benefit the customer and the product. Decisions are the currency of product management; if you're not making decisions, you are not playing the game. You can improve at

"being a player on the court" by examining how many decisions you are making, and increasing that count.

2. "**Take charge**", taking ownership of the situation: People of high agency take charge of the situation they are in. They know that they are not the expert, but their role is to bring the experts together to improve whatever situation they are in. So, naturally, they ask questions on what the situation is when they enter a meeting, they motivate and facilitate the discussion among those in the room, they propose solutions and bring together people towards consensus, and they follow on the action plan. If you are not bringing people together in conversations towards decision making, you are not taking charge. You can improve at "taking charge" by examining how many times you are bringing people together towards conversation and decision making, and increasing that count.

3. "**No Plan B**", Be choiceless once you've chosen: People of high agency may take time to make a choice: but once they make a choice, they don't hedge their bets or reverse course easily. They know that it is better to go all-in and fail and learn, rather than to hedge their bets and play it safe and not succeed. If you find that you always have multiple options that you are running in parallel: stop, because you are not being choiceless, and your lack of commitment will show. You can improve at "being choiceless" by examining how times you were truly all-in on a course of action, and increasing this count. Owners know what their goal is, and may examine different paths of getting there – single goal, multiple paths – but they don't cultivate multiple goals.

Challenges To Agency — And The Solution

There are six challenges to ownership and agency that disempower you from action.

1. "I don't deserve this position", or Imposter Syndrome: Imposter syndrome is to be trapped in the thought of "Am I the right person for this role, do I deserve it?", rather than committing fully to the role we have been placed in and giving it everything we have got. It is possible to beat imposter syndrome; the 3 steps to doing this are:

a. Separate the role from the individual: Remind yourself of the role you have been assigned and the importance of the role. When you think "I have to solve this problem", you may worry if you have the skills and experience; when you think "It is the product managers job to solve the problem, and I am the product manager", you challenge yourself to be that good and to acquire the skills you need for the role.

b. Ask what is required of the role: Thinking through what is required of the role helps engage your critical faculties and set a benchmark for the ideal. It is easier to think in the 3rd person at times, like "A good product manager would look at the data and meet new customers to understand why customer acquisition cost is growing". Most of us find it easy to advise others: tap into this to advise yourself!

c. Ask what your role models would do: Thinking about what your role models would do in a similar situation also gives you access to action, especially when you recognize that your role models were also once new in the roles that they played.

2. "**My decisions don't make any difference**", or Apathy: Changing existing paradigms can take many years, and the efforts of several people.

"Most people overestimate what they can achieve in a year and underestimate what they can achieve in ten years."
— Gates's Law

This challenge relates to Gates's law above: if you overestimate what you will achieve in a year and hold yourself up to that impossible imagined yardstick, you will start to feel that your work doesn't matter, and you will cease to exert effort. However, when you recognize that your repeated efforts will compound and yield outsized results over the long run, you will keep the flame alive to keep working, and to keep making decisions. In addition to this change in mindset, tracking the decisions you make and the outcome they have over the long run is a good way to see the outcomes of your decisions.

People managers can do a lot to create a sense of agency by repeating and reaffirming to those on their team that their work matters. This repetition is what creates a sense of shared purpose on the team.

3. "**My choices result in failure**", or **Loss-Aversion:** This is almost the opposite of the previous challenge: whereas the ego was subdued in the former, one's ego is puffed up in this condition, believing that every choice you make leads to failure. When you have repeatedly made decisions that have not worked out the way you thought, it is easy to blame yourself for the failure, and to choose to make no decisions so that you can avoid all loss.

> **ASIDE:** I struggled with this: our decision to move back from the US didn't go as I had hoped, every action I took for my mothers treatment seemed to make things worse, and the recent move to Bengaluru and Google didn't work out as I had wanted. It was only in finding that balance of choice and destiny that I have been able to beat this.

I have discovered two mental positions to combat this challenge. The first is a change in mindset, where you don't see yourself as all-knowing, but rather see yourself as an explorer. When you recognize that you don't have a choice but to make choices, and that you are an explorer of unknown land and what you call failures are paths to places on the map ("Here there be dragons!"), you will see that the work you do helps uncover both what to do and what to avoid. Your choices are valuable, irrespective of their outcomes.

The second tool is similar to the previous challenge: getting into the habit of tracking your decisions, and listing out why you made those decisions and the rationale behind them allows you to look back at your decisions and examine whether the *thinking* was right, irrespective of the outcome. As long as your thinking is right ("I would make the same decision again in the same circumstances") allows you to beat regret, or improve your way of thinking: both of which are good outcomes.

4. "Things happen that cause me to fail, or Victimhood: Feeling like a victim is the opposite of feeling like an owner. Things happen to victims; owners make things happen. In "Man's Search for Meaning" Viktor Frankl describes his time in a Nazi concentration camp, where life was regimented, life was without choice, life was random, and life was cheap. This short and incredible book is packed with wisdom on how to rise above feeling like a victim. One of the most powerful quotes in the book is:

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

The way out of victimhood can start with this smallest, and yet this greatest of choices: the power to choose how you respond to your circumstances. Instead of blaming and worrying about external events, making a choice of

how you will respond brings back agency and ownership to you: and from that kernel, you can rediscover the world of agency. So, whenever you are feeling like a victim, recognize this, and make the choice of how you will respond: this will give you power.

5. "Here is the plan for a plan", or Procrastination: Planning is an important part of the role of a product manager. However, a plan is not the product, and a plan is not customer success. Planning can become, at its worst, a way to procrastinate — it may feel like progress without being true progress — it is the game-plan without the game, it is the map without the driving to the destination. To be trapped in plans is a sure way to become devoid of agency.

Dealing with procrastination can take a whole other book (which I will write some other day!). The best way I have found to beat procrastination and over-planning is to track and measure outcomes, rather than to track plans, intentions, or hopes. The cold hard truth of what has been accomplished, the outcomes of the work, and seeing how you can improve this, is what can bring you out of planning purgatory into the paradise of ownership and agency.

6. "Nothing can be changed", or History: Why is it that product managers in start-ups seem to get more done than product managers in older products in large companies? Are the product managers in start-ups smarter or better? It can seem hard to be in action in an environment where the norms are established, where culture may be ossified, and where many paths have been explored. This is the weight of history that can act as a millstone on agency, and stop you from taking ownership.

The way to combat this challenge is to go the other way: to accept all the history and to take all the responsibility for everything in your current environment and context, and to then create change with a respect for the past.
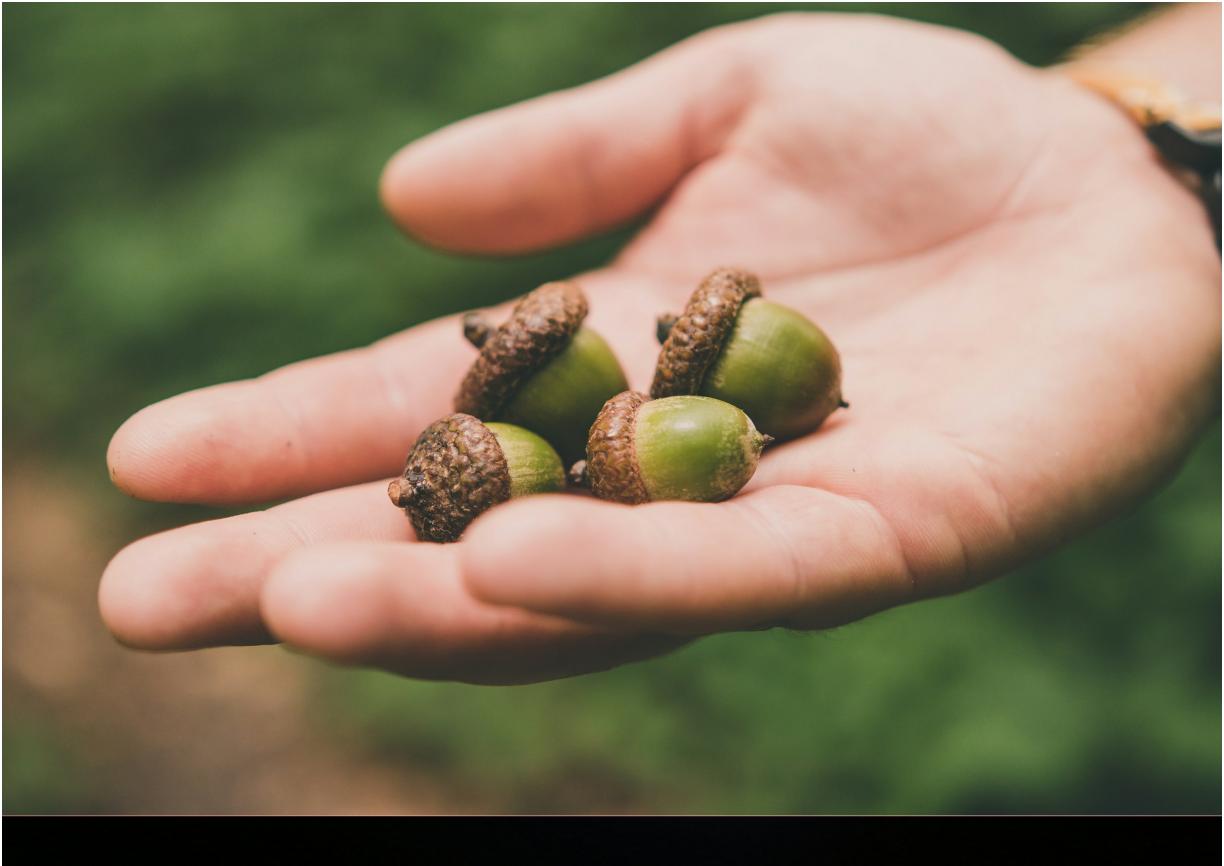
ASIDE: The most powerful example I've seen of this is when Satya took over as CEO of Microsoft. At that time, the stock was at its lowest, the company was said to have many factions inside it, nothing ever seemed to get done, and people spoke about how Microsoft had become irrelevant. Satya demonstrated the highest example of agency in not criticising his predecessors or dismissing the past, and rather by taking ownership of all of Microsoft's history and taking responsibility for all of the good and the bad, and speaking of going back to the core of what Microsoft stood for, and rediscovering our past in a new light. In acting in full acceptance of the past, even a behemoth like Microsoft could transform in a trice, and become a newly energised version of itself.

Ownership And Agency With Humility And Grace

When you transform into a person of high agency and ownership, you will be in action, generating energy, fighting entropy, and creating success. In this space, it is easy to stop being humble and grateful towards your circumstances and those around you.

All of our faiths and our greatest books whether it is the Bhagavad Gita with "Do your *dharma*" or the Guru Granth Sahib with "Walking the *hukum*" speak about being in action without being in ego, of letting the work flow through you rather than holding on to it and ascribing your own self to the outcomes of the work – to truly be an agent of a higher purpose.

Being a person of high agency and ownership is important, and it is equally important to do this with humility and grace. The way to do this is to remember to thank the people around you without whose permission and help you wouldn't get anything done, to acknowledge and accept the mistakes you make, to listen to inputs from your customers and colleagues, and to be thankful for the privileges you have that allow you to get things done.

FAILING TO BE STRATEGIC

Also known as Clarity

"Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes" — *Carl Jung*

Story

In 2011 I took on the role of Group Product Manager for the first time, for the existing Windows Server Cache and the new Windows Azure Cache products. I had always been skilled at surveying what existed, putting

together "State of the Union" presentations, and co-creating a plan with engineering and market inputs.

My immediate focus was the upcoming Windows Azure Cache product release. When I joined the team, we had completed most of the work on version 1 (v1.0) of the service, and I started to build out the plan for what we should do beyond v1.0. I spoke with users of the Windows Server cache product, looked at support tickets, spoke with our engineering team, and also with our General Manager, who had a vision for an Azure platform-as-a-service suite, of which Windows Azure Cache was part. I built out a plan based on this information over the next month or so, with a roadmap for different cache strategies (cache aside, write-through, write-back), different cache invalidation algorithms, different SKUs of cache based varying customer needs, and different price/performance SKUs of cache. I was proud of the comprehensive plan we had put together for the upcoming exec review!

However, over the next couple of weeks, we had an organisation restructuring, and as a result of that, a new leader for our part of Azure, Scott Guthrie. Scott was already a superstar in 2011, the intern product manager who had created ASP.NET, and someone who was revered by the developer community. Scott visited India soon after the organisational changes and I was excited to meet him and take him through our Windows Azure Cache plans. During the review, he took out a little black diary from his bag, listened to our presentation without interruption, and took the occasional note.

At the end of the presentation, he said, politely, "That's a comprehensive plan you have put together for a roadmap. Tell me though, what is the purpose of a cache?". I answered hesitantly, something about how a cache

helps with data retrieval performance, and how our customers wanted this at low cost.

Scott nodded in agreement, "Precisely; what are our current latency numbers and cost per MB, and what are memcached and Redis at?" he asked. I hurriedly looked at my notes, and sheepishly shared the numbers. "Well, that's clear then – you need to focus only on performance and cost till they are better than memcached!"

Over the next few months, whenever we would meet Scott, he would take out his black diary, look at the notes he'd made on cache cost and cache performance and ask us our progress on those 2 numbers.

In the beginning of this, I was frustrated: why did you need a group product manager if the only focus was on cost and performance, were those not engineering problems? However, over time, I understood. The term "clarity of purpose" has two parts: clarity, which is knowing what to do and what not to do, and purpose, which is knowing what you are about. Cache was about performance and cost, and the clarity was to focus only on those two parameters, at least till we were better than the competition.

Understanding Clarity

"The successful warrior is the average person with laser-like focus"
— Bruce Lee

Being strategic is about making choices. It is about making trade-offs with incomplete knowledge, amidst change, and with an uncertain future. While business strategy is a broad topic of research and thinking, for an individual product manager to be strategic means deeply understanding one's purpose, articulating principles based on that purpose, and being disciplined in making choices and acting according to those principles. It is grounded in

understanding the timeless and unchanging constants at the core of one's product, and results in clarity on what not to do.

This showed up in the above Azure Cache example; however, no one said it better than Jeff Bezos, and it is instructive to look at the entire passage from him:

> **ASIDE:** I very frequently get the question: 'What's going to change in the next 10 years?' And that is a very interesting question; it's a very common one. I almost never get the question: 'What's not going to change in the next 10 years?' And I submit to you that that second question is actually the more important of the two: because you can build a business strategy around the things that are stable in time. [I]n our retail business, we know that customers want low prices, and I know that's going to be true 10 years from now. They want fast delivery; they want vast selection. It's impossible to imagine a future 10 years from now where a customer comes up and says, 'Jeff I love Amazon; I just wish the prices were a little higher,' [or] 'I love Amazon; I just wish you'd deliver a little more slowly.' Impossible. And so the effort we put into those things, spinning those things up, we know the energy we put into it today will still be paying off dividends for our customers 10 years from now. When you have something that you know is true, even over the long term, you can afford to put a lot of energy into it.

This clarity of purpose makes things simple. It becomes simple to articulate your principles, it becomes simple to focus, it becomes simple to make trade-offs, it becomes simple to say "No", and it becomes simple to make decisions. Having this clarity will be the source of the tremendous energy and action that is required to build and bring your product to customers.

How To Build Muscle For Clarity?

Clarity emerges from three things:

1. Seeing the world clearly: It is easy to be trapped in dichotomies of good and bad, fair and unfair, and so on. These fixed mental positions can keep you from seeing the world clearly. As an example, you may have the fixed mental position of "Big businesses are bad, they put local stores out of business", or "It is unfair to small businesses when companies do deep discounts". These opinions are often a result of unexamined principles that have been formed by osmosis from our environment: parents, teachers, and friends. I achieved a breakthrough in clarity when I started to see the distinction between "What is right" (morals and values) and "What is real" or "What is so" (facts). To see the world clearly, you must first see the facts of the world as it is: "Consumers want variety" (and will prefer big businesses over small stores for variety), or "Consumers demand lower prices" (and deep discounts will work). Seeing the facts as they are, uncoloured by biased opinions, can help you make clear choices.

2. Knowing what you want: It can seem cynical to focus only on the facts. However, there is a place for values, and that place is once you know the facts. Recognizing the reality of the world, and then stating your purpose (the "what you want") that is based on personal values can be powerful; to dwell only on what is right without recognizing the reality of the world is nothing more than day-dreaming. As an example, to say "Consumers want variety: I want to help small businesses provide their customers with the same variety as Amazon": now, that is powerful and motivating, a combination of facts and a statement of what you want based on personal values and beliefs. However, envy is the powerful force that acts against being able to state what

you want. When you get caught up in questions like "How can we be more like Amazon?", or "Amazon is doing a 25% discount on Diwali, how do we match that?", you lose sight of what you want to do. "We don't have the margins to do deep discounts during Diwali, but I want to thank our customers in some other way" recognizes the facts and expresses what you want to do, and is internally motivated: and this can be a gateway for action and innovation.

> **ASIDE**: On Envy — One of the most common threats to clarity is to be driven by envy and to be defined by others. When you start to see others succeed in the market and chase your competition, you forget your own purpose, and let your roadmap be defined by others. I believe this is what happened for a few years, between 2008 and 2012, when Microsoft floundered and was written off, before Satya Nadella became CEO and brought back clarity of purpose – I remember that the conversations stopped being about chasing Google, chasing Amazon, and chasing Facebook, and became about who are we, and what we should do. We had to recognize that we were not a "born in the web", or a "born on mobile" company – that we had a past, a rich history, and a purpose, "To help people and businesses realise their potential". When action flowed from this timeless purpose, and we stopped chasing external goalposts, things improved almost immediately.

3. Making the choices you must to get what you want: Once you know the facts, and you know what you want, you have to make choices that are consistent with that. Clarity and being strategic eventually is about the actions you take, not about the words you say. Further, making a choice means ruling out several others. The *doing*, and not the *knowing* is the most challenging part of being strategic. To take a trivial, personal example that

many of us may have grappled with — you may see clearly that you are 10 pounds too heavy, you may know that you want to lose that weight — and while that is clarity, it is in making the daily choices to skip carbs (and not eat that *croissant*), go for a run (and not watch the next episode of Ted Lasso), and drinking more water (and not having that beer), that we become strategic.

So, to build the muscle for clarity, you need to think through how to practise seeing the world clearly, how to practise knowing what you want, and how to practise making choices & being strategic. Let us examine each of these:

1. How to practise seeing the world clearly: There are two aspects to seeing the world clearly: the first is to identify your default positions; the second is to see with new eyes. I have found that making a list of my default positions is useful; I've shared below a snapshot of my list from my journal. These are defaults that I have acquired through culture, tradition, environment, and so on: my intellectual tradition if you will. I don't blame myself for these positions, and nor do I feel I can't change these positions: just knowing that I have these defaults allows me to know when I am not seeing the world clearly.

1. Money is to be viewed with suspicion / money is not important / fear
2. Lifes trajectory should be upwards / fear of failure
3. Argument is important
4. There is a right answer / fear of being wrong
5. Intellectual pursuit can show you what is right
6. Fun is dangerous and should be moderated / fear of enjoyment
7. Celebrating invites bad luck
8. Being kind to strangers can be dangerous
9. Being on time is important
10. Family is more important than community
11. Politics is corruption

The second part of this is to practise seeing with new eyes. For product managers, meeting customers regularly and asking yourself, "What's common and true across all of these customers?" is a good way to see patterns across people. More generally, engaging in meta-thinking where you don't just examine an area, and rather think about the underlying patterns that govern that area is a good way to identify new "laws".

To take an example of how I started to see what "money" truly meant — I had to start by examining the preconceived ideas I had about money — that having lots of money meant "ill-gotten gains", that credit was "bad" and the same as being in debt, and that investments were a vice like betting and gambling. Once I recognized and parked my biases, and I started examining the underlying patterns among people who were wealthy, I started to see that money correlated with value creation, that credit was a reflection of one's honesty & uprightness, and that investing one's money was a responsibility to not let one's assets lie fallow.

It is through disciplined examination and questioning of one's existing biases that you can get to clarity.

2. How to practise knowing what you want: Knowing what you want is hard, especially in such an inter-connected age where it is easy to know what everyone else is doing. I have found that a journal is the best and cheapest tool to examine what you want — write down your values, write down what you'd like to accomplish, write down your dreams and hopes, write down how you would like the world to be — and examine these periodically, both to motivate you and to change your mind. If you haven't written it down you will be unable to stay the course when the tide changes; you will be left unsure of what you really want.

To take an example, after examining "money", say I write down in my journal that "I want to be rich, but I don't want to make money the object of my life or the reason I make decisions, and I don't want to be held hostage by money. I value freedom more than money, which is why I don't want to have a lot of debt". Now, along comes a job opportunity that offers me twice the salary: would I take it if I hadn't written it down? Or let us say I see a fantastic house that I will have to take a twenty-year loan on: would I buy it if I hadn't written it down? Writing down and going back to the journal allows you to re-examine what you truly want in a structured way. So, get a journal, and get into the practice of writing down what you want.

3. How to practise being strategic: A decision journal is an invaluable tool to practise being strategic. Every product manager should write down the decisions they make, the rationale and reasoning for the decision, what they hope to accomplish from that decision, and what they are choosing to not do. Then, one should track the success and failure of the decision over time, and write down what you learnt from that success or failure, and see if there are any common patterns or principles across your successes and failures that you can apply again. Having this discipline to write down what you will do, what you won't do, and then measure your success based on sticking to what you wrote down is the most structured and sure way to becoming strategic.

