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# Product Management in Practice

A Real-World Guide to the Key Connective Role of the 21st Century

Matt LeMay • O'Reilly © 2017 • 188 pages

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Management / Management Concepts

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## Take-Aways

- A product manager's responsibility is to do anything and everything necessary to make the product succeed.
- Product managers need four "CORE" skills: "communication, organization, research and execution."
- Product managers don't need to know "data science" or programming, but they must talk with experts who do know in order to learn and build alliances and trust.
- Don't try to implement best practices. Know your organization deeply; then adapt practices to fit its corporate context and culture.
- Product managers rather need to "overcommunicate" than to "undercommunicate."
- Listen carefully to senior leaders; persuade them to support your product in terms of corporate goals and user needs.
- Keep your end users or customers in mind at all times. Know what they want and don't want.
- Product managers need clear goals and must grasp their firm's vision and objectives so they can prioritize their tasks.
- Remind people that agile demonizes rigidity, including rigid adherence to agile itself.

## Recommendation

Consultant, coach and former product manager Matt LeMay's engaging style, irreverence and humor make his writing so entertaining that even if you don't manage products, you'll enjoy this description of those who do. His blunt advice strips away any illusions about the prestige and power of the position. His wise prescription for success, including case vignettes and illustrations, will equip aspiring or current product managers with everything they need to prosper. For firms establishing product management practices, LeMay weighs in on what you can borrow from other companies and what you must craft to fit your culture.

## Summary

**A product manager's responsibility is to do anything and everything necessary to make the product succeed.**

No book, article or position description adequately describes the role of the product manager (PM). Being PM includes anything and everything that helps make your product successful. When you find yourself in the job, you're likely to wonder what you're supposed to do with your time. Asking your superiors won't help; they can't articulate the job requirements. They'll probably tell you to figure it out for yourself. Even though you have no authority, you do have responsibility – lots of it.

Describing the job in terms of what you don't do might make more sense. You don't build anything; you don't order anything to be done because no one reports to you; and you don't wait for instructions from anyone because no one knows what you do. You bring people together, negotiate compromises, facilitate, soothe wounded egos, lobby senior management and clients, listen to developers' complaints, and generally solve problems using persuasion.

*“Product management is the glue of modern organizations – the role that connects user needs with business goals, technical viability with user experience, and vision with execution.”*

Product managers need self-awareness, a contained ego and lots of self-esteem. Sure clues that you've fallen prey to your insecurities include using arcane jargon or quoting design clichés from Steve Jobs to make yourself and your role seem more important. Or you might try to take credit for things you shouldn't. Resist such temptations by focusing your efforts and your measures of success on making your teams and products better, regardless of who gets credit. Do this, and before long, programmers, designers and the rest of the team will sing your praises loud enough that you won't have to.

**Product managers need four “CORE” skills: “communication, organization, research and execution.”**

Great product managers come from all disciplines and backgrounds. Though you'll do different things as a PM in a start-up than in a large organization, most firms will expect you to have a mix of technical, business and user experience (UX) knowledge. In reality, while each of those things helps, the specific CORE skills you must have are communication, organization, research and execution.

The best PMs communicate with and among their stakeholders; they never sacrifice truth and clarity for comfort. They work to make the team's systems and the company's systems function seamlessly, changing the rules where needed while improving flows, processes and practices. Product managers stay curious, research the needs and viewpoints of their stakeholders, understand the competition, seek new ideas, and learn everything essential to making their product work. Across industries, PMs get things done; they execute. Whether performing a menial but necessary task, learning enough about coding to roll up their sleeves if called on or stepping in for a far more senior person when necessary, PMs do what it takes and inspire others to do the same.

**Product managers don't need to know "data science" or programming, but they must talk with experts who do know in order to learn and build alliances and trust.**

Worthy PMs will ask a data scientist, programmer – or anyone else in the organization whose work they need to understand – to sit with them and explain their job, what matters to them and how they can help. As a PM, you want to speak to your people instead of trying to gain technical expertise through books or blogs. They will give you knowledge within the context of your firm and the work it does, and they can build bridges between you and those with whom you work and serve.

Nurture relationships with your team and broader group before you ask anyone for a favor. Seek out information, knowledge and skills, even on topics and subjects that cause you effort and anxiety. Gather information continually, and stay open to ideas that may work better than your own. Admit it when you're wrong, and learn from your mistakes.

*"All work with data includes assumptions...make sure that your organization can navigate, discuss and test those assumptions as needed."*

Use data, but don't make it a fetish. If you spend all your time looking at numbers and spreadsheets, you won't do what great PMs do – spending time with people, communicating and resolving problems. Avoid using the term "data." Describe exactly what you have, whether survey results, UX results or other information. When you consult data, record and share your purposes, hypotheses and assumptions so people know the interpretive context you're using for that specific data. Track metrics that align clearly with your goals.

When you're interpreting data, look for the reasons behind changes. If sales go up, for example, understand why: Get to the reasons by interviewing users. Similarly, if numbers go down, learn and understand why. Figure out the metrics and what falls within your span of influence. You don't need to know what a data scientist does, but you must be able to interpret data in the context of your users' needs and your business goals to ensure that those crucial forces align.

## **Don't try to implement best practices. Know your organization deeply; then adapt practices to fit its corporate context and culture.**

Stay curious and cultivate curiosity among your teams and – to the extent possible – throughout the company. Put people together who work in different functions; set up meetings and events where they can share their work and ask each other questions.