Challenges To Clarity — And The Solution

There are 3 challenges that product managers face in trying to create clarity. We have examined all of these to some extent above; let us look at these more closely now:

1. Different customers want different things: When you go and meet customers and speak to them, you will get feedback. This is good. However,

the feedback and suggestions you receive can be varied, and at times at cross-purposes. As an example, one customer may want more features, other customers may want simplicity and performance, and a third may suggest that you unbundle your product so customers can pick and choose what they need. These are all good suggestions and ideas! Which do you pick and focus on?

2. The competition is surging ahead: The competition is releasing features at a quick clip, getting covered in media, and surging ahead. You have notifications set up to track the news about what your competitors are doing. The speed and dynamism of your competitors is something that seems like magic, and you wonder how they are able to do it. In comparison, your team seems slow and your roadmap pitiful. How do you get ahead of your competition?

3. Everything is important all at once: Your divisions vice president wants to focus on quality, your engineering leader wants to focus on technical debt, your design leader wants you to focus on fit-and-finish bugs and making the product more polished, your marketing leader wants to make your product features more fun and relatable, and every time you use the product, it hangs: you want to focus on performance! What to focus on, and whither clarity?

The solution to these 3 different challenges is the same: it is to know what you want and to decide (decide means "to kill all other options", from the root -*cide*, as in suicide and pesticide). The product managers role is a challenging one because it is you who has the role and the responsibility to make the call on what is best for the product: to see the underlying patterns and priorities across customers' requests, to ignore the competition (and to know what not to ignore), and to cajole and convince your different stakeholders to come along with your plan.

The solution presented above is not meant to be flippant, and it is most certainly not easy; however, the path to action for decision making comes from knowing your product's purpose and knowing your own mind as to what is to be done next. This is an instinct that you develop over the years, less science and more art. The answer to "How do you train your nose to know what's good?" is to smell a lot, to toss out the crap, and focus on the few good bits.

How Does Clarity And Being Strategic Feel?
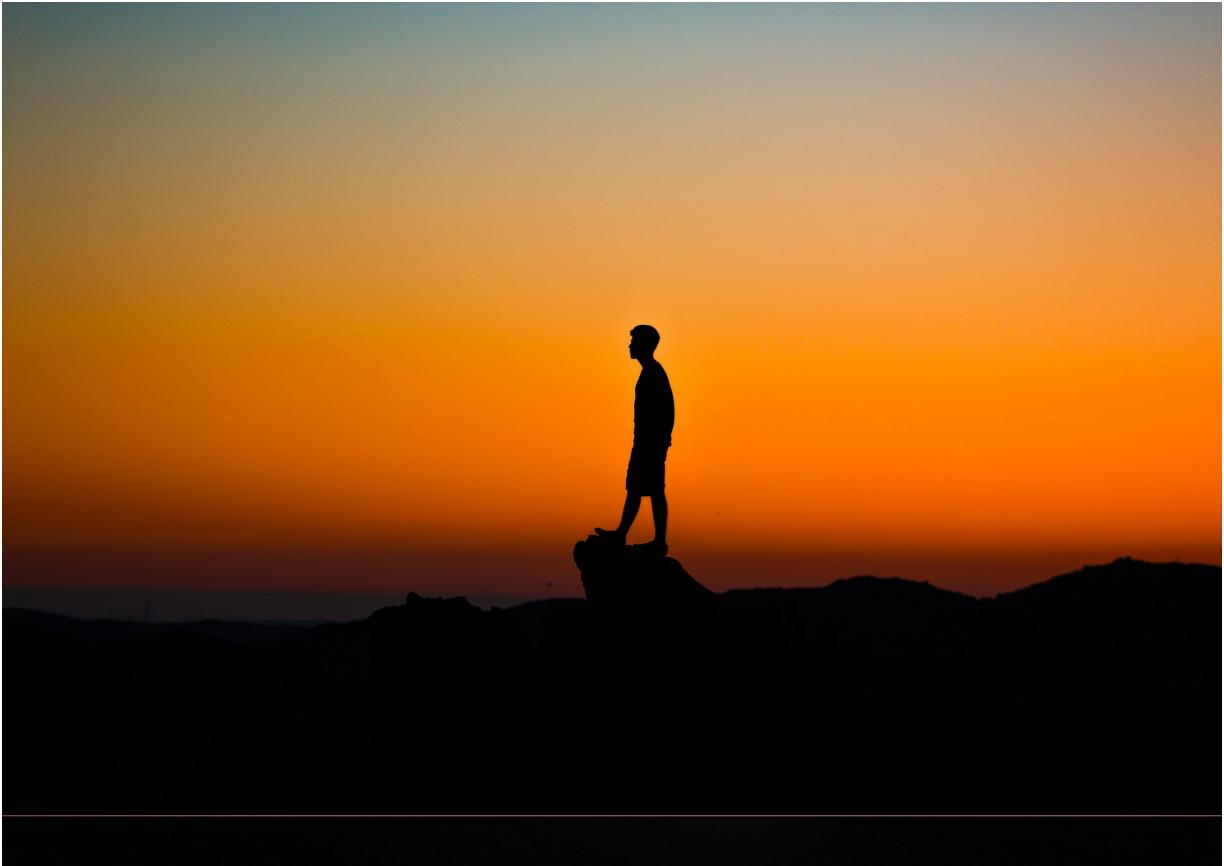
While we've examined clarity, how to build it, and the challenges to it, what we haven't examined is to see how it feels in the bones. Getting to clarity can feel difficult and tiring, with a lot of analysis and rumination at the same time. Being strategic and saying "No" can feel gut-wrenching and be full of anxiety.

However, once you have clarity and once you have made the decisions on what to do and what to not do, it is peaceful and simple, and it feels wonderful. You feel complete, and there is so much energy that you have back. There is no self-doubt, there are no disturbing thoughts, and there is just a path forward that you have to walk on.

ASIDE: My general manager and I were outside Satya's office in 2016, waiting for him to arrive from a customer visit for a meeting we had with him. I heard someone whistling a cheerful tune in the hallway around the corner, and then there Satya was, greeting us with a smile. It was a small incident, but I remember thinking to myself, "Microsoft has a lot of challenges, but it sure feels good and gives confidence when your CEO whistles when he walks into work!" From then on, I've

always thought that this is how clarity feels in the bones, when you can whistle and sing your way to work each day.

Examine your past, and look at the times you had clarity and the feeling that you had. You can use these feelings and a guide to knowing whether you have clarity or not: if you're whistling, you probably have clarity, and if you're popping antacid pills, probably not.

FAILING TO BE COURAGEOUS

Also known as Doing The Right Thing

One of my [favourite speeches](#) is by Bill Waterson, the creator of the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes. He gave this speech to the graduating class of Kenyon College in 1990. The entire talk is fantastic, and one passage is worth reproducing here in the context of courage:

> "You will find your own ethical dilemmas in all parts of your lives, both personal and professional. We all have different desires and needs, but if we don't discover what we want from ourselves and what we stand for,

we will live passively and unfulfilled. Sooner or later, we are all asked to compromise ourselves and the things we care about. We define ourselves by our actions. With each decision, we tell ourselves and the world who we are. Think about what you want out of this life, and recognize that there are many kinds of success."

— Bill Waterson

Story

I remember Sri when I think of courage in the context of product management. Sri was my manager for a short while when I worked on Office Live. Sri wasn't one of the initial members of Office Live; he had taken on the role of Group Product Manager shortly after we had released a new version of Office Live and when we were facing a variety of growing pains: challenging team dynamics, scale and uptime issues, and negative customer feedback. Sri had the challenge of establishing himself, gaining credibility, and making the tough changes that were required to create success — and he had to do this fast. Sri was quiet, self-effacing, and introverted by nature; Office Live was a classic start-up, where people were expressive, opinionated, and extroverted: would Sri have the steel required to do the job?

While we had been sceptical about Sri's ability to be part of the team, his candour, authenticity, and product thinking soon won us over. People respected his customer empathy, curiosity and genuine interest, and his structured approach. Over the next few months, Sri brought together the team to create a compelling roadmap and plan for the future, based on customer feedback and data. Sri's first big milestone on the team was the quarterly planning review, where he would share the strategy and roadmap we had

created with the entire division. He spent time pre-reviewing the slides with each of the stakeholders and getting buy-in, and doing the rounds to ensure that the presentation would be a mere formality.

The big day came, and after a few preliminaries, Sri took the stage to share our roadmap. However, things did not go according to plan: the wind wasn't blowing in the right direction, something had changed overnight, and there were many interruptions and questions being raised by the stakeholders, including the Vice President of the division. It did not look like we would get commitment to invest in the roadmap. What was Sri going to do?

There was a lot at stake. Sri was new to the team, was trying to integrate himself in the team, and I knew that he was coming up to be promoted to the next level. An easy way out would have been to push back a little bit, blame others for what was presented, agree to the suggestions from people around him, and praise the wise counsel from the group. That would have been diplomatic, safe, and a "good career move".

However, Sri stood up for the plan we had put together: he stood up for us, and he stood up for our customers. He spoke up, this soft-spoken man raising his voice just a little bit, standing his ground, responding to questions calmly and challenging the Vice President's suggestions. Slowly, through conversation, conviction, and courage, Sri changed the minds of people in the room, and got them to come around on most points, and to give us a chance on the ones they did not agree with.

Sri standing his ground, casting aside consideration for personal gain or growth, was an act of courage. It may not seem like much, but it is through such daily acts of courage that we show the world what we are made of, and who we are. Though this incident happened more than 15 years ago, I still

remember it as an example of being courageous: to do the right thing in the face of pressure and temptation.

Understanding Courage

"We can have courage, or we can have comfort, but we can't have both"
— Brene Brown

What does courage mean in the context of product management? Popular opinions are common, safe, and have low value. It is in the controversial and the counterintuitive – in the ideas that go against established norms – where breakthroughs happen. However, our ape-DNA pushes us to bond together in groups and stand against the person who takes on the uncommon viewpoint.

Taking the uncommon viewpoint — not for the sake of it, but based on unique insight — requires courage. Further, pushing down our ape-DNA and giving the person with a unique viewpoint a space to express themselves: that too requires courage. Organisations that repeatedly create breakthrough value have a high tolerance for the misfits and the outcasts, and what's more, the misfits and outcasts feel at home in those organisations!

Courage is not only about expressing the uncommon viewpoint; it is also about speaking up when things are not according to your values or principles. A key part of courage is standing up for what is right, and being an ally for your peers and your customers, and saying out loud what others may be alright ignoring. Courage creates change in cultures that are ossified by breaking existing patterns and asking the important question: "Are we doing the right thing?".

Through the process of caring, curiosity, and agency you will come to clarity as a product manager, and will know what needs to be done. But will you

have the courage to get it done?

How To Build Muscle For Courage?

"Being brave doesn't mean you aren't scared. Being brave means you are scared, and you do the right thing anyway"
— Neil Gaiman, Coraline

There are 5 traits I have seen in people who are courageous. It is possible to become courageous by cultivating these traits.

1. Stay weird: Courageous people are comfortable in their own skins. They don't measure themselves against existing norms. Rather, they are comfortable in being different, and even weird to others. This comfort often comes with years of staying weird, despite a childhood of being forced to be well-rounded, an adolescence of having to conform, and an adulthood of needing to fit in. It is only in maturity that most people realise the truth that they are "same, same, but different", and with this comes the comfort of embracing one's difference and finding courageous self-expression. To build courage, embrace your preferences and differences, and start expressing them.

2. Learn to argue well: A few simple phrases — "I don't agree", "Wait!", and "No" — are the foundations of courage. Practice voicing dissent. Speak up when you hear the protest in your soul. While learning to speak up is the first step of a good argument, staying in the argument without getting angry, emotional, or personal is a good practice. Starting small and sparring daily is the best way to improve at dissent.

3. Take a stance: Our biggest fear in product management is that of being wrong. This fear keeps us from making decisions, which, ironically, is the

job of a product manager. To make decisions with incomplete information and in a changing environment can be nerve-wracking. Practice taking a stance: the worst thing that can happen is failure, which is a better outcome than not knowing what would happen.

Building muscle for courage — staying weird, arguing well, and taking a stance — requires a safe environment. If you are in an environment that doesn't allow you to be yourself, that doesn't allow dissent, and that doesn't respect failure, you must question whether you want to stay in such an environment. It may be best to move on, to find a tribe that respects you for who you are, and that allows you your differences, your opinions, and your efforts.

Challenges To Courage — And The Solution

Let us take 3 fictitious examples to examine the single challenge to courage:

1. Challenging the leader: During a town-hall the president of your division congratulates the team on a great quarter and says "It is incredible that we have hit 10 million monthly active users". However, you know that you have only hit 9.5 million monthly active users, and 10 million is at least a month away.
What should you do?
a. Raise your hand in the townhall and correct the president of the division
b. Meet the president of your division later and tell him that his facts were wrong
c. Wink at your developer and analyst, and do nothing

2. Changing the plan: Your development team has been working hard on a new feature for months. While you have always wanted to do user testing, you haven't had the budgets for it. You finally get the approvals for user

testing, where users complain that the new feature is complex to use and is not useful.

What should you do?

a. Try and convince users that they can learn the new feature with more effort

b. Tell the team that customers were "mostly fine" with the feature, and there a few bugs

c. Tell the team that you need to revisit the entire feature

3. Fitting in: You have joined a new company as a product manager. Your manager and your peers want to welcome you with a party: dinner and drinks at a steakhouse followed by a night on the town. You are a teetotaller and vegetarian, but you want to get to know your colleagues better.

What should you do?

a. Decline the party invite, and tell them that you are not feeling well

b. Go the party, nibble at steak, have a few drinks, and feel guilty the next day

c. Tell your colleagues your preferences, and go out to party with them

While these examples may seem trivial, each of them shows us that there is a single challenge to courage: the voice in your head that says "Why get into it?" (avoidance), "Why disappoint them?" (pleasing others), "It doesn't matter this one time" (convenience), "It's not such a big deal" (compromise), "Someone else will speak up" (ignorance), or "We can solve it later" (procrastination).

It is the voice that coaxes you into silence, that cajoles you into procrastination, and that charms you into intelligent excuses that is the challenger to courage.

Learn to listen to this voice in your head, pay attention to it, and know that every time it speaks up, it is asking you to take the path of comfort rather than

courage. If you can hear this voice, then you can pause: and make a choice towards courage rather than comfort.

"Doing The Right Thing"

As we have seen, we often have a voice in our head that tells us to play it safe. To do the right thing, we have to train ourselves to ignore this voice. Ignoring this voice can be hard as it goes against our instincts of self-preservation and our ingrained tribal nature. We have to recognize that modern-day boardrooms are not a jungle and that the best workplaces encourage individuality and diversity. We should be encouraged to ignore this voice more, and to express ourselves more.

In repeatedly doing the right thing, we will build great products for our customers, create value for our organisation, and most of all, have a night of peaceful slumber, without nagging thoughts of, "What if I had spoken up?".

FAILING TO BE PRESENT

Also known as Showing Up

"Just show up. Even tired. Even wearing yesterday's stains on your clothes and yesterday's dirt on your hands. Ignore the side eyes that don't understand. These things are easier for some people. People who don't realise how close we all are to the ground. People who've never had to pull themselves out."
— *L.E.Bowman*

Story

For a year and a half — between early 2016 and late '17 — I was present for life and showed up each day. This was followed by the crash and burn of '18 and '19.

I remember the two years when I was showing up. We lived in a tiny two-bedroom apartment, my wife, my daughter, my mother-in-law, and I. My mother-in-law was no longer undergoing treatment for cancer, but we had an attendant come in every evening and stay the night. I had moved my parents to the same apartment community, and they stayed a few floors below us. My mother was being treated for cancer at the time. A close friend of mine had also taken up an apartment in the same community, just the floor below our home. My wife had taken on a new job, and had a long commute and a long workday. This was the time that Kaizala was taking off.

While it sounds dire, this was a time when I showed up for what life was presenting to me, without thought or complaint, doing the work, maybe a bit

too stoically, if anything. My memories of the time are cheerful ones: driving my mother for her chemo sessions, cooking dinner with my friend on many evenings, playing table tennis with him at his apartment for hours on the weekend, and working hard and doing well professionally too. We also sneaked in a vacation in December of 2016 as a family, and spent a couple of weeks travelling down the western coast of India.

Showing up was almost easy because life was relentless and I just gave myself to the demands of the day. There was always a crisis at home or work and the only response was to apply oneself to addressing the challenge. The down time was spent in rest and relaxation.

Showing up became difficult for me after the events of 2017. We lost our mothers, and it looked like the product that I had given my soul to for the last 2 years was also going to die a slow and painful death. I blamed myself, racked with guilt, for the demise of all things that I loved. "Whatever I touch turns to ashes", I thought, it seemed better do nothing. Being present for life became even harder through COVID. I had more time at work, more time at home, and more time for leisure too. However, I was consumed with thoughts of mortality, and of death at the doorstep. Life seemed pointless; I felt like stopping people and shouting at them, "Wake up! We're all going to die, this is not important".

Comparing the time when I was showing up with the time, I was struggling to be present, I can see now that in the one case I was stoic optimist, focused on what I could do while knowing that life wasn't going the way I wanted to; in the other case I was pessimistic nihilist, with of view of "We're all going to die, and this doesn't matter any way". In many ways, this book chronicles my journey from being a stoic optimist to being a pessimistic nihilist, and then finding my way out to a happy place with the knowledge that the good life is

the one in which we give ourselves to Life, without thoughts of how we are going to get out of this alive.

Understanding Showing Up

"All you have to do is show up. Be late. Be scared. Be a mess. Be weird. Be confused. Just BE there. You'll figure out the rest as you go."
— Nanea Hoffman

Showing up is about being present to what the role you are playing requires of you, and giving the rituals of the role your full person and presence. It is about being there in time and space and doing this repeatedly, despite how you *feel*. In dwelling in thoughts, feelings, and emotions, we let the opportunity to show up for life pass us by.

The rhythms and rituals are well known for traditional roles and the people who grew into these roles knew what was expected of them. What are the rhythms for product managers? They are the daily stand-up, the weekly team meeting and manager one-on-one, the Friday socials, the monthly town-hall, and the quarterly business reviews. What are the rituals for product managers? They are the user interviews, the bug triages, the design discussions, the PRD reviews, the partner alignment meetings, and the spring planning. Showing up is also reading and replying to emails, participating in meetings, and having hallway conversations.

To understand what your role requires of you, to know the rhythms and rituals of your role, and to embrace these rhythms and rituals with an attitude of giving your best to them is what showing up is all about.

How To Build Muscle For Showing Up?

One needs to build muscle for showing up in time and for showing up in space.

Showing up in time — being present to the rhythms

"People overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in 10 years" — Bill Gates

The calendar is a great tool for showing up in time. When I struggled with showing up, I would cancel many meetings (sorry!). To plan your meetings, and to be prepared for them is one of the best ways of showing up. Let us examine showing up in time in more detail.

1. Showing up in the moment: To be attentive and present for what is happening around you is to show up in the moment. This means to not check your email on the side, to not browse the cricket scores during a Teams call, and to not daydream about your dinner plans during a presentation. Three tools I have found useful in being present in the moment are asking questions, taking notes, and (if you are remote) turning on video on your conference calls. Through practice it is possible to stay engaged for longer in conversations, and be fully present for those you are working with.

2. Showing up for the day: Having a regular start and end to your work day, planning your work day the previous evening, and completing any important pre-work are good practices to show up for the day. At the same time, being able to adapt your day to fire-drills and rescheduling meetings that you weren't able to make because of emergencies is something to work on and improve, since our days are not fully predictable. It is important to exercise our professionalism in the course of each day, and that means making sure that cancellations are rescheduled.

3. Showing up for the week: I have found that having a week-long forward view best allows you to plan what you would like to accomplish, and best allows you to track if you made progress. When I am planning for the week, I look at what I would like to get done, set up my meetings for the week, choose to say "No" to things I don't want to give my attention to, and glance at what the calendar looks like over the next month. Progress is made in weeks, and carving out time at the beginning of the week to plan ahead and review the past week is a good practice.

4. Showing up for the decade: Any large transformation — personal or professional — will take about 10 years. What will customers want 10 years from now? Who do you want to become 10 years from now? What will technology be like 10 years from now? These big questions allow us to create the future in the present, and allow us to define the dreams we want to chase. Many of us show up in the moments and the days, but fail to show up for the decade: we ignore the broad sweeps of time that will define our generation, and stay stuck in the quotidian and fail to create a better future.

Our lives are made up of the moments, days, weeks, and decades. It is in the moments that you show that you care, it is in the days that you demonstrate your agency, it is the weeks that you build and share your clarity, and it is in the decades that you define your character.

Showing up in space – being present for the rituals

There are four aspects of showing up in space too. Let us examine these.

1. Showing up for the work: Showing up for the work is to be present for problem solving and decision making. Decisions are the lifeblood of a product manager's work. To check if you are showing up for the work, review how many decisions you've made.

Showing up for the work is also about doing what the role requires of you: exercising curiosity when meeting users, staying attentive and engaged in meetings, providing feedback in reviews, writing specifications and having them reviewed, and all the other nuts and bolts of the product management role. Doing all of these well is required for showing up for the role.

2. Showing up for the challenges: Being present when the chips are down and when people need support is key to being a great product manager. Your job as a product manager is to help make things better in every group you participate in. It is part of your job to help and assist, and to do so while bringing optimism and energy to the team. A product manager is like the captain of the ship, and not being there for the challenges is like abandoning ship. Be there for the tough times and challenges.

3. Showing up for the socials: Being present for the birthday cake-cutting for the new engineer on your team may not seem like the most important thing but it is! As the product owner you have to be there for the cake-cutting, the lunches, the weekly pub outing, and the team bowling event. It is in getting to know people beyond their work that you get to know them at all and form connections that last beyond the years that you work together.

4. Showing up for the successes: Most good product managers I know show up for the work, the challenges, and the socials: and fail to show up for the

successes. This often comes from years of coaching that the success belongs to the team, and not to you, and so good product managers shy away from the limelight. However, great product managers recognize that they are part of the team, and they celebrate the successes with the team and also use the opportunity to shine the spotlight on those whose contributions were invaluable to the success. Showing up for successes is to complete the orchestration of your work as a product manager.

Challenges To Showing Up — And The Solution

There are 3 challenges that I have found to showing up.

1. Imposter syndrome: If you do not believe yourself to be worthy of the role you are in, it is almost impossible to show up for the rhythms and rituals without a sense of not being needed in that space. I have found that the best way to tackle imposter syndrome is to reverse the thought "I don't have skills for the role I am in" into asking "I have been placed in this role by people who believe my capabilities: what does this role require of me?". This gives way to agency, action, curiosity, learning, and improvement.

2. Remote work: Remote work makes it harder to show up as a product manager for the rhythms and the rituals of the work. Going to the office and hanging out with the team is a great way to show up; however, with many companies moving to remote or hybrid work it has become harder to show up and have those invaluable water-cooler conversations. We are all more considerate about how many video conferences to have, and these meetings are anyway not best suited for casual conversations. Embracing the changes required by remote work and showing up for meetings prepared, having read the pre-read materials, keeping the meeting short and focused, and leaving time at the end for chit-chat is a good way to show up for remote work.

3. **Physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing:** Showing up is next to impossible when you are sick. Taking care of your physical, mental, and emotional well-being is crucial to showing up. Showing up can be hard if you haven't slept well, if you haven't exercised, and if you haven't spent time with your loved ones. Starting your day with taking care of your physical energy, spending time meditating for your mental peace and wellbeing, and having conversations with friends and family for your emotional wellbeing is a good way to get ready for the intellectual work you need to dedicate your energies to through the day. Examine and learn what daily rituals help you with your physical, mental, and emotional health, and dedicate time towards them.

Showing up doesn't need to be an individual quest. Find an ally who can tell you if you have been showing up and have been present in conversations, and be an ally to others. Let people know if they are skipping too many meetings, tell people that they seemed distracted in the conversation, and call out people if they missed something they were supposed to be prepared for. By raising the people around you, you can support each other and become the team that always shows up: what a great place to be.

What Happens When You Show Up

"You have to create your own luck. You have to be aware of the opportunities around you and take advantage of them"
— Bruce Lee

When you show up and are present — daily, consistently, and with intention — you create the environment for good luck, and you are there when opportunity knocks on your door. You may have heard it said about someone that "They're just plain lucky!", or that "They happened to be at the right

place at the right time". However, behind this luck lies preparedness and the discipline of showing up. Show up, and transform your luck!

FAILING TO DO

"Doing what needs to be done may not make you happy, but it will make you great." — *George Bernard Shaw*

Product managers get things done. While Being is the engine that drives action, Doing is the action itself. There is no change in the world without doing. In this section we tackle the bread-and-butter of product management – the doing!

We start by looking at Discovery, how to get into what customers want. From there, we look at Planning & Prioritization, the doing of establishing a clear roadmap for the product. At times, it feels like all that a product manager does is sit in meetings, and so we next take a look at how to "Do" meetings, and related aspects of communication. Often, the reason for meetings is to

manage dependencies or drive alignment, so we take a look at this aspect of product management next.

We close this section with the most important part of doing – Doing What You Say – or Integrity. Integrity is foundational, and I have failed at this in many different ways: of over-promising and not delivering, of not stating precisely what I'll deliver, or breaking unsaid promises.

Mastering the "Doing" of product management will make you a rockstar product manager!

FAILING TO DO DISCOVERY

Also known as Opportunity

"In the expert's mind there are few possibilities, in the beginner's mind there are many" — *Shunryu Suzuki*

The Purpose Of Discovery

The purpose of discovery is to understand customer needs, and to go behind the surface of what is stated to understand motivations, drives, desires, and needs. Product-market fit is an outcome of understanding one or more customer needs and building a product that meets those needs. Product-market fit becomes a game of chance if discovery is not done in a systematic,

deliberate way: and which is why we speak of *finding* product-market fit, since discovery is a process.

Discovery is a process of truth-sensing, of going beyond the stated, and going beyond the single customer to discover a need or an insight that translates into an opportunity. Sometimes, when you have an insight, it may seem obvious: but through the discovery you see how it is in fact *not* obvious, and how it changes everything.

When I was working on Kaizala as part of the mobile incubations, we met over 500 small and medium businesses and generated several insights. One of the insights we had was "Work gets done on chat". This seems obvious – a statement of fact – but the implications of this "A–ha" was that we have to build our app to have a chat-based interface, and it gave us the conviction to build a product that was as simple and familiar as WhatsApp, and indeed to take on WhatsApp. I remember that the one time I had an argument with Rajiv was when I broke the chat interface design to bubble up work-related actions – which wasn't seeing much usage – into its own tab in the interface.

"You don't understand – I am disappointed – you don't see that everything has to work on chat, work gets done on chat", Rajiv said. His deep conviction from meeting several customers was that chat was the way work got done in India, and that we shouldn't sacrifice this to drive usage of another part of the product. Deep insights like this that come from discovery can help define the constraints for problem solving – should we try and get actions to work inside chat, or should we bubble actions outside of chat? The answer to this has to come from an understanding of customer truth, that work happens in chat, and so the actions have to be inside of chat.

Discovery is not the job of user research, design, or any other team: discovery is the heart of a product manager's job.

How To Do Discovery

It may sound obvious, but discovery is about meeting and speaking with customers often.

The reason I state this obvious fact is that many product managers don't meet their customers regularly, and prefer to stay in an ivory tower, working on execution of plans or on executive meetings. This is a sure way to fail at growing as a product manager.

There are 8 steps to doing discovery well:

1. Meet customers – daily, weekly, monthly: The first step to doing discovery is to meet customers often. This will vary depending on your product, but push the boundaries here. Demo your product to someone on another team and ask them what they think of it (can be done in the order of days!), meet with a customer to show them a feature you're building (can be done in the order of weeks), and conduct formal research with a customer panel (can be done in the order of months). Earlier I used to push back against meeting customers too frequently or meeting the wrong type of customers ("The engineer on the other team isn't our customer!"), but I stand corrected – quantity leads to quality, and discovery is a process and a muscle that needs to be built. The more you do, the more you'll become better at it, and you'll also learn what to keep and what to discard from your conversations.

2. Involve others, especially researchers – but don't let that stop you: Going to do discovery? Bring along your engineer, your intern, your marketing counterpart. Having others along helps reduce bias, you can check your memory with them later, and makes discovery a team sport. Most of all – and if you can afford it – do discovery more formally with a researcher or

a research agency. They can help with survey design, reducing bias, and conducting interviews the right way. However, don't let not having a researcher be an excuse to not meet customers: go out and meet people!

3. State what you are trying to discover, and tailor your discovery accordingly: What are you trying to discover – a product opportunity, a feature roadmap, validating if a feature meets customer needs, or something else? Tailor your research accordingly, and recruit the right users, get the right questionnaire, and have the right conversations.

I've too often made the mistake of and seen product managers meeting only with their existing users to understand what new product capability to build – if you are trying to figure out what product capability to build, you also need to meet with customers who abandoned your product, customers using competitive products, and customers who are on the fence and haven't yet bought into your product category.

So, state what you're trying to discover, and tailor your discovery accordingly.

4. Cast your net wide, and meet several types of users: Meet customers – the people who buy your product. Meet users – the people who use your product. Meet people who use competitive products, and those who don't use products in your product category at all, but who someday may be a customer. Too often in discovery, there is a strong selection bias in the types of users we recruit for the study, leading to answers that are self-fulfilling. By casting the net wide, we can find the insights that surprise us.

5. Ask lots of questions, and go beyond the first answer: Treat the time you get to meet customers as precious, and get the most out of it! Many product managers are quiet in customer sessions, mistakenly in listening

mode, when discovery is in fact an active, interrogative time. It is better to err on the side of interrogation, asking too many questions or asking leading questions to being on the side of asking too few. When I was a new product manager going on the first customer meetings, I was told to not ask leading questions, to listen, to not interrupt the customer, and to not offer solutions – all good suggestions, but they led to my remaining quiet through the entire interview!

When you meet customers, exercise your curiosity muscle – go beyond the first answer and ask five more questions, really dig in to understand the challenge, and don't let go till you get an answer! Ask about their lives, their challenges, their dreams, about how they use your product, what other products they use, what they want from the product, and so on. I have found that the best way to get customers to respond honestly and lose their fear of being wrong is to be really interested – once people see you are interested, they open up and share. In fact, it is in listening too much that you end up appearing formal or aloof, and customers stay fearful of what they are going to say.

6. Take copious notes and recordings: Don't rely on memory. Take copious notes during your customer meetings, and if possible, record the sessions and watch them later. The notes and recordings are useful in two ways: I've found that I note down what I find important in the moment, and it helps me remember better; also, the notes are invaluable in checking for adlibs or specific quotes from the customer later, especially when you want to socialise your research.

The point is that you want your customer meetings to be treated as precious time, that you have prepared for, where you take notes, and yet where you maintain an informal air and build rapport, so you can tease out the answers

to your numerous questions. Don't fall into the trap of not taking notes because of the informal tone of the conversation.

7. Synthesise your notes into insights: After your customer discovery meeting, especially if you went in a group, you'll have lots of notes. As the product manager, it is your job to synthesise these notes into insights, in partnership with the research team (if you have one). What you want coming out of your research is insights: either insights about the customer opportunity, or insights about customer jobs, the journeys that customers take to accomplish these jobs, and challenges and gaps that keep them from completing the job they are using your product for. Specifically, have the following outcomes from each research session: insights, user jobs, user journeys, feature gaps, and opportunities. This structure will be useful later in planning and prioritisation.

On Kaizala, we had a fantastic research and design team that not only had video snippets, but also had sketches of the "Day in the life of the customer", insights about customer needs, and storyboards of the customer journey. This kind of synthesis can really help in building the product later.

8. Socialise your research with everyone on the team: Good discovery is meant to be shared! I learnt this on Kaizala, where we put together a "walking deck" of our insights and shared it with everyone in the company over the course of the first year of the Kaizala journey. The research had become so much a part of me that I could literally wake up in the middle of the night and tell you our customer insights. Having the user insights in my bones helped me build a better product, and the reason I had these insights so deep was that I learnt from Rajiv the enthusiastic, self-effacing way in which he shared the customer insights with one and all. Through this process we saw that not only everyone on our team, but also people in other teams and

execs in other businesses would share our insights as their own: this was the success of the discovery!

Challenges To Discovery

There are 3 challenges you are likely to confront in doing discovery often and systematically.

The first is the "already know" challenge – of people who feel that new research, especially if it yields the same results as previous research, is useless. This couldn't be further from the truth, for confirmation and rejection of hypotheses are both valuable, and insightful. To know 5 years after a particular fact was found that it is still true is even more valuable in the social sciences than the hard sciences – finding the unchanging among changing circumstances is a goldmine. Related to this challenge is the 'ROI' question, the return on investment from research; the best companies know that this question is as meaningless as asking the return on investment of integrity – customer obsession is a cultural trait of the best companies. It is a low-ROI effort to find the ROI of research!

The second challenge is almost the opposite – of doing research to confirm what you want to do, or what an exec has asked you to do. Having a going-in bias when doing research, or hearing only what you want to hear from users is a poor way to do discovery. However, when the heat of a solution is on you, as it can happen, it is very hard to hear or know anything other than what you want, and you almost will the world to provide you with the clues that point to what you are trying to find. In the long run, this is a path to failure: it is ignoring the evidence, it is faking the experiments, and it is bound to go up in flames. History is filled with stories of scientists and businessmen who have faked the results, and the only thing to be said of this is that it is "bad

science" – an insult worse than "lack of integrity" or "dishonesty" to good geeks

The third challenge to discovery is the temptation to use secondary research or read research reports. This is not all bad, but if this is all that you're doing, then you're doing it wrong. In your busy schedule you may feel that reading the research report, or reading that Gartner, Forrester, or McKinsey report is sufficient to understand the customer. It is not. These reports have their own biases; they often try to draw broad trends and influence investment outcomes. Similarly, reading research reports produced internally can be a good addition to meeting customers, but is never sufficient – they may have their own motivations and biases at worst, and are second-hand reportage at best.

Despite the calls on your time, schedule your discovery, and do it often, despite questions of value, and in an unbiased way.

FAILING TO DO PLANNING

Also known as Roadmaps

"A goal without a plan is just a wish" — Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The Purpose Of Planning

A product plan is the series of steps that you will take to meet the customer opportunity in the given strategic context. The plan is the nuts-and-bolts – the product capabilities, the minimum-viable-product (MVP) scope, the ordering of work, the engineering estimates, the dependencies, and the GTM approach.

Planning is a snapshot in time, a mental exercise done over a few weeks each year for a large enterprise product, or over a few days each quarter in a start-up environment, of thinking through what needs to be done to accomplish your goals, the challenges you may encounter on the way, and the constraints you have as a team. Planning forces you to push the boundaries of how much is knowable in advance.

Early in my career, I used to get frustrated when things never went according to plan. It was later that I realised that all plans are bound to fail: customer needs evolve, and the strategic context changes. In fact, it is more than that: the only way you can get a plan perfectly right is when there is no information asymmetry, which means there is no opportunity for arbitrage, no chance of any profit or value creation.

So, if we are to create anything of value, we will have plans that are incorrect, and what is needed in addition to plans is the ability to adapt to change. The purpose of planning then is to know the contours of the landscape in advance and help you adapt to change faster: if you have a plan, then you understand your goals, your challenges, and constraints, and you can adapt to change faster than if you didn't have a plan.

There are two distinct parts to explore in planning: the process of "how" to do planning, and the plan itself: the output of planning.

The Planning Process: How To Do Planning?

"Chance favours the prepared mind",
— Louis Pasteur

Over the years, I've participated in many planning processes. The best planning processes have 5 characteristics:

1. They are inclusive: The best planning sessions are inclusive. The planning process is run by a product manager and includes people across engineering, design, research, and partner teams, and sometimes even customers. Executives are invited to sit in on the planning process. Unfortunately, I have seen too many situations of "we want to keep the planning process closed", or even "we won't have space in the room for more people". A master product manager will own the outcome of the plan while including everyone into the planning process; a novice will exclude people from the planning process because they aren't confident of being able to take inputs into the planning process and to yet own the outcomes.

2. There is pre-work before planning: Customer research, competitive landscape, market research, product usage analytics, and other relevant information should be ready before the planning meetings. The planning pre-work should be available to read before the planning meetings, and having read through the pre-work should be the only criteria for participation in the planning process. The best planning sessions have good pre-read material that all the participants have read and have had the time to think about and comment on. Weak planning sessions don't have customer or market context, or these are shared hurriedly, and participants haven't taken the effort to read through the material.

It is best to cancel or reschedule planning sessions if the pre-work to planning hasn't been completed. Half-assed preparation and lackadaisical participation results in wrong plans.

3. They are time-boxed: The incremental value of a one month long annual planning exercise over a one-week long planning exercise is minimal, and in fact is likely to be negative. Keep the time to plan short and focused - ideally one week for cross-company annual planning, and at most a couple of days

for quarterly planning. Similarly, the prep time for the pre-work should be short and focused. The intuition behind keeping planning short is that the planning is not the work, and planning takes time and energy away from the most important work of building products that solve customer needs. Keeping planning time-boxed allows people to bring their best energy and optimism to the planning process, and experience planning as a crucial part of creating success, rather than as a time-sink and a distraction from work.

Weak planning sessions don't have a clear timeline, and participants don't have a sense of when the planning will end and what the outcome of planning will be.

4. They are time-aligned across teams: In addition to being time-boxed, good planning sessions are time-aligned across teams. This means that everyone in the company and across related teams are planning around the same time. This can be quarterly boundaries, or any other arbitrary calendar time, but the planning sessions are rhythmic and known well in advance to everyone. This allows teams to effectively take dependencies on each other and to be aligned on plans.

The best planning sessions bring together related teams in planning, with platform teams going through planning first and user experience teams going through planning later, where they know what platform capabilities will be built out.

Weak planning sessions are not time aligned and happen at different times for different teams, which makes it hard to make requests of other teams and to take dependencies on other teams' outcomes.

5. They are outcome focused: The best planning sessions have clear outcomes: articulation of the strategy, areas of work, people assignments,

cross-team agreements, execution timelines, and future investigations. Further, these discussions and agreements take place as part of the planning sessions, and not on the side-lines. Side-line agreements are often short-term, opportunistic, and "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" kind of agreements across teams that don't result in the best outcome for the customer, and are done because of a fear of candid conversation in the main planning session.

Weak planning sessions do not have clear outcomes. The planning sessions are used to talk about company vision and mission, and as a social event, rather than as an opportunity to have clarity on who does what in the next few months. Having clear outcomes from planning is a responsibility of product management.

Outputs To Planning: The Plan

A productive planning session will have a clear plan as an outcome. While there are different ways to present planning outcomes, I have found that a particular format has worked well for me across different types of products. A coach of mine had the format of "What is so?" (the present context), "What is missing?" (the gap between the present and your desired future), and "What is next?" (the plan to go from here to there), which is a good way to think of the structure of the output to planning. The different parts of the plan are:

1. Inquiry: An inquiry helps people get into the frame of an open-ended conversation. Starting with an inquiry – a "How might we?" kind of question – is helpful in kicking off the planning process, and also in sharing out the plan with the team later. This is done as pre-work, and shared in the output of planning.

2. Market context and business update: Having the market context and an update on the business is useful to ground the planning outcomes in reality. Usage numbers, metrics like acquisition cost and churn rates, competitive growth, market trends, technology trends should be synthesised into not more than 3 slides. This is done as pre-work, and shared in the output of planning.

3. Customer insights, jobs, and journeys: Research around what your customer needs are, the existing user jobs, and the journeys users are taking to fulfil the jobs and the friction and challenges in those journeys should be shared out as a pre-work to the planning, and as part of the output of the planning.

4. Product investment thesis: From the above 3 sections of "What is so?" – the inquiry, the market context & business updates, and the customer insights – we can build out a key outcome of the planning: the articulation of "What is missing?". This requires the ability to look at the present state, and answer the question "What is missing? Why doesn't our present state fulfil our ambitions – what else do we need to do?". As an example, we may answer this question as, "Customer support is a key missing piece", or "The sales process is too broken and needs simplification". From exploring and answering this, we can start to form a product investment thesis – the pieces of the product that are underinvested in that keep us from achieving our ambitions.

5. Investment areas and allocation: Now, we move into the "What is next?" part of planning outcomes: defining the investment areas. Irrespective of products, I've seen that Infrastructure and Quality are durable investment areas. Infrastructure may consist of features, based on where you are in your product lifecycle: test harness, automation, experimentation platform, analytics and telemetry etc. These are the things that you need to invest in

continuously as your product scales up. Quality, similarly, is a durable investment area: investments in performance, reliability, app size, and user experience quality are always important, and an investment area that will be durable.

However, customers don't care about your infrastructure and quality is expected from you. So, the remaining investment areas should be about customer value: what the customer expects of your product but you don't have yet (table stakes), what will make the customer go "Wow, I want that!" (differentiators), and what bets you want to make that you think will pay off (bets). Another way to think about your investment areas is around your business metrics: investments for acquisition, investments for usage, investments for growth, investments for retention and customer happiness. While these are generic investment areas, one of the outcomes of planning should be specific investment areas for your given market context and product.

Once you have your investment areas, another thing to clarify is the allocation by area, which is an outcome of the investment thesis thinking – is quality the biggest issue you have, in which case you should maybe have 50% of the team work on quality? Or is your challenge that customers aren't interested in your product; in which case you should maybe invest deeply in differentiators in the next 6 months? Having a percentage-wise allocation of how much of the team will work on different areas is a good way to resource-fuel or resource-starve different areas so that you drive the outcomes you want from planning.

6. Product investments roadmap: This is the heart of planning – the list of work items to work on, organised by the investment area. At this time of planning, it is unlikely that you will be able to get a prioritised list of work

within each area, since you would be missing important information about engineering cost and dependencies. Now, on the feature investments themselves: I have personally found that brainstorming sessions are perhaps a too democratic tool to use, at least the way they are typically run (sticky notes on a whiteboard with votes). Such brainstorming sessions result in favouring extroverted personalities. Rather, for each feature investment area, have an expert in that area first share their list, and have people add to that list. As an extreme example, having a brainstorming session in an area like performance or security can be frustrating to the experts since a lot of basic or cool ideas will get votes, and the important, unsexy work will go off the backlog.

Having a thoughtful roadmap in each investment area that is built up by the experts, and challenged and added to by the rookies is a fantastic outcome of planning, and helps raise the knowledge of the rookies.

7. Areas of ownership and organisational planning: Planning is also an appropriate time to discuss areas of ownership. If you have decided to double investments in a certain area – like Quality – for the next 6 months, then how are you funding this growth? This should be a concern for the product manager of the area, even if they don't have the authority to fund more engineers. They should raise this question, of how the new investment is being funded, who the people are who will work in the area, and so on. This curiosity can generate the conversations for clarity on the organisation setup to support the plans.