*“Good product managers bring curiosity and openness to their everyday work. Great product managers turn curiosity into a core value for their team and their organization.”*

Always keep your door open to anyone who wants to talk. For PMs, communication – that is, talking to people – constitutes getting work done. Know best practices, but don't rely on them. Reliance can make you rigid, which is the opposite of curious. Only after you study and observe the organization and its situation, decide if you should gradually introduce ideas and practices that worked for you in the past at other companies or that are known to work in leading firms elsewhere.

## **Product managers rather need to “overcommunicate” than to “undercommunicate.”**

The potential damage from undercommunicating – resulting in broken projects and angry clients – far exceeds the awkwardness and embarrassment that might result from overcommunicating. Don't book unnecessary meetings, but don't apologize for the necessary ones. Just don't waste people's time. Make meetings meaningful by using the “disagree and commit” process whereby everyone present takes responsibility for decisions that come from the session. In this mode, people can't passively consent. They either agree and commit – or disagree and explain their objections. It may take many meetings to reach complete agreement.

Arrange optional informal gatherings, such as coffee breaks or breakfast get-togethers. Schedule these breaks when people need a boost, such as the mid-afternoon lull. With remote teams, expect more difficulty. Keep meetings focused and short, call people often, and encourage informal communication through chat rooms and corporate social media. Avoid uncertainty. For example, announce real deadlines with clarity and conviction. Learn the preferred communication styles of the people with whom you communicate. Some need things explained visually; others need time to process what you tell them. Some won't tell you what they really think, so you must coax it out of them. Being good at communicating is a critical component of being a PM. Other people may not be good communicators, so don't expect them to be.

Ask questions all the time, and dig to get to the root of problems, ideas and disputes. Don't take people's initial statements at face value; ask why. Always get to the source of a conflict or grievance; then resolve it with as much information at your disposal as possible. Strive for clarity with senior stakeholders especially. Make sure you get to the root of what they want – precisely – especially in terms of the firm's big objectives and goals. If you don't know something, push higher up the hierarchy until someone can tell you. If the CEO doesn't know, help him or her by sharing your vision for the company.

## **Listen carefully to senior leaders; persuade them to support your product in terms of corporate goals and user needs.**

Don't surprise senior people at meetings; prepare them for your remarks ahead of time. When disagreements arise with leaders, fall back on what your users want and on the company's stated goals and priorities. Don't argue from the perspective of your opinion versus a senior leader's. You will always lose.

*"A product manager cannot succeed if there is not clarity among senior leaders about a company's strategy and vision."*

Work diplomatically with senior leaders. Avoid confrontations. Before you react emotionally to a perceived criticism or unreasonable request, take a breath and ask questions that get to the underlying reasons for their comments or behests. When a senior stakeholder wants something moved up the priority list and done right away, ask what you can move back to accommodate him or her. Don't volunteer your team for nights and weekends.

## **Keep your end users or customers in mind at all times. Know what they want and don't want.**

Communicate with customers. Take advantage of whatever user experiences, teams or people are available to you. Never resent them. When you talk with users, ask open questions designed to get them talking about what they do. Ask them about their experiences; don't ask what they like. Ask them what they want in a product. Watch your customers when they use prototypes of your product, earlier versions or a competitor's similar product. Avoid questions that make users defensive or lead them on tangents. Beginning with "why did you" can shut a person down. Plan a series of questions that escalate to what you really need to know. For example, you might ask what led people to make certain decisions or what processes they used.

## **Product managers need clear goals and must grasp their firm's vision and objectives so they can prioritize their tasks.**

Use your "product road map" less as an ironclad plan and more for guidance. It's a tool that gives people a clear sense of what your team will build. Tell stakeholders that your road map isn't inviolable. The road map belongs to you as PM, but you don't control it or call the shots. It must fit in other PMs' road maps and work for a broad range of stakeholders. View it less in terms of ownership and more in terms of how it can fuel collaborations.

*"As with all aspects of product management, road maps and prioritization are best approached not as sources of authority – but rather as opportunities to connect and align."*

Other people will have ideas for the product road map. Don't shut them out or include them only when their ideas align with yours. Don't dump their ideas into a holding tank. Give stakeholders a template with which to record and describe their ideas. Insist they explain why and how their ideas relate to relevant goals and

who they will help. This will severely curtail the number of ideas thrown at you and should ensure that only the best come forward for consideration.

Make sure you posit clear, comprehensible goals so you can more easily set priorities for future sprints and development cycles. Make sure your goals align closely with your priorities, and vice versa. Use your goals to determine your backlog priorities. Leave room for urgent needs, but use an even more detailed questionnaire to ascertain whether a person's urgent matter should take priority over everything else. How many users will it affect? Why must it get done right away? Require stakeholders to explain their urgent requests in detail before you bump something else.

## **Remind people that agile demonizes rigidity, including rigid adherence to agile itself.**

The agile approach doesn't change PM principles. Even with an agile system, PMs must still overcommunicate, compromise, connect and collaborate. Agile provides an excellent foundation for product management, but don't expect miracles. Agile won't accelerate your output, for example. Agile works if you approach it by keeping true to its nature – a process that respects developers and customers, encourages deep reflection, and acknowledges the need for constant learning and improvement to keep up with constant change.

Unfortunately, many firms try to apply agile as a rigid orthodoxy. This violates the principles of agile's conception and renders it harmful to effective product management. Develop an overarching vision using the values of agile. Apply one of the popular agile methodologies, like Scrum, at least at first.

## **About the Author**

Former product manager **Matt LeMay**, a top 50 influencer in the field, coaches product managers and consults with firms about their product management capabilities.



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