ASIDE: A note on OKRs (objectives and key results)

Objectives and Key Results (or OKRs) were all the rage a few years ago, and are still being used by many companies. This methodology of tracking

results was popularized by Google. However, just like any other methodology, I've seen teams become slaves to OKRs; more commonly, I've seen teams using OKRs poorly and ineffectively. OKRs are a common outcome of planning: my only suggestion is to not over-spend time on making OKRs, and to rather start small and spend the time on tracking and checking-in on the OKRs to see if you are actually using this tool. Jettison it if you're not using it well.

Once you have the plan formed, make sure to socialise your plans broadly within your team and partner teams, so that everyone can understand your plans, and make their plans accordingly.

Challenges To Planning

There are 3 challenges to planning that I have encountered repeatedly over the years.

The first challenge is in the "how" of running the planning process – when the planning process is not inclusive, or the planning process is top-down instead of being bottoms-up. In doing this, you avoid getting the best ideas from people who are often closest to the customer or product truth. You also lose the opportunity to enrol people into the plans, and make people feel a sense of ownership towards the outcomes they are working towards. The variant of this challenge is when inclusion in planning or bottoms-up planning is done as a corporate responsibility, without truly believing the value. This results in the owners of the planning having a plan in mind before the planning process, and then ignoring suggestions and pushing the team towards the plan they already have. Charismatic product managers can shape plans this way, but this doesn't work in the long run, and you get the reputation of someone who isn't truly inclusive. Avoid this. Bring your ideas

to the planning in truly a democratic way and engage in discussions and debates to generate the best plan that everyone is enrolled in.

The second challenge is in the "what's so", or the market and customer context – when the plans are "made up", without the rigorous pre-work required for a positive planning outcome. If you start your planning process without having done the work around the business context or having customer insights, and have an approach of "I'll wing it", you will generate plans that will not be truthful. Again, I have seen smart product managers being great at being able to wing it – by making up customer scenarios or business challenges that aren't grounded in reality but that sound plausible – and then generating plans and building products that fail, only to have forgotten their own made-up stories, and wondering why the product didn't do well in the market. Avoid this. Do the pre-work, make sure it is shared well ahead of time, and hold the participants accountable to have read the pre-work before participating in the planning discussion.

The third challenge is in the "what's next", or the plan itself – when you end up thinking of the plan as definite, and you get too wedded to your plans and are not adaptable to change. This is the stickiest problem; even though I know this, I still get attached to plans and am slow to change to a changing market context. Operating on old plans when the environment has changed – and when you know it – is foolish. The reason this happens so often is that the cost of change is seen as high – changing course, making fresh plans, communicating the change to stakeholders, breaking commitments to partner teams – all of this is deeply uncomfortable. However, hiding your head in the sand or making a wish that your plans will work despite change is a sure-fire way to fail. Avoid this. The best product managers are able to be clear-sighted about change, and are able to adapt their plans to the change: that is the point of plans in the first place.

Changing Plans: How To Do This Well

Change is constant. There can be external changes in the market or customer context, or internal changes in your product or company context.

There are 3 aspects to handling changes to plans well:

1. Take ownership of the change without guilt, but with empathy and listening: When change happens, you will need to change your plans: that adaptability is key to your role. So, first of all, don't feel guilty about changing your plans and take full ownership of the change. I've been through this – sharing a plan with the team, and then being asked "But how can you change our plans when we are half-way through the sprint?" – and shuffling my feet, mumbling, and feeling guilty about it. What is needed at times of change is empathy, to understand how the change affects people on your team who may be wedded to plans. Hearing them out, and helping them understand the reason for the change and coaching them to cope with the change is a real part of the job.

2. Communicate the change with clarity and speed; "Don't know the new plan" is a valid answer: When there are external or internal changes that will change your plans, it is good to communicate these changes with clarity and speed to the team. There is always a question of "How soon should I tell the team?", and I would err on the side of sooner than later. You don't want people to find out about the change from elsewhere, for there to be idle rumours about changes coming down the pipe.

That said, don't communicate big changes in a drip-feed: "There are some changes, I am finding out more, and we'll set up time with the entire team to talk about the change and its impact to us" is a better position than sharing

individual bits of constantly changing information in the name of transparency.

When you do have the meeting to share the changed external or internal context with the rest of the team, limit your sharing to speaking about the change and its potential impact to the current plan. You would likely not have had the time to determine what the new plan ought to be, and will need inputs from people on the team to figure out the new plan. So, don't speak or speculate about the new plan, and instead enrol people to help you with processing the change and coming up with the new plan together.

3. Communicate the change to partners who have dependencies, and try to make it up to them: Partners have dependencies on your work. Your promises to your partners may be affected by the changes you are dealing with. Again, the above two points apply: share the change with partners with clarity, speed, and without unnecessary guilt, and with empathy towards the impact to the partner. After this, try and work with the partner to see how you can make it up to them: maybe you can lend them some resources, or work out creative alternative paths for the partner to not be impacted. However, don't overdo this either – just like you are prepared to change and be adaptable, the partner too should be ready for change – so don't let your feelings of guilt overdo the making it up with partners. Strong partnerships are built on openness, trust, and mutual respect, not on feelings of guilt and anxiety.

When you are able to plan effectively, and are able to use the plan to navigate change in a fluid way to reach your goals, you have become a master of planning. This is something each product manager should strive for.

FAILING TO DO PRIORITIZATION

Also known as Scope

"Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things."
— Peter Drucker

The Purpose Of Prioritisation

There would be no need to prioritise in a world of infinite resources and time. Given our limited time and resources, what is the most impactful set of things that we should work on?

Prioritisation is the act of picking the highest return-on-investment work items from the plan and maximising the utilisation of the team at all times, while meeting other constraints like ship dates or demos. It is a complex multivariate value maximisation exercise that you will never get right.

What makes prioritisation harder is that work item estimates are inaccurate by large degrees, different work items will complete at different times, and the people on a particular area of work cannot always work on another area. So, the act of taking the business prioritisation and translating it into an engineering resourcing plan is a complex problem that engineering managers solve.

From the planning output, we would have a sense of the "benefit" side of the prioritisation equation – at least the business impact and customer value from the work items. However, what is not clear during planning is the "cost" side of the prioritisation equation: the engineering estimates, the dependencies, the ordering of work, etc.

So, typically after planning – when there is a roadmap and allocation of resources for each investment area – taking that roadmap and saying, "To meet our objectives for this quarter we are going to prioritise these 3 items of work and not do the rest" – that is the outcome of prioritisation. It is the outcome of an analysis of what is the maximum possible given the resources at your disposal. At Microsoft, this used to be a formal process back in the day, with adds-cuts meetings done a few weeks after planning, when all the preliminary design and costs had been done, and you could now "draw a cut line" below which nothing would be done.

Good prioritisation creates clarity. It allows you to say no to middling priorities, and pick the few things that the team can deliver with high

confidence and quality that are most impactful for the business and customer, with enough slack for you to adapt to changes in plans.

How To Do Prioritisation

Let us start with an example. Let us say that as part of planning, 3 engineers have been assigned to your area. In the upcoming quarter, you have 3 engineers * 12 weeks * 5 days / week = 180 dev days. Now, assume 1 day a week (or 80 % productivity) for training, etc., which brings down our dev days to 144. Now, you can pick any factor based on history or heuristics for daily engineering productivity – say 70% – which brings us down to 100 dev days.

This is the amount of developer time you have in the quarter. Now, based on the planning that you have completed, you would have a long list of feature ideas in the roadmap. As a next set, you need 4 pieces of information:

1. Cost – Engineering cost of each item: Doing 1-pager PRDs and design estimates by experts on the team is a good way to get the approximate engineering cost of each item. To do this, you will need to take the 5 or 10 items on your roadmap and break them up further into the same level of granularity – it is unhelpful to have some items with a cost of 20 days (as an example) and others with a cost of 1 day. At Microsoft, we used to break all work into costs of < 1 day (bug fix), half week (low cost), 1 week (medium), 2 weeks (high cost). Getting a similar granularity of work across work-items is a good outcome from this exercise.

2. Dependencies – Engineering ordering of each item: Some items, like APIs or platform capabilities, need to be done before other items can be worked on. So, having ordering and internal dependencies is an important input to prioritisation.

3. Risk – External dependencies for each item: There will also be areas where you are dependent on work done by teams outside yours. Having this information is also important to doing prioritisation. Think of this as a risk score for the item between 0 (won't happen) to 1 (will happen).

4. Value – Customer or business value for each item: While you may have a customer and business value defined at the macro level, once you break down the work into engineering work items, it is important to continue to reflect the value of the work. You can score this on a scale of 1 to 5.

At this point, rather than use a more complex tool, a spreadsheet is handy: having all the work items on a spreadsheet, with columns for value, cost, risk, and any ordering dependencies.

This is the point where you will likely see that the 10 items on your roadmap have been translated into 40 work items, and have a total cost of 300 days! It is time to prioritise…

This is now quite easy to do: the first step is to have a column for confidence * benefit/cost (ROI) for each line item, and order your spreadsheet on this column. The next step is to examine if any internal dependencies or ordering rules have been broken, and tweak the ordering based on these dependencies. Then, it is a simple matter of drawing a red line (the cut line) in your spreadsheet where the sum of the cost exceeds 100 (the number of days you have).

The reason I am being specific with this is – if you have done this process well, you can now hold the line. There will be attempts by people to bring items above the line – don't allow this unless there is a good justification of why the benefit should be higher, or the cost is lower, or the confidence is higher. While I have been very specific here about the model, the idea is to

give you a sense of how you can construct your own model, get agreement on the model, and then use the model to make prioritisation calls and hold the line.

As an aside, there is a question of how to prioritise investments in quality, or user experience bug fixes, fit-and-finish, and other investments that everyone knows is important, but is never quite sure how to prioritise. The golden rule that was shared with me many years ago is: "A customer won't see a feature that hasn't shipped, but will see a bug that isn't fixed". Now, everyone knows this, however, prioritising this work is always challenged by differentiators or competitive response and so on. The best way that I have seen this done is to time-box investments in these key areas: so, out of the 100 days you have, carve out 15 days for quality investments or fit-and-finish, so that every quarter there is a fixed allocation of time towards improving the product and that doesn't need to go through the prioritisation exercise.

Challenges To Prioritisation

There are three challenges to doing prioritisation well. The first problem is to get accurate information on costs, ordering, and dependencies. The second problem is to get agreement on the prioritisation model or framework. The third problem is holding the line on the prioritisation.

The first challenge is that it is hard to get accurate information on engineering costs. This is not because of nefarious efforts by engineers to undermine product managers, as I once thought, but because engineering complexity is hard to predict. It is a truism that things that a product manager thinks are simple will take weeks, and things that a product manager thinks are hard will take days. I once made a request to change the colour of an icon, which was budgeted as a five-week work item (true story!). While it is important as
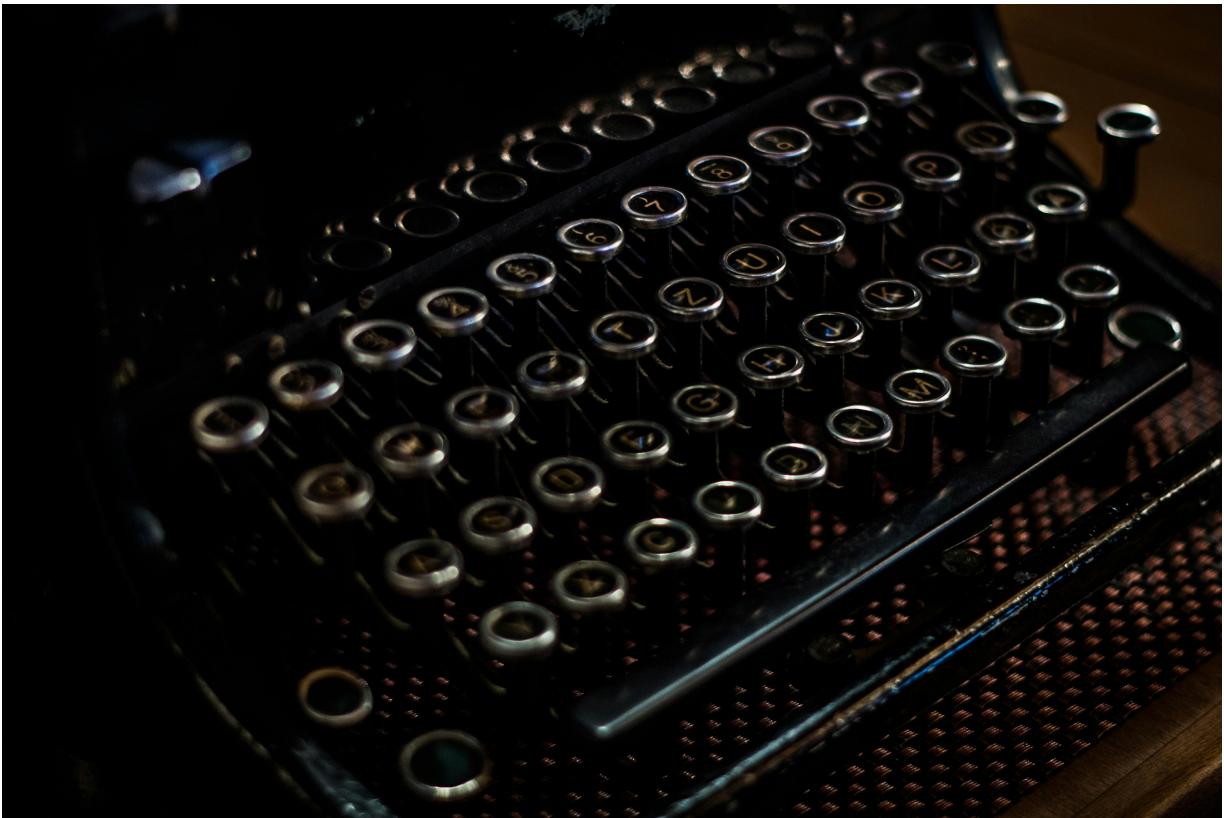
a product manager to understand the costs and pressure test them, I would err on the side of trusting your engineer, and also knowing that they too are just guessing. The best approach is to prioritise based on the best information at the moment, and be adaptable to changing costs.

The second challenge is to get agreement on the prioritisation model. The starting point is to realise that all models are wrong, but some are useful. There are many prioritisation frameworks and models a search-click away; however, I have found that the prioritisation model with the fewest moving parts (cost, benefit, risk) is the easiest to understand and consistently used. The reason it will be hard to get agreement on the prioritisation model is that by adding another parameter and scoring it in a particular way, you can end up with a different set of priorities, that may be more favourable to one of the stakeholders – as an example, if I were marketing head and asked that we should add "customer acquisition cost" as a new parameter to the prioritisation model (and separate it out from benefits), it could lead to scoring differentiators highly and quality low. The suggestion here is to agree on a simple, and transparent prioritisation model that can be consistently applied, so people get comfortable with waiting for the next sprint or next quarter for their items that didn't make the list.

The third challenge to prioritisation is to hold the line on the prioritisation. This is a matter of finding a balance – you will have requests to prioritise your executives favourite feature over something of customer value (which you should push back against), but you may get genuine requests based on changing market or customer context to prioritise something over an item that has become less important (which you should consider). Holding the line on prioritisation too hard can make you lose out on new opportunities; holding the line lax on prioritisation can cause you to do only things that please others and never deliver customer value.

Outputs To Prioritisation

The best output to prioritisation is a simple output: a spreadsheet with all the items on the roadmap scored and sorted according to a simple & transparent prioritisation framework (cost, benefit, and risk). Share this spreadsheet out broadly, so everyone has insight into the prioritisation. Also, once you have agreement on the prioritisation, don't update values dynamically through the quarter in the spreadsheet to reflect the latest prioritisation, and hold the spreadsheet as a snapshot in time of the beginning of the quarter agreements. Making dynamic changes throws people off, and they worry that prioritisation is being done based on some other information. Make notes of changes to prioritisation that can be tracked separately to understand where new information resulted in a change to the prioritisation.

FAILING TO DO COMMUNICATION

Also known as Writing & Speaking

"You need to acquire the skills of writing and speaking that make for candour, rigour, and clarity. You cannot think clearly if you cannot speak and write clearly." — John Searle

The Purpose Of Communication

Early on in my product management journey, I was told that a core product management skill was to "influence without authority". How can you influence without authority when engineers, designers, researchers,

and other functions don't report to you and yet you need to get work done through people in those roles?

The heart of influence without authority is clear, compelling, and consistent communication. The purpose of communication is to think together, share decisions, and energise and motivate. It is the tool that you have as a product manager to get everyone on the team moving in the same direction. It is through communication that you can enrol people into your ideas, your vision, and have them change their mind about positions they may have held and adopt your positions instead. Communication is a virus, a way to hack other people's brains…

As an aside, when people ask me whether they need to have a computer science degree to be a product manager, I share the example of one of my mentors in product management who did not graduate engineering or have any special interest in computer science growing up. She graduated in English, mastered communication and problem solving, and grew into a senior product leadership role at Microsoft. She used to talk about how every group of people – like engineers or designers – had their own language, and mastering that language was the key to getting work done.

Communication is the fabric of work, and mastering communication – speaking and writing – will help you master product management. The reason I have titled this section "Doing Communication" is that communicating is a conscious act, and can be planned and done systematically to achieve goals.

How To Do Communication

"I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say"
— Flannery O'Connor

There are essentially 2 ways to communicate – writing-reading and speaking- listening. In a simplistic sense, the "how" of writing and speaking is to do it. The more you write and the more you speak, the better you will become at it (assuming you have an ability to pick up on feedback and improve, even marginally, over time).

Writing is a muscle to practise daily. A product manager has a lot of opportunity to write – writing product requirement documents, making presentations, writing press releases, sending status reports, and writing emails is part of the daily job. In writing any of these, practice writing well: your writing should be simple, short, well organised, and easy to follow. Your writing must become clear and concise, with repetition of key points only to drive retention and understanding. A good product manager knows how to use pictures, numbers, diagrams as part of their writing to create understanding across all types of readers. Also, getting the basics of business writing right consistently – starting with the summary, the key problem, the analysis, and the recommendations – is important to do consistently. There is no room for sloppy writing as a product manager.

Mark Twain said, "I didn't have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one" – and good writing takes time: it takes time to write and 3 times as much to revise. I still remember revising a set of slides more than 40 times for Rajiv. There was even feedback about slowing down the animation, or changing the colours (I've spoken about how much he cared about the small things earlier!). However, the point of the incessant revision wasn't to bother me, but was to get the communication right: for it to be it's most easy to follow along and impactful for the reader.

Speaking is an equally important skill to master. I struggled through my career with speaking – not because I wasn't good at it (I am!), but because I

found that as a deeply introverted person, I often lacked the energy for lengthy back and forth debates and discussions. They wore me out, and I would see others around me get a lot of energy from the conversations. So, speaking isn't only public speaking (which is easy to practise and learn), or exec presentations (which too can be learnt), but the daily speaking at stand-up meetings and one-on-ones that need to be mastered. The other challenge that I faced is that I found that the people who are best at this are able to navigate the conversation and take different positions, are able to argue the details, and have a memory of the discussion for later.

Over time, I found a few tips to do this well: first, learn the details before getting into the discussion, maybe in a 1:1 setting; second, speak up and share your thoughts without being stuck to them; third, never end a discussion without summarising or capturing the key points for the group to remember; last, take your own notes after each discussion, even if just for 5 minutes, to remember later what you discussed. For someone with a bad memory like mine, the third tip was invaluable for me to recollect before the next meeting what the key points were and what was agreed to.

This loop of writing – speaking – writing can be a powerful one, once mastered. You put down your thoughts, maybe on email, and send it out. Someone will reply and the conversation may flow. Then you may bring together people in a meeting to make decisions after gathering all the information over email and synthesising it. Once you speak and make decisions at the meeting, you may communicate this out through writing – as a document or a presentation. Though this sounds quotidian, this is the bread and butter of a product manager's job.

A Note On Email & Chat

I have struggled with email and chat apps like Slack/Teams throughout my career. Both Microsoft and Google are big on email and chat, and the volume of email in a day can be hard to get through. You may get at least a hundred emails a day; you probably need to read 20 of those carefully; you may need to reply to 15 of them; you may need to send out 5 of your own emails. And this is just email – chat has made it worse in many ways.

I have seen people constantly triage emails with no down time, send and reply to emails outside work hours, and even reply to emails while on vacation! This is unhealthy for the culture and for the individual in the long run, and makes emails a competitive sport.

Over time, I've become better at email and chat, and the way I've become better is not by reading and writing more, but by setting boundaries, using a few tools, and doing less. To dig into each of these:

Setting boundaries is just a rule for myself to not reply to email or chat outside of blocked times on my calendar. You can decide what these times are for you. For me, I had chosen 7:30 - 8:00 am for triage, read, reply for overnight emails from the US (since I mostly worked in India), 12:00 - 12:30 for an email push before lunch, 5:00 - 6:00 for evening emails and things I want to send out before the end of day. I did this on every weekday, and never on weekends. This – 2 hours a day – still feels like too much time in emails and chat.

While I tried various tools and techniques to manage emails, a few basics helped me with my email management (and I miss these tools in Slack & Teams!). The first was to triage emails quickly – delete without reading, read and delete, read and reply, read and save for later attention. The second was to use the classification and read important emails first (and reply to them). The third was to use rules to move emails from certain people to certain

folders. The only thing I'll suggest against is to get enamoured by techniques like Zero Inbox or GTD – I've been there, and while they are useful concepts, they add too much stress, and take the focus away from customer value to replying to emails – where you want to spend the least amount of time.

Doing less email and chat is a good thing, but how to do this? The first is a matter of discipline: kill the fear of missing out. The second is to practise and become good at apologising for missing an email – "if it's important they'll call" is a good rule of thumb, and if you are doing the rest of the role of a product manager, people will know how to find you for something that needs your attention. The last is to meet more people casually through the day or get on calls with people, rather than rely on email as your only source of information. If you're meeting enough people each day, they'll tell you what they want from you and you can get it done (be on the sending side of the emails!). You can even be open about this – ask people to tell you what they need from you when they see you in a meeting or a video conference, rather than wait on email.

Challenges To Communication

There is one main challenge to communication as a product manager, and two ways to address this challenge.

The challenge is best framed as a question, and then explored: "How do you communicate, and influence through your communication – either writing or spoken – when you are neither the expert, nor are you the one with the most experience?". As a product manager, I had the opportunity to work on many different areas of work – Outlook, Microsoft 365, Azure, Teams, Android – and in each of these teams I was a newbie with no expertise or experience.

Communicating and making decisions in this environment can be fraught with anxiety and stress.

Put another way, "How do you communicate when you are bound to ask foolish questions and make mistakes?". The fear, anxiety, and stress of communication fell away for me when I embraced being a fool – not a pejorative, but in the highest meaning of the word, as an example from the Tarot card for fool: "The Fool is someone who is called to go on a journey to gain wisdom, to go on an adventure, or to accomplish a large task."

So, there are 3 ways to combat this challenge to communication, of being the one with the least knowledge but who has to bring together people and make decisions. The first is to drop your ego and be the Fool, to open up to mistakes and missteps in the cause for forward progress. The second is to speak from your bedrock – to ground yourself in customer truth and always speak from this point of view; you can be criticised, but the customer cannot! The third is to realise that in your role as the glue between various experts and executives, communication as the medium of collaboration is bound to be fraught with challenges: so, stop expecting perfection, but rather strive for small wins and forward progress.
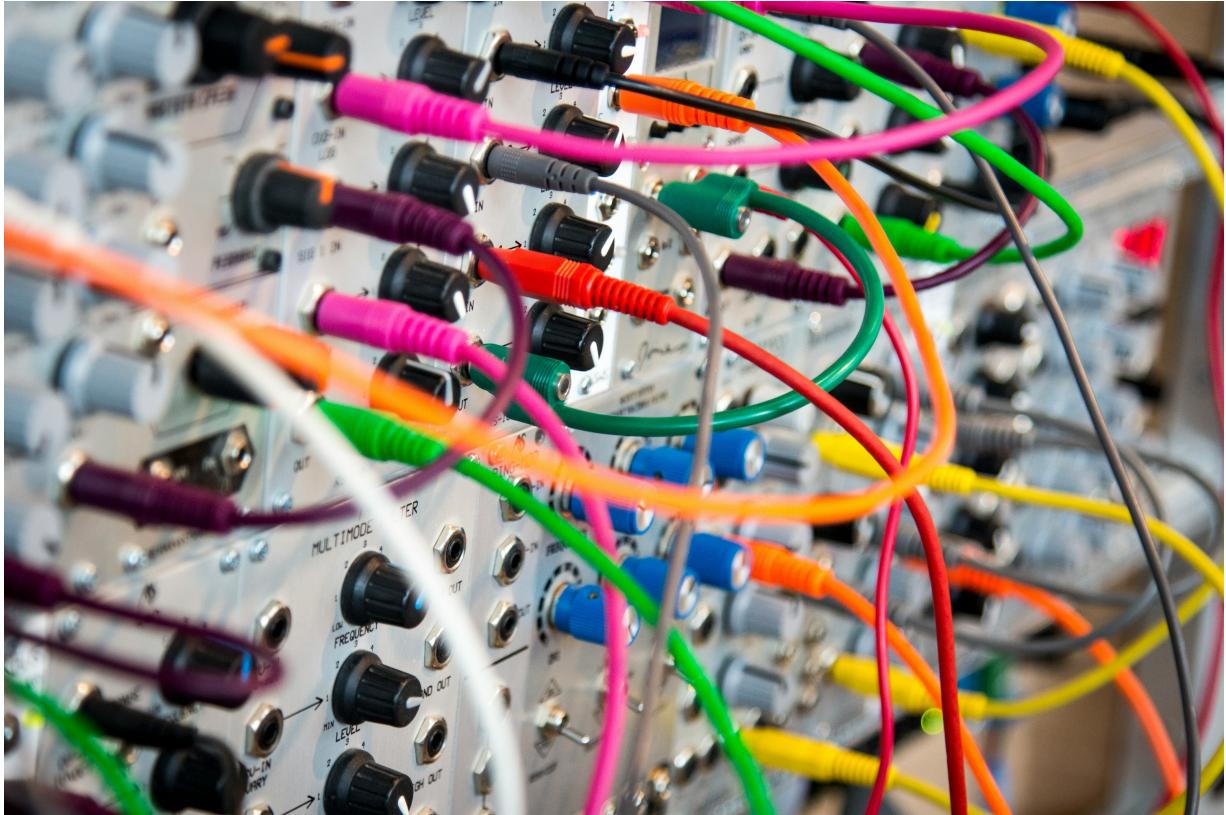
Outputs To Communication

Product requirements documents (PRD) & presentations aren't the outputs to communication. The output of communication is forward progress towards building a product that serves the customer, and clear expectations around this. I have seen that there are 5 outputs to communication, whether written or spoken, and independent of the format of the writing or speech.

1. **FYI: Status updates** – The first is a "For your information", where you are informing people of progress or status, without requiring any action from them. They may have follow up questions from this information.
2. **FYA: Decisions** – The second is "For your attention", where decisions have been made, and you want people to pay attention to these decisions and acknowledge that they are in alignment, or protest these decisions.

3. **FYR: Input needed** – The third is, "For your review", where you want comments and inputs from the people you are addressing the communication to. Whether it is comments in a Google doc, or a review meeting, PRDs and presentations are often for the review of others.

4. **FD: Discussion needed** – The fourth is "For discussion", where you don't have decisions, but are trying to learn more and perhaps reach a conclusion.

5. **AI: Action needed** – The last is "Action item", where you require specific actions to be taken by the people you are communicating with, and where you may in fact assign actions to individuals.

I have found that using these prefixes in email subject lines makes it clear for people what the communication is about, and what output they are expected to look for in the communication. Often, mismatched expectations – where, as an example, you may share information as a status, and the recipient may

perceive it as a place to provide input – is the cause of lengthy communication.

FAILING TO DO DEPENDENCY MANAGEMENT

Also known as Alignment

"It is literally true that you can succeed best and quickest by helping others to succeed." — Napoleon Hill

The Purpose Of Alignment

It is impossible to build a product in a single team with no dependencies. Getting people to agree to the plans that you have made, and to deliver on their commitments is the heart of alignment.

Alignment can be incredibly tough or incredibly simple. I struggled with getting alignment on plans for the longest time, and it was frustrating: "Why can't people just agree to what is so obviously good for the customer?" was my constant rant, with often the conclusion that "Man, they're either dumb or evil!".

Alignment became simple when I realised that there is no *alignment* required when you help people succeed. Shifting from a "My way or the highway" to a "How can I help you?" mindset removes the need to align: who is not going to agree to being successful?!

The purpose of alignment is then to put in the hard work to find the win-win outcomes across your team, and people or teams that your team depends on. When every product manager works on win-win outcomes, the customer wins! It results in people agreeing and moving in the same direction. This results in higher velocity of product development, and a multiplier effect, without efforts working against each other and dissipating the outcome for the customer.

Now, you may have agreements in place, and everyone bought in on the win-win outcomes: but dependency management is also about checking in on commitments, and ensuring things are on track, and making changes based on changes to commitments. Trust is built not blindly, but by following up, through dialogue on ensuring alignment is maintained.

Great product managers are able to create alignment by focusing on win-win outcomes, communicating the agreements on dependencies, checking-in to

ensure that commitments are on track, adapting early if there are changes to commitments, and delivering customer value by ensuring that agreements are met.

How To Do Alignment

Let us take a concrete example. Let us say that you are the product manager on a streaming music app, and that you have met customers in India, and understood their needs and context. You realise through this research that customers in India would prefer a phone-number based sign-up over an email-based sign-up, and that they would prefer to make payments using UPI (the unified payments infrastructure that is popular in India) rather than credit cards.

Now, all you need to do is to convince your platform team to deliver on APIs for phone number sign-up (using text messages and one-time-passwords) and UPI payments that your client engineers can implement – and you want this capability in this quarter!

Early in my career, I would have approached this, in what to me was a natural and obvious way – I would have put together a presentation that I would have excitedly shared, with the research insights from India, shown the growth of streaming music in India, and made a business case for the revenue growth we could see from India – all of which would be possible if the platform team delivered on these 2 simple asks! And, I would have been frustrated and fuming when the platform team either refused to take on these commitments.

The problem with this logical approach that I would have taken is that I would have been excited about *my* findings, excited about *my* product's success, and be seen as being interested only in *my* success. Though you may

argue that I was interested in the success of the product and the company on behalf of customers: no one else will see it that way! This approach sacrifices empathy and caring for intelligence and ego.

The way to approach this instead is to start by understanding the platform teams goals, and listen to what their challenges are. You may find that the platform team is trying to address GDPR requirements as a top priority in the quarter to ensure safety for customers and meet regulatory commitments. You may find that the platform team is trying to meet the objective of improving API latencies for customers world-wide.

It is in listening and understanding this context that you can create the space for the creative thinking required for win-win outcomes. You may say, "I have a person on my team who is interested in API performance optimization – can we loan her to your team for this quarter?". They may say, "The marketing team was presenting just before us when we were doing the GDPR review with the vice president, and I found that they are using an SMS partner for promotional messages, have you checked that out?". My point is not that this always happens, but that it is important to create the opportunity for happy accidents, for serendipity, and that comes from openness and listening.

In this approach, you are trying to help your partner team – who is also working towards the customers success – succeed in their job. It is humble, and in bringing your problem-solving skills to your partners problems, you also build trust.

The worst outcome in this approach is a "We can't do this now: but come back later, and by the way, here are some ways we can help you". The worst outcome in the alternative approach is a "No, and we never want to help you unless you escalate and we're forced into it."

That said, once you have some agreement – and a "No, but later" is also an agreement – then there is the follow up work of agreements and dependencies. This is unglamorous work, but important: capturing and sharing the agreements made, checking-in regularly on those agreements (and not in a "Where are you with this?" kind of way, but rather a "How are our requests coming along given your overall priorities?" way), and changing course and adapting if those agreements aren't on track.

Doing the work on alignment in this way maximises the chance to reach a global optimum and deliver the greatest value to the customer, with you feeling pride about belonging to a company that does it's best for customers, rather than many local optimums where you may feel like your team succeeded, but that the company didn't.

Challenges To Alignment

The biggest challenge to alignment is change. We have examined change before, when looking at planning. However, it is ironic that while we overemphasise the impact of change on our plans, we tend to undermine the impact of change on our partners.

So, starting with a realisation that just the way change impacts our plans and our promises to partners, change will also wreak havoc on our partners plans and commitments to us. There is no point getting upset or angry about this, as this is the nature of the game. Operating in an environment of no change is only for the dead.

So, now that we realise that change will affect our partners, the only way to meet this challenge is to check-in frequently and adapt your own plans to partner commitments. Being on top of commitments and checking-in can seem like drudgery, but the sooner that one realises that this is key to successful

shipping of products, the sooner one will accept this whole-heartedly and do this often and in a disciplined way.

To put it simply, great product managers not only drive alignment, but also watch out for places that have fallen out of alignment and fix those broken windows as soon as they can.

Outputs To Alignment

There is one other challenge to alignment, and that is clarity of agreements. A key output to alignment is having clear agreements, or contracts. In some sense, all work is just conversation and contracts.

A contract is a documented agreement, with details and specifics, and a timeline. Going back to our example, having an agreement that the partner team will deliver an API for phone-number based sign-up is not sufficient. You need to sign-off on the requirements document for the API, you need to sit in on the meeting where the API will get prioritised, you need to ensure that it's there on the backlog with a certain time when it will be released, you need to have a plan to test out the API stub, and also provide integration testing feedback.

While the specifics will vary, the point is that the output of alignment is the specifics, not the general agreement. The requirements document, the test plans, the release date – all of these are the outputs to alignment that it is important for you to check-in on regularly, to ensure that what you have aligned on comes real, and that you are helping your partners be successful at what they committed to you. This is how cross-team collaboration works best, and when trust is built and maintained.

FAILING TO DO WHAT YOU SAY

Also known as Integrity

"You are what you do, not what you'll say you'll do" — Carl Jung

The Purpose Of Integrity

My world-view shifted when I changed my thinking of integrity as *something that you have* to *something that you do*. Integrity is not a virtue that you have ("He is a person of high integrity", or "She has high integrity"), but rather something that you need to work on every day. Like

trust, integrity is something that is built and maintained through your everyday actions.

What is integrity? The definition that I have found the most useful is – "Saying what you'll do and doing what you'll say". Integrity is not about morals, ethics, or values, but rather just a statement of what you will do, and keeping that promise. It is easy to be in integrity by keeping your word, and equally easy to fall out of integrity by not keeping your word – I have been out of integrity many, many times.

Now that we have a working definition for integrity, we can ask: "What's the purpose of integrity?". Integrity is the lifeblood of work; if everyone does what they say they'll do, at the time when it is supposed to be done – well, why, work would get done on time and at high quality! Integrity makes all work possible, and without integrity, agreements and commitments are all just idle talk, statements of hope and prayer, rather than statements of action.

So, the purpose of integrity is simple: it is to get work done.

How To Do Integrity

The easy thing is to know how to integrity, the hard part is to do it. There are six steps to doing integrity:

1. Give your word – Say what you will do: Many people fear commitment. How can you commit in a world rife with change? Fence-sitting, hedging your bets, and the classic "Can I get back to you later?" are all ways to avoid making commitments. However, great product managers make commitments despite a changing world, and they then figure out and do what it takes to keep their word. Integrity starts with saying what you will do, in a concise

and clear way – what it is you will do, and by when: "I will get that to you by this Friday 5:00 pm, and not before Thursday 9:00 am" is better than "You will have that by end of week". It sets expectations in a way such that the person you are giving your word to can in turn make their own plans and promises. Integrity is the best pay-it-forward.

2. Say "No" to things you will not do: Integrity is equally about saying "No" to things you will not do.

A "maybe" is useless to get work done, but a "No" is extremely useful. A "No" lets people know what your priorities are, and enables them to make alternate plans.

A "maybe" is rude – and a "no" is polite; however, many of us have been taught in childhood that saying "No" is impolite – and that is something for us to unlearn.

Celebrate the "No"!

A "no" is fine ground to getting work done.

As a last word, since saying "No" is intertwined in people's minds with rudeness, people often end up saying "No" rudely. Learning the art of the polite, firm, and respectful "No" is important: the first step to this is to realise that "No" is polite, and that you are being nice by giving someone a clear "No".

Lastly, don't acquire a reputation as someone who says "No" and then changes their mind; a firm "No" that stands is useful, a "No" that can be overruled or can shift is a poor reputation to build.

3. Move implicit understanding to explicit promises: In your role as a product manager, people around you will have a lot of expectations of you

based on their understanding of the role. Engineering may expect you to deliver on a test plan, marketing may expect you to help with collateral for launch, or sales may expect you to pitch at customer meetings. Not meeting these implicit expectations can cause you to fall out of integrity. Now, you may think this to be unfair – but the responsibility to make implicit understanding into explicit promises (both Yes's and No's) is yours – "Do you expect me to create a sales pitch for the upcoming customer meeting? If so, I have to let you know that I am not planning for that", or "Do you want me to get a press release done – I can do that, it'll be done by Thursday at 9:00 am, will that work?" are examples of making implicit understanding explicit.

Also, you may be tempted to keep implicit understanding and assumptions implicit, since it gives you wiggle room later. Don't do this – while you may think there is wiggle room, the person who has an expectation of you doesn't assume any wiggle room, and will see your later protestations as a break of a promise.

4. Do what you say: Do what you say you will do, by the time you said you will do it. While this is the other half of integrity (the first half is saying what you'll do), actually getting stuff done can be hard. One tip here is – making small promises is better than making big promises, since they are easier to track and deliver on. So, rather than say, "You will have the new feature by end of the year" (high chance of failure), saying "You will have the mock ups for the feature by end of the week" is better. So, pick small wins to stay in integrity. Doing what you say can be an infectious habit, so make sure to keep doing what you say and building a streak of small wins.

5. Raise a flag early if your word is at risk: In a world of change, it is certain that you will not be able to keep your word at times. However, there

is a Failing Well at integrity and a Failing Poorly. Raising a flag early – and letting people know that things have changed, and that you may need to adjust your commitments – is Failing Well at integrity. When you fail to communicate risks, or hide risks, you are flying on hope, and while that may work sometimes, it always fails poorly in the long run. Making risks visible and clear early on helps others adjust their plans too – "We have been asked to prioritise a critical customer issue and it is likely that I won't be able to get the document to you by Friday morning, I will know more by tomorrow noon and will let you know, is it OK if I get this to you by Monday noon?" is an example of this in action, and will be appreciated by the person you made the promise to.

So, raise a flag early if your word is at risk!

6. Clean up if you aren't able to keep your word: Now, despite raising a flag and making risks apparent, you may fail to keep your word. Rather than be consumed by feelings of guilt, it is best to do the simple thing – "I'm sorry – what can I do to fix it up?". Again, change is inevitable and promises will get broken. Handling broken promises fast and with a real intent of helping fixing up is the best way to get back into integrity; of course, if you continuously fail at the new promises you have made, you will have lost the opportunity to build trust.

Challenges To Integrity

There are two challenges to integrity. The first is with the "saying what you will do" part, and the second with the "doing what you'll say" part.

The challenge to saying what you'll do is to not to see the world as it is. When you see the world as it is – existing promises and commitments, unforeseen challenges, and unexpected changes – you will be conscious

about giving your word, and won't take it lightly. Taking on too much is to undervalue your own word; taking on a few things and making them happen is to value your word and not make plans based on hope. It is our optimism that often is the biggest challenge to integrity; being hard-nosed and clear-sighted is more important when making promises than being optimistic.

The challenge to doing what you'll say is that you will invariably fail at this multiple times, and will fall out of integrity. Having thoughts of "I am not a person of integrity" and being wracked with guilt and shame is a challenge to doing anything at all! Work needs to be done with a sense of play and fun, rather than taking oneself too seriously. Instead of seeing integrity as something you have or don't have, and seeing integrity as something you can always work on, improve on, and "do" is a positive way to confront this challenge, of playing the "integrity game" of taking on something small and getting it done. When I was at my lowest point, and consumed with feelings of failure, what helped me get back was the simple promise to write a few sentences daily; just this act of getting something done daily and keeping my word around it allowed me to create a virtuous cycle of getting things done, and a feeling of success from this.

Outputs To Integrity

Though I am being specific below, since integrity is a set of promises, you need a good system to track your promises. There are 3 parts to this.

The first is to be conscious of giving your word to something, and to make a note of it right away; not being conscious of promises you have made or making promises and not making a note of it is a poor way to play the integrity game.

The second is to move your promises from your notes to a single place – say a to-do list or a calendar. Having your promises spread out across pages in a diary or multiple tools like Kanban boards and to-do lists and calendars is a sure way to miss out on what needs to be done.

The third is to then take all of these promises, break them out into work you need to do, and translate them into time on your calendar. You will never get work done if you don't make time for it, and the place to track your time is your calendar. This is the best place to manage your work, because it is easy to glance at your calendar when you need to commit new work or make a promise to someone: your calendar is the truth of whether you have the time to take on more, and can guide you in making new promises.

FAILING TO HAVE

"Goals are good for setting a direction, but systems are best for making progress." — James Clear

We can perform better with the right systems in place. While "Being" is the engine that drives action, and doing is the action itself, having is all about creating the systems and structures to support the action. Good product managers operate within existing structures, and great product managers create the right structures to operate within.

There is some scaffolding that I have seen be useful repeatedly for product managers to get their work done. In this section we will examine this

scaffolding – and how having this scaffolding helps product managers succeed.

We will look at having product requirement documents (PRDs) to create clarity and alignment on what's being built, having daily stand-ups to drive execution, having regular dogfooding to build a sense of quality, having a go-to-market (GTM) plan to ship the product, having learning systems for analytics and experimentation, and finally having community to get honest feedback from customers.

Having these systems in place increases the chance that you will build a product that meets customer needs, that succeeds in the market, and that keeps getting better.

Don't get wedded to systems. There are many methodologies out there, many templates, and many consultants. The best product managers in world class product companies become good at building the machine: of creating the systems needed to build products that serve customer needs given the current context.

However, across products and teams, I have seen that there are 6 recurring elements that are common to successful product teams.

The first is a document or presentation that details the product capability that is being built. This is called a product requirements document (PRD) or a specification.
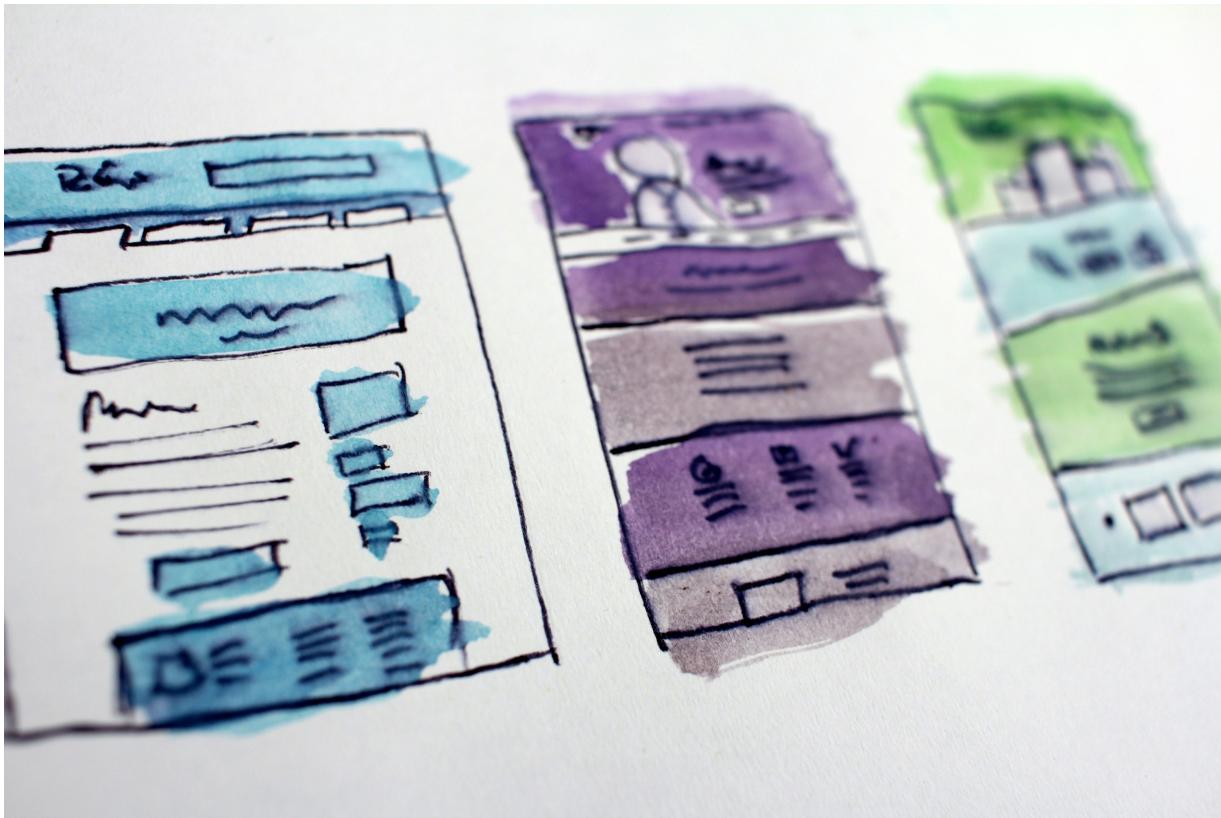
The second is a short, recurring team meeting where progress and challenges are discussed. This often is done daily, and is called a stand-up.

The third is a system for everyone on the team to use the product that they are building every day, and find and discuss product issues they are discovering through this. This is called dogfooding.

The fourth is a plan for the different stages of how the product will reach customers, and what exit criteria must be met at each stage. This can include Beta programs. This is called the ship plan.

The fifth is a system for learning how the product is performing in the market, and to gain insights from this. This is typically done through analytics and experimentation.

The sixth, and last, is a way to gather qualitative customer feedback from the users of the product. This is best done by creating a community for the product.

FAILING TO HAVE SPECIFICATIONS

Also known as PRDs

"If people cannot write well, they cannot think well, and if they cannot think well, others will do their thinking for them" — George Orwell

Story

When I was on the mobile incubations team, I wanted us to move fast. The start-up scene was exploding in India. There were many stories of start-ups doing things differently and benefiting from the new ways of

work – no product requirements documents (PRDs), shipping daily, and even no product managers!

"We can learn from these start-ups, we need to move fast on the incubations team", was the thought I had, and the place I decided to experiment was with PRDs. "We have smart engineers and designers who are meeting customers too, and have the same insights that I have. I just have to tell my engineering team, say something like, 'Let's build phone-number based signup', and it will get done, I don't really need to write a PRD: if there's any doubt, the engineer will come to me or go to the designer."

Over the next few months, we didn't have any PRDs on the team. Product managers went through an existential crisis without PRDs, engineering didn't know what was supposed to be built and built cool technology, design complained that they were bombarded with ad hoc requests, leadership was worried that we were spinning in circles, and I was looking for a place to hide.

Through this failure, I learnt that velocity is an outcome of clarity and alignment, and PRDs help you go faster. I learnt that a team with no PRDs ends up being engineering driven and doing work to fill time, and lacks a coherent product strategy. I also learnt that changing traditions and rituals should be an evolution to meet the new context, not a revolution and a tearing down of existing structures without understanding the underlying reasons for their existence.

Microsoft is around, and doing great – with its tradition of PRDs and rituals of spec reviews. Many of the start-ups I wanted us to emulate are not around anymore.

The Purpose Of Specifications

Writing a PRD (product requirements document), or specs as we used to call them at Microsoft, helped me be a better product manager. The time I grew the most as a product manager was in the early days of working on Office Live. I was one of the few product managers on the team, and there was a lot of work to be done. As a result of this, I ended up working on many different areas and writing several PRDs in a short time – about 16 PRDs in about 6 months if my memory serves me right.

Through this process, I learnt that there are 3 things that happen when you write a PRD.

The first is that you create clarity for yourself. Writing creates clarity, and one of my earlier managers used to repeat the mantra, "Write it down, write it down!" whenever I went to him with an idea. Writing helps structure your thoughts, work through arguments, and generate a point of view. In writing a PRD, you are immersing yourself in the details of the product capability to build, defining the problem you are trying to solve, detailing the customer need and value, articulating the business impact, designing the solution, thinking through the timeline and trade-offs, and listing the dependencies and open issues – all of which create tremendous clarity for yourself, and allows you to tell the people around you the why and what of the product capability you are building.

The second is that you involve and enrol others into your plan and enable independent decision making. Through the process of iteratively writing, discussing, debating, and reviewing a PRD, you include engineers and designers into the product definition, you review the PRD together, learn from their expertise, incorporate their feedback, and come together as a team about the why and what of the product capability you are building. For engineers and designers, the reading and reviewing the PRD is a way to

critique and improve the product capabilities. A good PRD and PRD review enables engineering, design, and other functions to make decisions independently when the product manager isn't around, and frees up time for the product manager.

The third is that you ensure alignment across teams and help in creating a single product strategy. When senior leaders or execs sit in on PRD reviews, they are not only looking for the details of the PRD, but also looking for how this PRD fits into the map of all the other PRDs they have been reviewing. They know that alignment in words is different than alignment in action: it is in the details that teams end up going in different directions, while they may want to align. The feedback they offer can help you understand the overall product strategy better, and enable closer collaboration and decision making across teams. For leadership, reading PRDs can help them understand the constraints and details of the product capability, and also understand how much clarity the team has in thinking about the problem space. Further, in inviting partner product managers to your PRD reviews, they can see the reason you are building the product capability, and again independently make decisions on how best to integrate with your work.

This clarity, enrolment, and alignment helps improve the velocity of product development and helps create products that meet customer needs.

How To Write A Specification

Writing is thinking in action. The way I used to write a PRD and how I write one now has changed, and in my mind, it has improved.

When I was starting out, I used to keep (be able to keep) all information related to a product feature in my head, and it would gestate and grow, and

eventually I would sit down and dash out a PRD in about an hour, fully formed and ready to review.

There were three challenges with this approach, and one good thing. The first challenge was that it became hard to use this approach as I started tackling large or complex features. The second challenge was that if someone asked me to look at the PRD while I was supposedly writing it, I had nothing to show for it, because it was all in my head. The third challenge is that as I've gotten older, I find it harder to keep all the facts in my head. The one good thing with this approach is that when everything was in my head, I was literally chewing the cud and thinking about the product capability subconsciously and having arguments and discussions with myself on how to do something well.

Now, I take a different approach to writing PRDs. The first thing I do is open up a document and start putting down my rough thoughts. I keep adding questions and open issues to this document in an unstructured way, and use this document as my external memory that I can gestate on. At some point of time, when I have enough detail down, I start to add in the right scaffolding or structure – I don't start with a pre-existing template, since I find that it constrains me in open thinking and picking the right format to communicate the idea. I then start to fill in the sections – I will almost always have a section for customer insights and for impact, and a section for the solution, but the rest of the sections are based on the problem at hand. During this time, I'll also choose the right format to communicate the idea, and open up a new document – maybe a presentation, or a mind-map, or a swim-lane diagram. I may also create a separate document for a 1-pager or a summary of the product capability. Once I have these decided, I will start to flesh these out from my scratch document and also start sharing the 1-pager document for inputs. Based on feedback from the 1-pager review and my own thinking, I

will continue to write the PRD till I am satisfied that it can be shared more widely with the group for further inputs.

While I frown at being too templatized, a template does help new product managers what is important and also can aid putting down a PRD fast. The structure of a spec that I learnt early on at Microsoft – Summary, Scenarios, Goals / Non-Goals, Design, Open Issues & Dependencies – helped me think through why we were doing what we were doing, articulate what user needs we were trying to address, capture how we were going to solve the customer problem, and track open issues. If pressed for a template, this is what I share:

1. **Summary**: what is the inquiry, what is the problem we are trying to solve, and an overview of the problem space.

2. **Customer insights**: what have we learnt about the customer needs, deep customer insights, represented as scenarios, user jobs, user stories, or any other way.

3. **Goals & Non-goals**: What are we trying to accomplish through this feature? What is it that we explicitly will not do?

4. **Opportunity**: What are the business goals? What are the metrics you want to move? What is the impact from the work you are doing?

5. **Design**: What is the solution you have in mind that will address the problem? What are the different product investments? Why will this all work, what is the hypothesis?

6. **Open issues**: What are the challenges, roadblocks, and open issues you foresee and need help with

7. **Dependencies**: What are partner team dependencies that you have for this work

This structure, with the greatest number of pages devoted to strategy and product investments usually results in a good PRD.

Dos And Don'ts Of Specifications

1. Do write 1-pagers fast and review them: A tip I have, and what has worked for me always is to write a 1-pager in a few hours and get it reviewed. It allows you to combat writer's block, and with just a quick note on inquiry, goals/non-goals, opportunity, customer insights, and some product areas to invest in – you're off the block and running. A 1-pager is great, because you can review it quickly, get inputs and start shaping your spec. Without a 1-pager written down, people can yak all day long, and then change their thoughts and opinions later; however, when reading and reviewing, they are usually more systematic and thorough, and a 1-pager gets people to provide feedback in a disciplined way on what they actually believe.

2. Don't write 20-page PRDs: In the early days of my career, 20-page PRDs – or even 60-page PRDs were not uncommon. Products shipped every 3 years, and a PRD was a comprehensive document with what needed to be done over that time span. Unfortunately, few people read these documents. I really like the Amazon 6 pager template, and while the details of the template can vary, the length of 6 to 8 pages for a spec seems like the right size. More than this? Split it into two specs if you absolutely must, maybe your feature is too big or complex.

3. Do include all stakeholders to PRD reviews: I have committed the immature sin of thinking "Let me not invite them to the review – they have too many comments and feedback!". While you may want to plan out multiple reviews of your spec, with a different group for 1-pagers and a different

group for the full spec, do be inclusive in inviting engineers, designers, leaders, and partners to your spec reviews. You want all the feedback, you must loop back after addressing the feedback, and you want to ensure enrolment with the plan. I am not a fan of "Disagree and commit" – why can't we talk till we "Agree and commit"? While velocity is important, alignment is often more critical.

4. Don't keep PRDs up to date: I used to pride myself when I was a new product manager on keeping my specs up to date – and then I learnt that no one cared, and rightly so. A PRD is not meant to be always up to date, or a "living document" unless you have some customer commitments around this. PRDs are useful at the start of feature development for creating clarity and alignment. Their purpose is exhausted in their writing, reading, and reviewing. PRDs stale fast, and its value decreases rapidly through the product development cycle.
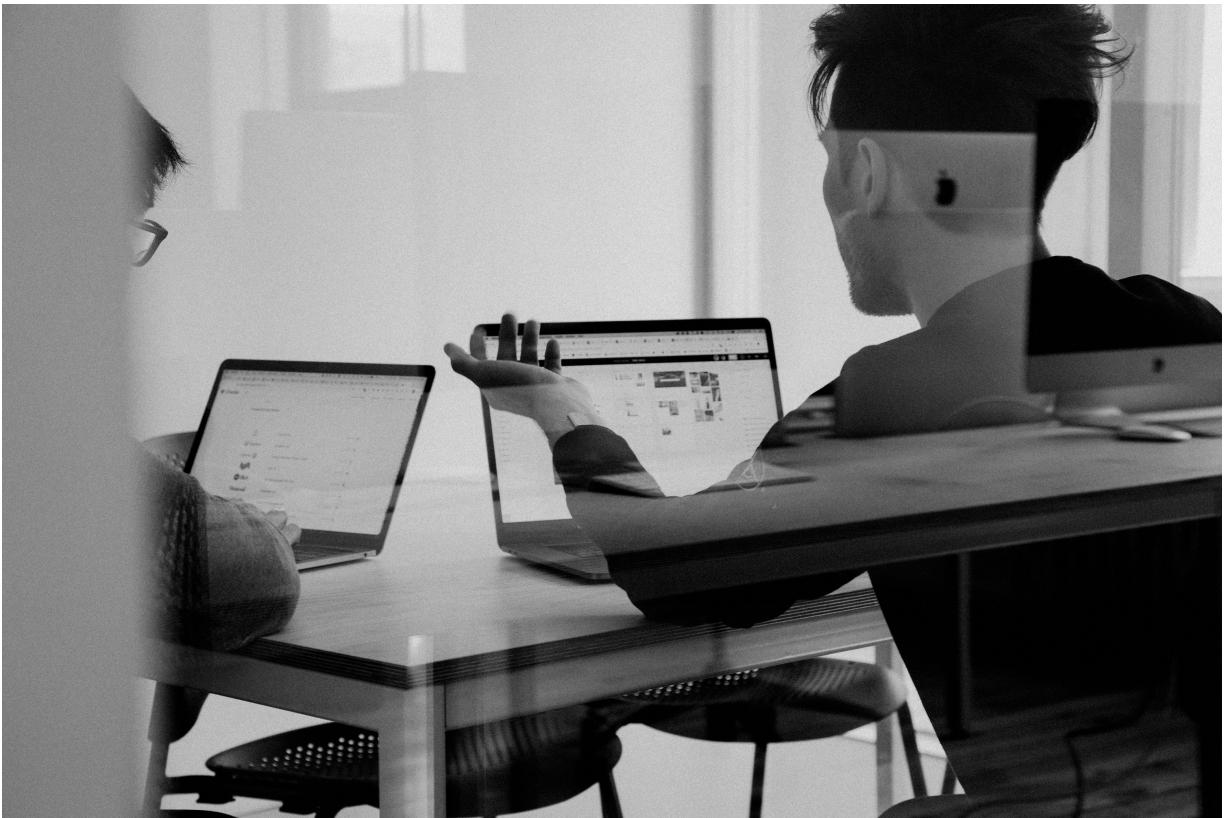
5. Do read and provide feedback on PRDs: Reading others PRDs is not only a great way to learn how to write PRDs, but also a way to understand what's going on in the rest of the company and see the product strategy holistically. Ask to be invited to many PRD reviews, and read a lot of PRDs. In reading and providing feedback on others PRDs you will learn to think critically and also improve the quality of your own PRDs.

6. Don't confuse pretty slides with PRDs: I have seen pretty presentations with mock-ups and architecture diagrams being passed off as PRDs. These are not PRDs. PRDs capture the problem, the customer context, the scope, the strategy, and the solution. A PRD doesn't need to be pretty; it needs to be concise and clear. Don't tailor your PRD too much for the audience – don't think "Oh, I am sharing this with marketing, let me put in pretty pictures" – in

addition to being biased and rude, it also dilutes your PRD into something that doesn't create clarity and rather tries to please its audience.

7. Do the why and what, and don't do the how: A PRD is about the why and the what. It is not about the how. Keep engineering details and your opinions on how the product should be built out of the PRD, it is not your job and you should not work on this. Focus – focus again and again – on the why and the what till you get that absolutely watertight. PRDs with the "How" often don't have the Why and the What clear.

8. Don't think that the PRD is the product: The PRD is not the product. You don't have to polish it, fix bugs in it, and the customer won't definitely care how your PRD is. The only goal for you in the PRD is to create clarity – so pictures, tables, and any stylistic additions that create clarity for you and for the reader are useful; anything beyond that are to be avoided.

FAILING TO HAVE MEETINGS

Also known as Execution

"As a leader, you must consistently drive effective communication. Meetings must be deliberate and intentional - your organisational rhythm should value purpose over habit and effectiveness over efficiency." — Chris Fussel

Story

Covid-19 was a time of change, anxiety, and grief. The world had changed in the matter of months. Each of us was trying to cope. We had to learn how to work from home. The news made us worried about the future.

We each knew someone who was in the hospital, or who had died through Covid.

Learning to work at this time meant that each of us had to be more kind, more empathetic, and more caring to one another. While we lost too many good people through Covid-19, hopefully we who survived learnt that each of us suffers the same pain, and we can be kinder to one another.

"Each of us has so much to deal with, and everyone is so anxious", I thought to myself. "We should cancel all our meetings, and give time back for people to do their work without meetings, and without the added stress of online meetings all the time. We don't need daily stand-ups and weekly shiprooms, and no team meetings or spec reviews either. People are smart, and working online we can perhaps get work done more efficiently without all the overhead of meetings."

> **ASIDE**: A shiproom is a meeting – typically weekly – in which all aspects of releasing a product are considered: bugs, schedules, open issues, new asks, and so on. I use this term, which I learnt at Microsoft, through many examples in the remainder of this book.

In cancelling meetings, I lost the opportunity to create a space where we could share stories of our individual challenges and support each other. Not as important, but I also saw how cancelling meetings reduced product velocity, reduced clarity, and caused us to be more misaligned.

Meetings, like any other tool, should be used effectively and deliberately. When used this way, they are a source of tremendous value, bringing together the team to work on a shared goal, with a sense of team spirit and an energy towards solving problems and helping each other out.

The Purpose Of Meetings

Work happens in days. I have had the feeling many times in my career of, "Where has the time all gone?". A product manager needs to focus on the long-term to do the right thing, and needs to focus on the short-term, on the days, to get things done.

Product managers run a few different types of meetings: PRD reviews, shiprooms, daily stand-ups, and triages. While each meeting has a different purpose, the overarching reason for meetings is to ensure forward progress towards building a product that customers want. Through meetings, product managers create clarity on what needs to be done, bring out issues into the open in a safe environment, problem solve on how to resolve these issues, and either take or assign action items to solve these issues and unblock teammates.

It was also in sitting in on meetings – in ship-rooms, triages, quarterly business reviews (QBRs), and PRD reviews – that I learnt what our overall product strategy was, learnt the nuts-and-bolts of building products, and understood the questions to ask. The reason I share this is that meetings are not only a place to get work done, but also a place to coach and train people who are new to your organisation on what the culture of the organisation is, and what the vision and strategy of the company is.

While meetings can seem a chore, if done well, they produce tremendous value. The trick, I realised, is to not see a meeting as a one-off transactional exercise, but rather as a series of multiple discussions. The compounding effect of such discussions is high, and so having a regular rhythm for meetings is extremely valuable. This rhythm allows you to follow up on actions from previous meetings, get work done, and move the agenda

forward. Cancelling recurring meetings because of "other things that have taken priority" should be done rarely and after deep deliberation – the payoff from a recurring meeting that is truly outcome focused is high, because of all the past discussions; jettisoning this for a one-off engagement is almost always never prudent.

Running good meetings results in positive outcomes: people are always in sync, there is clarity on what needs to be done, everyone understands what progress has been made and if anyone is blocked, it removes the need for status reports, and is almost always the best way to ensure forward progress. You will find that if you cancel meetings and take your eye off the ball for a week or two: suddenly things are off course, people are drifting off in different directions, some people are blocked and waiting, and others are "dwelling" rather than getting work done.

Devoting energy – it takes energy – to run good meetings pays off, and results in shipping great products.

What Meetings To Have, And How To Run Them

There are many meetings in organisations, and especially so in large ones – executive presentations, quarterly business reviews, product reviews, engineering reviews, town-halls, and so on. Of the set of meetings, I have found that product managers should run four meetings: PRD reviews, weekly shiprooms, daily stand-ups, and triage meetings. Let us examine each of these:

1. PRD reviews: PRD reviews are formal meetings to review the product why & what (and not the how) that meets a customer need. The product manager who is the author of the PRD should run the meeting. The PRD (not longer than 8 pages) should be sent as a pre-read a few days before the

review meeting, so that the participants can read through the document and add comments or make notes before the meeting. The product manager should invite all stakeholders to the PRD review: engineers, designers, leads, interested execs, partner team product managers, product marketing, support, and others who may be interested or affected by the product capability.

I have found that a PRD meeting is run most effectively when the product manager asks participants to take 15 minutes at the beginning of a 1-hour long PRD review meeting to silently read and collect their thoughts. The next 30 minutes should be spent in constructive feedback, suggestions, and discussion on how to improve the PRD. The last 15 minutes should be used by the product manager to capture any notes and action items on how to improve the PRD, and should be shared out by email right away to both those who attended the meeting, and those who weren't able to be present.

Running a good PRD review is an art, where the product manager can get everyone present to participate constructively, rather than it becoming a contentious or fractious meeting with a clash of opinions and ideas. The PRD review should be a culmination of conversations that have already been had with important stakeholders, rather than the first time that people are seeing the details of the specification.

2. Weekly shiprooms: I learnt a lot from sitting in weekly shiprooms. I learnt how senior leaders thought about our product strategy, learnt what was important and what was not, learnt the questions to ask, and also gained confidence to contribute to plans. Being invited to shiprooms used to be a big deal at Microsoft many years ago, and junior product managers were often not invited unless they needed to be there! You needed to prepare for a shiproom, with answers for the questions that you may be asked in the five minutes you got at the meeting. While this has changed, the key point of a

product manager knowing the facts and details of their product is still an important one.

The point of a shiproom is to make decisions and take action on the product. So, important triage decisions (should we do this or not), design change requests, requests to take on a new feature, changes to the schedule, live site issues, bug burn-downs, code coverage and test automation are all examined in detail in a shiproom. The format of a shiproom was called precision question / precision answer; pointed, clear questions and crisp, detailed answers that aided decision making.

Running a shiproom effectively requires a combination of managing time and making decisions. Publishing an agenda of what topics will be covered ahead of time, and inviting the right people who have the details is an important pre-step to an effective shiproom. The shiproom can start with a ritual of looking at leading metrics for 10 minutes: whatever the relevant metric is based on where you are in the product cycle; we used to look at a bug query of number of active P0 and P1 bugs. You then get into the agenda and discuss each topic, get the details, and make a decision before moving to the next topic. Again, we used to close with a ritual of discussing the top 3 bugs to triage, or looking at a demo of a feature that was early in development.

You know that you have run a good shiproom when you have used the time, usually an hour, to make at least 5 decisions, not by dictating the decision, but by crystallising it based on the information presented in the meeting, through a logical analysis of the facts and clarity of what needs to be done. If you do this repeatedly, you will not only move the product forward, but will also lift up everyone in the room to make better decisions.

3. Daily sync: A daily sync is a quick informal daily meeting with your immediate feature crew or team. I am avoiding the phrase daily stand-up here, as it has some existing ritual and meaning to this phrase from the world of scrum and agile. The point is not to be wedded to any process, but for the core intention to be realised: that of showing up for your team daily.

A good daily stand-up starts at a convenient time to all participants, and has a relaxed atmosphere to it: none of the focus and intensity of a shiproom here. People have their coffees and teas, and may start by sharing how they are feeling, physically or emotionally, and may talk about the weather or the game last evening. You then chat about what you got done, and if there's anything you need help on, where you may be blocked. People may have ideas or suggestions on how to resolve some issue, or who to speak to. As the product manager you may take away some ideas on how to help your team.

A good daily sync isn't orchestrated by a product manager as much as it is cultivated. If each person comes out of the meeting feeling a sense of closeness to the team and some ideas of how they can help, that is success!

4. Triage meetings: A triage meeting is a meeting to go over bugs or open issues with engineering, QA, design, and other stakeholders, and to make decisions on which bugs to fix, and which ones to not fix. The product manager brings the customer viewpoint to the meeting, and engineering brings cost and complexity to the meeting, and you together decide what to fix to meet the ship date. Nowadays with online services being updated constantly, you may think you don't need to triage; but prioritising and making trade-offs, and considering opportunity cost is something that will never go away, so triage is always going to be important.

When I started out, I used to find triage meetings difficult: weren't we supposed to fix all bugs? How could I decide, if I truly wanted to take the customer point of view, to not fix bugs? Later on, triage became too simple, when I became hard-nosed and cynical, and started to ruthlessly triage out issues even though it would impact customers, working through many issues quickly. It is only over the years I have found a sense of balance, of taking time to think about the issue, represent the customer, and fight the good fight and then make a decision on which issues are important to fix, which ones can be postponed, and which ones we will not fix at all.

When this conversation happens across stakeholders, each pushing hard on their area of focus – product managers on customer needs, engineering on cost and complexity, QA on risk and quality, Design on user experience – then the outcome of triage is a good one, where decisions that serve the customer best are made, and where everyone learns and grows.

Do's And Don'ts Of Meetings

1. Do few meetings regularly, and do them well: As I grew fast in my product management career, my calendar filled up. I had lots of meetings all through the day, and I am ashamed to say that it gave me a sense of success to be busy all the time. I sat in on exec reviews, attended partner team meetings, did many one-on-ones, set up mentoring circles, and so on. I also often bailed on shiprooms and daily sync meetings – I was too busy for it! I started to burn out, and kept making poor product decisions.

It was only after deliberately attending to my calendar, paring down meetings to what I could contribute towards, setting up a regular rhythm to meetings to

compound their value, and sticking to every meeting that I had committed to that I was able to start to contribute again.

So, do few meetings regularly – and take the time to prepare for the meetings, and run the meeting well. If you overhear a surprised "Wow, that was actually a useful meeting" after the meeting, you know you've done well and added value.

2. Don't participate in or set up meetings without an agenda: Meetings without a clear purpose, an agenda, and pre-reads are to be avoided. Refuse to go to these meetings, and don't set up such meetings: it's just sloppy.

A purpose, an agenda, and a pre-read helps clarify to each participant whether they need to attend the meeting, how they can contribute, and doesn't waste anyone's time. Insist on an agenda for every meeting.

3. Do take notes, make decisions, and share out after meetings: I remember sitting in a meeting early in my career, when this person walked in, sat quietly by the door, took notes and sent them out after the meeting. He was the Vice President of the team I was meeting! It made a real impact on me – I realised that doing the basics well is something that never goes out of fashion.

Take notes in meetings, make decisions in meetings, and share these out with the right audience right after the meeting. It's small stuff, but it's the small stuff that makes a large difference.

4. Don't waste time in meetings: If you are done with the purpose and agenda for the meeting, there is no shame in ending the meeting early. I have seen meetings scheduled for one hour where the decision is made in the first 15 minutes, and people feel compelled to stay the remaining time "because it's on the calendar". Resist this temptation, and end meetings once they are

done. Also, get up and leave any meeting to which you are not contributing or where you are not learning something. Life is too short to be spent in non-valuable meetings.

5. Do use meetings to coach, train, and provide feedback: Use meetings to be a role model. Run meetings well, make good decisions, take notes and share, be inclusive in meetings and share the strategy and exhibit the culture in meetings.

New employees to an organisation will learn a lot from the meetings they participate in, and you can help them learn faster by role modelling what is important to the organisation in meetings.

FAILING TO HAVE A SENSE OF QUALITY

Also known as Dogfooding

"Be a yardstick of quality. Some people aren't used to an environment where excellence is expected." — Steve Jobs

Story

Around when I became the Group Product Manager on Azure Cache, Scott Guthrie became the Vice President for our division of Azure, the Platform-As-A-Service (PaaS) team. I was visiting Seattle at the time and a

few days after Scott became Vice President I heard this (perhaps apocryphal) story doing the rounds.

The story was that soon after Scott took over as Vice President, he had called for a meeting with all the General Managers and senior leaders of our division. At the 9 am meeting, as people entered the room, they were given a credit card and led to a computer – where they had to sign-up for the Azure PaaS service, complete the setup, and build and deploy a small PaaS application using our Azure services. They had 3 hours. The story went that everyone in the room failed to do this – and that some people even failed to complete the sign-up!

There was a lot of anxiety in the air, and rumours doing the rounds that Scott would use the performance of people in the exercise to do an organisational restructuring.

I don't know how much of the story is true, but the story stayed with me. As people grow in their organisations, they get so distant from their own product that they stop using their products. If you don't use the product, you won't feel the customer's pain: you won't know what the issues are, you stay removed from the details, and you speak in thin air, removed from reality.

All the best product managers and leaders I know use the product they are building every day, and find creative ways to get their entire team to also use the product. This is dogfooding (the term comes from a quip about "eating your own dogfood") – and dogfooding is what makes products great.

The Purpose Of Dogfooding

Having a visceral sense of the quality of your product is one of the most important skills a product manager can develop. The only way I have found

to build this in-the-bones feeling for the quality of the product is to use the product daily with a beginner's mind.

No matter how many bug queries you may look at, or customer reviews you may read, you have to use the product to know for yourself how far you are from your goalpost of being world-class.

The purpose of dogfooding is to have this sense of quality for your product. There are several other benefits to dogfooding daily:

1. Building credibility: Dogfooding and reporting bugs is one of the easiest ways to build credibility with your engineers and designers. By using the product that engineers are building and showing them issues that you are running into, you show that you care. And I have found that the engineers will give their best for a product manager who cares.

2. Becoming world-class: When you start building the product, quality will likely be low, and there will be lots of bugs in the product. You may report many bugs in dogfood; QA, design, and engineers themselves will also be finding bugs. Over time bugs will get fixed, and the product quality will start to improve. You may even have QA sign-off and may have met all the ship criteria. But is your product world-class? If you dogfood the product daily with a beginner's mind, and if you care deeply, you will keep raising the bar for the product till it is world-class: and the only person who will champion this is going to be you, as the product manager. You can build the relentless pursuit of world-class excellence only by dogfooding daily and pushing the bar higher.

3. Percolating quality through the team: Quality is not the job of QA, or the job of the test engineer. High quality is everyone's job, and you want a culture where no one stays silent at broken windows. If everyone on the team

dogfoods the product – your engineers, designers, QA, product managers, admins, sales, marketing, execs – and if they all report bugs, you will improve the quality of the product. Now, championing this cause, and finding important daily use cases and removing roadblocks to dogfooding should be the responsibility of the product manager. In getting people to try your product out, not only can you raise the quality, but you can also learn how to become a great ambassador for your product.

How To Dogfood Well

Getting a sense of quality is all about setting up a dogfood program for your team that all of you participate in and spend time using the product as the customer might, and find issues in your product that your customer will run into.

1. Establish a dogfooding program on your team: Start small and start early with dogfooding. Have everyone on the team participate in the dogfooding, and invite ideas and suggestions from everyone on how to dogfood more effectively.

2. Remove all friction to dogfooding: The smallest friction can stop people on the team from using your product – not having a build, not having the right deployment, not having good uptime on your integration environment, not having real-world data, not having devices or hardware, and so on. Remove all this friction, it is your responsibility to make your product easy to dogfood for your internal stakeholders. Removing this friction is costly and time consuming, but this is an investment that will pay off.

3. Create scenarios for dogfooding: Dogfooding is easier for some consumer tech products, because it is a product that everyone on your team may use anyway as part of their daily lives. But how do you dogfood an

enterprise CRM product, or an embedded system for trains? One part of the challenge is around the test environment or simulations; however, the bigger challenge is, "What should I do with this CRM?", or "What should I use this locomotive system for?". While this can be challenging, listing out the different user jobs and core user journeys, dividing this up and rotating these among your team is the best way to approach this. The way I have started to think about this is that test plans explore the corner cases, while dogfood plans exercise the core user journeys. So, having these written down and exercised often is a good way to build confidence that customers will experience a high quality in the main value you are trying to deliver.

4. Make it competitive and fun: Finding bugs and improving quality is a fun team sport. Create challenges, have rewards for finding bugs, celebrate when you find many dogfood issues, and recognize people on your team who find the most bugs.

5. Calendar the dogfooding: Set up 15 minutes of time daily to dogfood on your calendar, and block off an hour maybe every Friday for the team to dogfood. I have found that dogfooding together – either in the same room or on a call together – can be fun, and people can riff off each other's ideas to test new scenarios and find bugs. Calendar the dogfooding so you can do it daily, and also do it together.

6. Make it an expected part of work: While you make it competitive and fun, and offer rewards, don't be confused: dogfooding is an expected part of work. You're not doing your work if you're not using your own product. Having dogfooding and quality goals as part of your (and your teams) objectives is a useful way to highlight that quality isn't someone else's job, but it is everyone's job.

7. Be a great role model: Like in most areas of product development, a part of the product manager's role is to be a role model. By using your own product daily, finding bugs, and being passionate and enthusiastic about using your product and openly criticising its flaws, you help establish a culture where others too will try out the product and issues won't be hidden away, but will be found and reported. So, be a great role model, and dogfood daily!

Do's And Don'ts Of Dogfooding

1. Don't confuse dogfooding with a formal QA pass: Dogfooding isn't an excuse for formal QA or testing. Dogfooding is about exercising the 80% core user journeys that every customer will use, and QA is about pressure testing the 20% which each customer will run into sometime. Further, areas like security testing, privacy testing, performance testing, and so on are most effectively done through formal QA processes rather than dogfooding.

2. Do invite other teams to your dogfood bashes: With dogfooding, it is indeed more the merrier. At some point in your product lifecycle, before your alpha program, you should open up your dogfooding program to other teams and perhaps the entire company. Having partner teams, sales teams, legal, finance and other functions use your product is the best way to get feedback on scenarios that you may not have envisioned. Don't keep your dogfood program closed – open it up!
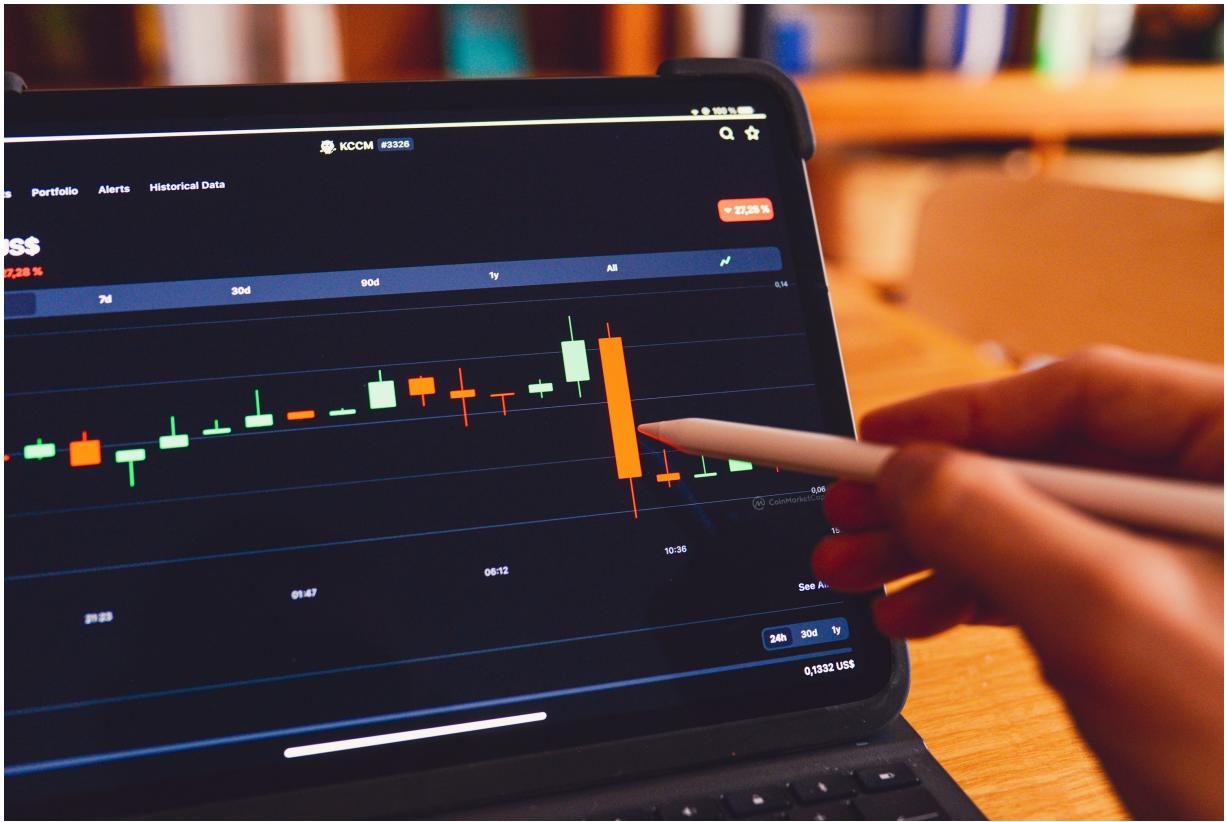
3. Don't dismiss or ignore dogfood feedback: There are so many times I have said, "Oh that's a corner case we're hitting just during dogfood – it's not a large enough sample size" to then have every customer complain about it. I have learnt over time to trust that my skill as a product manager is to represent the customer, and so if I run into an issue with the product, it is likely that the customer will experience this too. So, don't dismiss or gloss

over issues that you hit during dogfood, as customers will experience this too.

4. Do keep dogfooding even once you have shipped the product: Dogfooding doesn't stop once you've shipped the product! By continuing to dogfood, you can replicate customer issues that are being reported from the field and start improving the next update or version of the product. So, just dogfood daily and keep at it.

5. Don't start thinking that you are the customer: All of this dogfooding and putting yourself in customers shoes and exercising core user journeys can give you a false sense that you are the customer. You are not the customer. While you may have intuition on the core user journeys, it is in the using of your product that you will find all the creative and wonderful ways in which customers use your product that you could never have thought of. Don't let dogfooding make you arrogant, or keep you distant from customers – use dogfooding with the humility and understanding that you are trying to represent the customer the best you can so that you can create a better product for your real customers and users.

FAILING TO HAVE LEARNING SYSTEMS

Also known as Analytics & Experimentation

"Never let formal education get in the way of your learning" — Mark Twain

Story

The mistakes we make while knowing better are the ones that hurt the most. When I was Group Product Manager for Kaizala, we were building features and growing rapidly. I knew that we needed better systems for data, analytics, and experimentation. However, we kept deprioritizing our

data, analytics, and experimentation in favour of more features and capabilities. Our customers wanted product capabilities, our product capabilities were helping us scale, helping us refine our product market fit, and also figure out the right business model. The analytics were important, yes, it was, but it could wait.

Till it could not wait any longer. About a year into the Kaizala journey, we realised we were flying blind. Customers were complaining of performance issues: and we didn't have analytics on it. Customers were complaining that messages weren't being sent: no telemetry again. We knew that we were losing customers, that retention was a challenge, and we needed cohort analysis: and we didn't have the systems or data in place for it.

The horrifying thing to confront at such a time is the realisation that you can't just build the system a year later and hope to have data: you have not only *not* built a system for analytics, but have lost all the important data for the last year by not investing in an analytics platform.

The only thing to do was to pick up the pieces, build out an analytics platform, and start to see the data flow in and be valuable six months later…

Don't leave data platforms, analytics systems, and experimentation platforms too late – they should be part of your plan from day 1, and built out from day 1, so you have the data later to analyse and make decisions on what to prioritise and to understand what challenges you have.

The Purpose Of Learning Systems

Analytics and experimentation help you learn and tweak your product to acquire more customers and serve them better, thus driving usage and retaining users for longer.

Analytics and experimentation systems are powerful tools, and even more power resides with product managers nowadays. As a product manager, you can use these tools to acquire, engage, retain, and monetize users in healthy and safe ways that come from a place of benefitting the customer, or in unhealthy and unsafe ways that comes from a place of profit maximisation and benefiting the business.

This is an important and urgent area, where more thoughtful policy and regulation is needed. I won't delve into the moral issues of using data to drive outcomes, other than to say that each of us has to learn, be vigilant to how the data we collect is being used, and make ethical decisions that are grounded in value to the customer.

Now, while this is a real concern, in my own experience as a product manager, I've mostly had the opposite challenge: of not having enough data and not having any analytics systems in place, and having no systematic way to run experiments!

Analytics systems help you get information about the usage of your product so you can track how users pass through the core user journeys, where they spend time and where they don't, and what friction exists that causes them to not complete the journey.

Now, once you have this analytics information, you may make an alternate design which you sense will reduce the friction and increase the probability of the user completing the journey, and you would test this with experimentation. You may deploy the new design to 10% of the users, and check the completion rates of the core user journey with this cohort, and if this performs better, then you bring this to all customers.

So, analytics and experimentation go hand in hand, and if they are in service of the right purpose of helping the customer accomplish their goals, then they result in wonderful outcomes for our customers.

Crafting A Learning System For Your Context

Learning and analytics systems have to be crafted for your context – the analytics you need as an early-stage web start-up are different from the analytics you need as an old enterprise B2B product. That said, I have seen that most analytics fall into the following buckets:

1. Analytics to understand product health and fundamentals: These are metrics like ANR, crash rates, app boot time, battery usage for mobile apps; it may be page load times, API latency for web apps; it may be crash data, memory consumption data for a desktop app. These metrics are important for a product manager to enable, to understand, and to engage with engineering to improve the quality and stability of the product.

2. Analytics to understand core user journey funnels: Whether it is a sign-up funnel, an ecommerce shopping funnel, or a writing a document funnel, each product has a few core user journeys that customers will repeatedly exercise. Understanding how users flow through these funnels, segmenting users into cohorts, and understanding user behaviour and friction in the product that stops users from completing the journey successfully is important.

I remember that in the sign-up form for Office Live, we had a field that said "Phone Number" – and we had a lot of abandonment on this field because users didn't know whether it was their personal phone number or the phone number of their business that they had to enter in that field! Knowing that

abandonment happened in this field helped us learn the issue in focus groups and clarify it, so that more customers were able to complete the sign-up.

3. Analytics to understand overall product usage: DAU/MAU, App uninstall rates, Session length are examples of overall product usage metrics. These metrics aren't limited to a part of the product where a funnel analysis can be done, but tell you how your product is overall being used. Having a cohort analysis by time, or by app version on this set of metrics is very useful – so you can compare the DAU/MAU of users who started on v1 and the users who started on v2, and see if the work you did across the product helped improve the engagement.

4. Business metrics: CAC, ARPU, LTV are business metrics that are useful to have. Ideally, the product work you are doing should help reduce acquisition costs and increase the user value, and these metrics reflect this. However, these metrics are also hard to move with a single feature usually, and the impact of your work on these metrics can be seen only in a longer time horizon.

Out of these four areas above, the first two are closer to the product and are leading measures of overall product usage and business metrics; so, it is more important to focus on the first two areas as a product manager in an early-stage start-up or a v1 product than focusing on the product usage and business metrics; if I had limited resources, I would put them on understanding product health and usage of the core journeys.

Once you have these metrics, it would be great if you had an experimentation system that allowed you to deploy new product capabilities to a fractional cohort of users based on some segmentation characteristics. Experimentation comes after having analytics in place, and can super-charge your product development outcomes by allowing you to understand the impact of your

product development efforts across two randomised groups. Handle experimentation with care – I have seen focus on experimentation when analytics isn't in place and not enough users are there to build significant randomised cohorts.

Do's And Don'ts Of Learning Systems

1. Do start early and start small: Do start your learning journey early on in your product lifecycle. Also, when you start, start small – don't spend all of your time in version 1 on building an analytics system when you don't have any users yet! Finding this balance, and continuously investing in analytics, and evolving your systems to reflect where you are in your product lifecycle is important.

2. Don't leave learning to data scientists or analysts: While many companies hire data scientists or analysts nowadays, I am wary of hiring for these functions till it is absolutely needed. A product manager for an early-stage start-up should be able to do analysis; it is only when you have scaled and have millions of users generating lots of data do you need data scientists. Even then, product managers should work closely with analysts and data scientists to help frame the questions they need answers to that will help move the product forward.

3. Don't use data in ways that compromise the users' trust: The data at your hands can be used in ways that compromise user's trust. Don't do it. Think twice, and then think again before collecting data that is not needed, in using data in ways that could hurt user trust, and most of all in sharing data (the default should be "no sharing of any data with any one").

4. Don't confuse analytics with speaking with customers: In recent years I have seen an overreliance on analytics over speaking to customers, and this

makes me cringe. Product management is an art as much as it is a science – if you are looking only at data, you will micro-optimize and miss the big picture; if you only speak with customers, you may know what to build, but never know if you have built it well. Don't be confused: the reason product managers exist is to ensure that products are built that help customers succeed; so, you must speak with customers at all times and at all costs. Analytics can only help you if you understand customers to start with.

FAILING TO HAVE CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Also known as Community

"Play is the highest form of research" — Albert Einstein

Story

We met many, many customers when we were doing mobile incubations & Kaizala, both before starting the incubations, while building the product, and as we evolved the product. I learnt a lot from Rajiv during this time, on how to create a sense of community for our products. It was exasperating meeting customers with Rajiv – he'd go off script, never

follow the rules in our focus groups, and would be so playful in his customer interactions. The thing that was doubly frustrating was that his style of customer interaction worked wonderfully well: it was disarming, genuine, and our users and customers laughed with him and told him everything we needed to know!

As we built up Kaizala, we had a number of customers who championed our product, and celebrated with us when we built out some feature they wanted, and called us and complained when things weren't working. Rajiv joked that I was more customer support than product manager, since customers were playing the role of product manager. It irked me, and at the same time I saw how it felt so right – the strong community of customers we had were wonderful, they were the fans of the product and would help us by sharing what they wanted to use Kaizala for – truly, Kaizala was co-created with customers.

The Purpose Of Community

We did a good job with Kaizala of including customers in the co-creation of the product. The boundaries of our organisations are becoming more porous, and the best product companies are building community and inviting fans of their products to co-create the future of the product with them.

When I started my career, customers were seen in a different light and were kept away from engineering teams. I remember wanting to meet customers when I worked on Outlook Connector, and I was told that it was not useful and it was too expensive. A few years later, we started to meet customers more frequently, and during Office Live, we started to get some input from customers – but customers weren't included as part of a community and

invited to share feedback and suggestions. We ran NPS (net promoter score) surveys, and got some feedback through second hand sources on what customers thought of our products. The only customer interactions were once-a-year, formal MVP interactions at a Microsoft event.

Now, having a community – say on Discord – that is active, contributing bugs, sharing feature ideas, and even upvoting ideas is more common. When your community works well, it reduces the time to get feedback, helps you understand what is important to your fans, and allows you to guide the torrent of input into a clear product roadmap of high conviction.

Building A Community Of Fans

There is a lot written about building community and some great books on it. I have seen that it is important to have a few crucial elements in building a community of fans:

1. Wanting to build a community: First off, you must truly want to build a community. You must want to do this not because it will help your product, help you get more users, or achieve any business goal; you must want to do this because helping customers succeed moves you and energises you. I have been guilty of caring so much about building the right product that I've forgotten who we were building the product for in the first place: our users, our fans, the people who improve or entertain themselves by using our product. In going back to users, you will always find energy and purpose. This is the reason to want to build community, to serve our users better by getting energy and clarity for yourself.

2. Showing that you care: Rajiv made us reply to every piece of feedback on the app store for our mobile incubations & Kaizala. He used to give out his – and our phone numbers – to customers, urging them to call us in case of

any issue. He had a realisation that I have had much later: that the millions of customers are made up of individual people. Only by showing individual people that you care can you care for your millions of customers. Caring is at the heart of community.

3. Being authentic and honest: You will receive feedback – both positive and negative – in the community. Making false promises to fix issues, agreeing with feedback (while discarding it mentally), and always being diplomatic are not the way to build a trusted community. A trusted community rests on respectful argument, candid conversations, and authentic promises. Cultivate these in building your community.

4. Being playful and curious: Being authentic and honest can happen without becoming formal. Communities that thrive have a playful interaction with customers, filled with banter, ideas, suggestions, jokes and pulling of legs as you get to know people in the community better. There is a sharing of concerns, and a sharing of dreams. Encourage this kind of conversation in your communities.

5. Keeping the community safe and respectful: While you encourage playfulness, you have the job of enforcing respect and safety in the community. Don't stay silent to hurtful comments, and don't let safety violations slide. There is no room for second chances and warnings. This is the one area that you should take a consistent stance in the community, of upholding the safety and respect of everyone who participates in the community.

Do's And Don'ts Of Community

1. Do build a community with a light touch: Building a community has to be done with a light touch. Your role in building the community is that of a

guide, encouraging people to contribute, nudging people to share their concerns, and becoming invisible and letting the conversations flow, jumping in only to uphold the law or to share a specific point of view, as a participant to the community and not as a company employee.

2. Don't confuse the community with your customer base: Community, by its nature, will have your most ardent fans: people who already get value from your product and want to make it better. However, you have customers beyond your community too. Even though you may think that the feedback from your community is harsh, it is better than the zero feedback you get from people who have tried your product and not used it, or customers who don't care enough to share their thoughts. Your role is to not only serve your fans, but to serve all your customers. While your fans can help you with this, they aren't representative of all your customers: you may have a feature that works for your fans but doesn't work for the rest of your customer base. So, be sure to temper the feedback you get from your community and validate it with the rest of your customer base.

3. Don't start a community for short term gains: When you start building a community, know that you are building a long-lasting relationship that could span product versions and last multiple years. Don't start a community for short term gains. Once you've started the community, you must maintain and nurture the community, listening, replying, meeting, speaking, and sharing. It is work that requires time and effort, so ensure that you have commitment towards the long-term investments that will be needed when you start your community.

FAILING TO HAVE A SHIP PLAN

Also known as GTM

"A ship in harbour is safe — but that is not what ships are built for." — John A. Shedd

Story

After the launch of Office Live, we had a 6-month period when we ended up re-writing a large part of the service, and building a lot of new capabilities. We were also growing users on the first version of the service, and had a few million users on the v1 service. Migrating users from

v1 of the service to the new service was going to be a challenge, with schema changes, data sharding and replication, and service reliability issues. This was back in 2006, when many of these problems had not yet been solved for online services at scale.

I was the product manager for the migration from the v1 to the new version (v1.5) of the service. While there were many technical challenges, the biggest challenge that I faced at the time was, "How will we ship this?".

Would the migration be an opt-in, or would we force migrate? Would it be a big switch, or a trickle of users to the new service? How were we going to test migration? We knew that our alpha and integration environments were already running v1.5 of the service. Would we have to set up test environments with v1 and v1.5 and run a migration?

How would we migrate users in production? How would we rollback in case of any issues? How would we handle questions of downtime? Would there be a Beta on the new environment? Would we continue to sign-up users to the v1 of the service? Most of all, when would we be done with migration?

These were real challenges, and without a solid ship plan, we would fail. I remember that even with all the planning and the ship plan, things went wrong. Our estimate to complete the migration was a couple of weeks. It took 3 months to complete the migration, and even then we weren't fully done and we had stragglers on the earlier version of the service.

I don't remember writing a PRD during this time for migration: I do however recollect in vivid detail the ship plan, with details of each step, how we would test, how we would monitor live site, how we would handle customer complaints and so on.

Most of all, I remember many late cold nights in Seattle, in the office with my wonderful colleagues from Office Live, all watching the big migration dashboard and discussing the next steps, my 1-year-old daughter sleeping peacefully in her car seat in the centre of the table in the ship room, blissfully unaware of the challenges of migration…

The Purpose Of A Ship Plan

"Should we ship it?" is a question you will ask yourself every time you launch a product feature. Your product will never be ready – the bugs won't all be fixed, the marketing collateral won't be done, support training won't be to the quality you want it at, and things will be a real mess. Making the call to "Ship it!" – or to hold the product and to not ship – should be a product management decision.

Making this decision is easier when you have put together an objective ship plan ahead of time, much before you ship and removed in time from the pressure to ship, from heated conversations of "We're not ready yet" from your QA team and "We're already delayed by weeks" from your marketing or sales team.

Shipping products itself has changed a lot, from the time of boxed products that could not be updated to online services and mobile apps that can be updated frequently. This has caused ship plans to evolve too.

However, the purpose of the ship plan has remained the same through this time – a tool to aid objective decision making on whether your ship is ready to sail the seas, or whether it needs some more time in the harbour…

The Elements Of A Good Ship Plan

There are many possible ways to structure a ship plan. What I have found most effective is to structure the ship plan as a series of gates to pass through, with entry and exit criteria and owners for each stage of shipping.

Now each ship plan is going to be different because of the context of the product and market, which version of the product it is, and so on. That said, to take an example, we could have the following gates to a ship plan: Release to Alpha, Release to Beta, Release to 10%, Release to World.

This is how you might then structure the ship plan, as a set of criteria – check boxes – for entry and exit into each stage. Looking at the example in more detail:

Release to Alpha

Definition of Alpha: Alpha will be 100 external users who are hand-picked to try our new version

Alpha gate owner: User research lead

Entry criteria to Alpha:

- Zero P0 and P1 bugs from QA

- At least 97% service uptime guarantee from Eng

- 100 external users have been recruited and NDAs and agreements signed

Exit criteria from Alpha:

- A minimum of 2 weeks in Alpha before graduation

- Usage telemetry shows that all core user journeys have been exercised

- Survey feedback completed by all Alpha users

Release to Beta

Definition of Beta: Beta will consist of 2000 external users who sign-up for the beta program, and at least 20 influencers / reviewers.

Beta gate owner: Product management lead

Entry criteria to Beta:

- Zero P0 and P1 bugs from QA
- At least 99% service uptime guarantee from Eng
- 2000 external users have signed-up and agreed to the ToS
- 20 influencers / reviewers have been recruited for the Beta program
- We have a 5 person internal Beta support team that has been set up and trained

Exit criteria from Beta:
- A minimum of 2 months in Beta before graduation
- Usage telemetry shows that all core user journeys have been exercised
- At least 6 surveys have been run with all Beta users
- P0 / P1 issues reported by influencers / reviewers have been fixed and the loop has been closed with them
- DAU/WAU of at least 40% before we exit Beta

Now, as can be seen, a lot of this example will be contextual, and we don't need to complete the example of Release to 10% and Release to World.

However, to reflect on these criteria – you can see how defining "DAU/WAU of at least 40% before we exit from Beta" much ahead of time can be useful in having an objective conversation in a ship room on exiting Beta – now you may decide after the conversation that 30% DAU/WAU is good enough to exit, but you would not have had this conversation if you had not had this criterion defined ahead of time.

Going through this exercise can also help you think of all that needs to be done to ship: should the NDAs with Alpha users have data loss or data retention guarantees? Should Beta influencers be allowed to write about the product online? Should 10% users be selected by random, or should it be based on some demographic characteristic?

Structuring a ship plan as a set of checkboxes gives you the power when people are flaring up or feeling anxious to walk down the list and restore calm to the conversation, and bring clarity of decision making to the question of should we ship the product, or should we hold and for how long.

Do's And Don'ts Of Ship Plans

1. Do review & publish the ship plan ahead of time: A good ship plan is hard-thought, hard-argued, hard-fought and published ahead of time. If you have a committed date for shipping, then it is even more important to distance the ship plan in time from the actual ship date. The reason a ship plan discussions will be hard is that there are different forces pulling in different directions, and you as the product manager are trying to find the point of balance – a good QA team will pull hard in the direction of "it's not perfect yet", a good marketing or GTM team will pull hard in the direction of "we have promised a fixed date and planned around it", a good design team will pull hard in the direction of "There are a few more user experience issues to fix". Finding this balance becomes harder and harder the closer you get to your ship date, and objectivity goes out of the window and emotions get involved, and often it is the loudest voice that wins. To ensure rational decision making, it is important to have these hard conversations and multiple scenarios ahead of time so that at the time of shipping, you can use the plan effectively. So, once you're done with these discussions and have the ship plan, review it and publish it ahead of time.

2. Don't confuse the ship plan with the GTM plan: The ship plan and GTM plan intersect, but they aren't the same. The GTM plan – which often is owned by marketing or growth teams – focuses more on how to acquire customers effectively once you ship; for this, the GTM plan will include partnership discussions, marketing collateral, and growth interventions. The

ship plan is focused more on how to get the product out of the door to the GTM team. The ship plan definitely influences the GTM plan, as you can go to market effectively only when you have a product. The GTM plan also influences the ship plan, because there may be external commitments and plans which may dictate the date by when you have to ship the product. So, while the two intersect, they are not the same.

3. Do enforce the ship plan: A plan and criteria that is not enforced loses its bite and becomes just a piece of paper. If you overrule every criterion in the ship plan when it comes to the crunch time of shipping, you will become toothless and lose credibility, and even worse, you will create confusion and eventually cause a poor outcome for the customer.

4. Don't enforce the ship plan too hard: Now, on the contrary, if you enforce your ship plan with an iron hand and no room for discussion, you will lose the opportunity to modify the ship plan based on the context at the time of shipping. Listening, using common sense, and adapting the plan to the needs of the times is the counterbalance to having a set of criteria, especially since the plan would have been formulated much ahead of time. I have found that the best way to find this balance between enforcing the plan and changing the plan is to ask, "What has changed, and what is it that we didn't predict when we wrote the plan?". If nothing has changed – then enforce the plan. However, if something has changed meaningfully, it is only logical to adapt the plan to the change.

KNOWING, AND DOING

"I have spent many days stringing and unstringing my instrument
while the song I came to sing remains unsung."
— Tagore

O ver the years, I have learnt a lot about building products by observing patterns of failures. Through this I've gathered a set of principles for myself about what works and what does not.

However, knowledge is useless unless it is translated into consistent action through doing. Latent knowledge is like undigested food, and makes one sick. However, if food is digested, it results in life, growth, and energy; and in some crap! The analogy, though gross, is an appropriate one: you want life, growth, and energy in your product as a result of applying your knowledge, and you can be guaranteed of doing some stuff wrong as well.

This is the biggest challenge: of knowing, but not doing. What is the reason for this lack of action? One of the biggest reasons is fear.

Fear keeps us in the safe domain of knowledge rather than the scary domain of action. Confronting our fears and taking action every day to push the boundaries and challenge our own limitations is what results in growth and dynamism.

Unfortunately, it is true that those who don't know are happy to act, and those who know and who are filled with doubt and hesitate.

The way to make the world a better place is by stepping up, speaking out, creating value and making a positive difference to the world. By staying in your intellectual shell, you will not build anything worthwhile, and will look back upon your life with a wistful, "If only…" instead of having no regrets, having given yourself fully to action coupled with knowledge.

Go forth and act on what you have learnt!

AFTERWORD

"The season of failure is the best time to sow the seeds of success"
— Yogananda

Through writing this book I was able to reflect on my failures, write down what I have learnt, and think about how to put these into action the next time I build a product. I was able to contemplate my season of failure, and hopefully sow some seeds of future growth, if not success.

More than anything, I hope that through my honesty and candour in this book I have been able to honour my father. The process of writing has been a salve, a soothing balm to know that not only that my father lives on in me and my work, but that through my work I will live on in my daughter, and maybe in a small way in you, my readers.

Thank you for reading…

"The temple bell stops — but the sound keeps coming out of the flowers"
*— Basho, translated by Robert Bly*
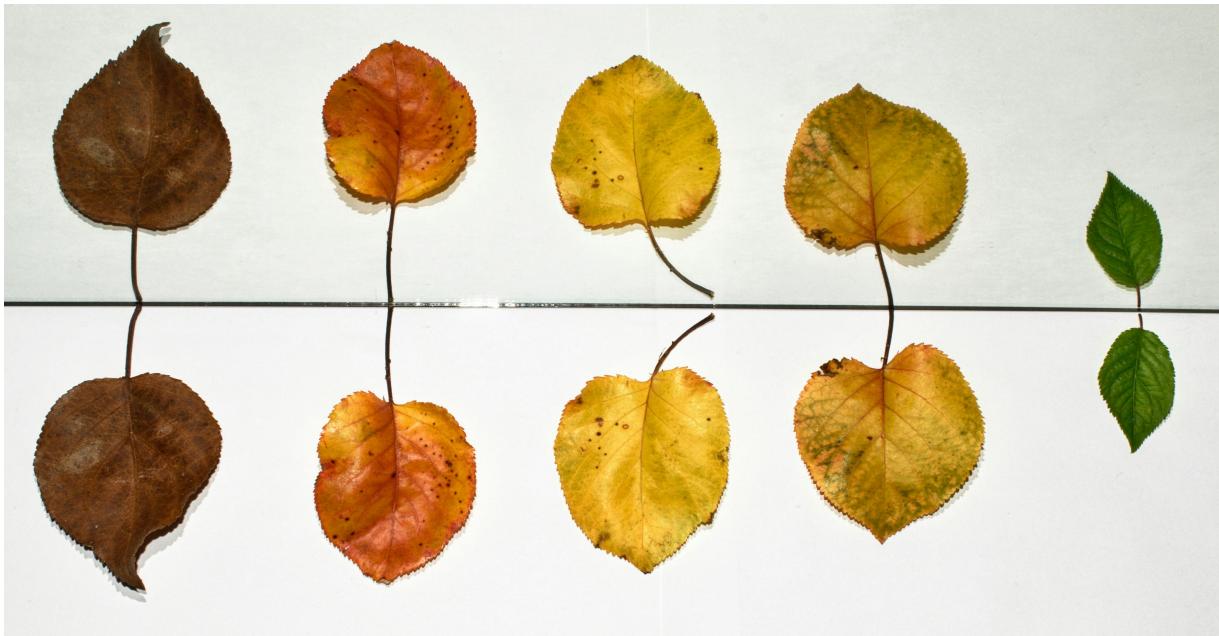
WHAT'S NEXT?

I will continue to post content related to this book at www.failingwell.com, including corrections to any errata (which are solely mine!). You can stay in touch with me at @appa. Do write in with suggestions, thoughts, and feedback on the book!

Five books that have influenced me that I would recommend reading next are:

1. Zero to One, Peter Thiel

2. The Hard Thing about Hard Things, Ben Horowitz

3. High Output Management, Andy Grove

4. Managing Oneself, Peter Drucker

5. Four Thousand Weeks, Oliver Burke

PROCEEDS FROM THE BOOK

I am self-publishing this book on Kindle. All proceeds from the sale of this book will go towards supporting palliative and end-of-life care in India. End-of-life care is still in its early stages in India and there is an urgent need for funding institutions that are working in this space.

One notable institution that I support and will be donating the proceeds of this book to is Sparsh Hospice.

If you would like to contribute to Sparsh in addition to purchasing this book, you can donate through their website.

ATTRIBUTION OF IMAGES

The images used in the book are from Unsplash (www.unsplash.com).
Thanks to all the creators on Unsplash for the fantastic images.

ABOUT ME

I love reading, music, gaming, movies, sports, food, and building technology products. I keep a weekly substack at https://arunrajappa.substack.com/, and you can write me at @appa.

At work, I am the regional manager for RIOT Games for India & South Asia. Prior to starting at RIOT Games in February 2022, I spent more than fifteen years at Microsoft and Google as a product manager, working on products like Android & Play Store, Microsoft Teams, Microsoft 365, and Mobile Incubations for India. I have spent the last 15 years focused on India & Emerging   markets, and continue to be excited about the incredible opportunities for growth in the region.

Oh, and I love crows…