Treating product management as a role, rather than a culture all its own, deadens its meaning and impact.

Product management as we’ve known it up ‘til now – as a limited function or role – is effectively dead. However, viewed as a culture, product management is thriving. I predict ‘product culture’ will be central to the future of work in digital economies. Yet knowledge workers, executives and business educators unfortunately remain indebted to the old paradigms of product. They’re lagging far behind. That was the argument I made in my previous article, to which quite a few readers took offense, with comments like:

- IT folks should stop complicating product management as if they were the first people to discover it!

- Disingenuous - product function is an evolution not a revolution.

- This is a good example of the nonsense published about the product.

These strong sentiments were welcome because they’re a reminder that, in scientifically rationalising work, we have forgotten how deeply personal and subjective it is. We also limit the power of collective work if we treat it only as a virtual assembly line between functions, roles and organisational matrices.

We need a cultural revolution of how we look at work, especially when it’s about the creation and management of ideas such as in product management.

Taylorism spread into the Soviet Union because the conveyor belt was a monster of efficiency. Even communist states couldn’t avoid it despite its philosophical clash with Marxism, which aims to eliminate anything that devalues people into a subclass of workstations on an assembly line.

That was the industrial world. Since then, the material aspect of what we make has taken a backseat to the intangible work we do. In this business of idea production, we do not need to put the human mind on a conveyor belt.

Before we can embark upon cultural change, we need to understand what ‘culture’ is at its core. Anthropologists generally deconstruct culture into four main elements: language, norms, values and artifacts. Product people employ markedly unconventional approaches to all four. Let’s go through them one by one.

**Language**

Product teams are infamous for developing their own language. New verbs (e.g. “ship it”, “let’s run a
discovery session”, “PM” something), acronyms
(PayPal had an internal wiki of thousands of
acronyms) and an entire jargon of concepts (jobs to
be done, personae, design sprints, etc.) are tech
speak across geographies. Elon Musk’s ban on the
use of acronyms because they slowed down
productivity highlights the significance of language.

More subtle communication happens nonverbally
through symbols pervasive in collaboration tools
(e.g. emoticons and badges that signal hierarchy,
status or achievement). Perhaps, this shared
language is what enables open source movements,
the creation of international products and
asynchronous work to happen seamlessly between
tech communities.

Norms

Product cultures incorporate a lot of rituals and
micro-behaviours that set expectations. A customer
debrief session every Friday at 4.00 pm over pizza
and beers or “logging time on the customer-support
desk even though it’s not part of the official job
description” are examples.

Norms are the ways product cultures structure their
time and are directly related to a product
organisation’s values. For instance, in order to
signal a value such as experimentation and learning,
a tech company could celebrate a noteworthy failure
during its monthly all-hands meeting.

Values

Whether it’s a two-person start-up or a company
with more than 50,000 workers, values (what a
group of people judge as either good or bad) are
prominent in product cultures. “Thrive on the front
lines”, “operate at the lowest level of detail”, “we
are owners”, “move fast”, “build social value”, “do
less, better”, “represent us with pride” are
examples.

A country’s work ethic permeates its firm values.
Yet, global product values revolve around common
themes of positive change, ownership, learning and
speed. A founder who was brainstorming his new
start-up’s values told me that values come in two
layers: the baseline product ones, and then the
company-specific ones on top. It’s as if product
workers share a common global identity.

Artifacts

A product culture’s internal artefact include the
knowledge, process and tooling that a company
builds (Google’s Design Sprint, Amazon’s meeting
memo, or Intercom’s 666 roadmap...). These are
often about how people work together rather than
domain specific know-how (e.g. medical treatment
practice or a venture acquisition risk assessment
framework).

The actual products and services reflect how those
maker teams view their world’s problems. Do we
build another video platform to grab consumer’s
attention or do we build one to alleviate excessive
video consumption? Do we build a Bluetooth-
enabled saltshaker that makes it more entertaining
to season our food or do we fix supply chain
inefficiencies in food supply reaching poorer
economies?

What we build in our technological society is no
longer an external artifact; rather, the artefact has
become part of us. Ben Evans hit the nail on the
head when he compared TikTok and recent
productivity tools to pop culture.

With these aspects of culture in mind, consider a few
consequences.

Be deliberate about ethics and values

“As our own species is in the process of proving,
one cannot have superior science and inferior
morals. The combination is unstable and self-
destroying.” Arthur C. Clarke’s quote resonated
with me while I was watching The Social Dilemma,
a documentary about the perils of not actively
thinking about the moral implications of what we
build.

Personal and collective cultures of product people
dictate what reality is manifested. Product managers
born in Germany in the 1980s vs. product managers
from a neoliberal banking background will
approach the same problem with different product
strategies. If they were to build a payment app, fee
structure feature vs. its privacy and security features
would be weighted differently. Guess which group
prioritises what.

So, be deliberate about asking tough questions
about ethical decisions and encourage product
people to be strongly opinionated about their
values. Peter Diamandis said that in a world
interconnected and of increasing complexity, it’s not
what you know, “it will be the quality of the
questions you ask that will be most important.” I’ve
yet to see a product course or curriculum that
seriously focuses on that.

Don’t try to buy culture, practice it

By viewing product management only as an
assembly line of the work to be done, practitioners
and thought leaders are attempting to standardise
this emergent way of working. Unfortunately, that
will hamper its effectiveness and dull its creativity.
“Find product-market fit in 8 steps, become a
certified PM, implement OKRs in two weeks..." are examples of advice regimenting how people should be working together. Past a certain point, that is wrong; how we work is the biggest manifestation of our personal and collective cultures so we should not follow as sheep.

Plus, there is no right answer. Product companies share their internal practices and know-how, things considered firm secrets in other industries. What’s proprietary in their case is their culture.

Instead, practice building product cultures from the ground up. Have debates, encourage tough questions and create the space for democratic participation in your product organisation. Software development teams are deeply socialist in how they work together and gifting cultures are widespread in open source code projects. Amplify these interactions and explore them your own way.

**Hold space instead of managing**

Elon Musk recently urged CEOs to go to the production floor and forget about PowerPoints. He realised the centre of gravity of value creation is moving towards the teams that build. It’s no longer in operations, financial engineering or strategy.

Look at how a company supports building and you’ll see what their culture is all about. Google invests in teams before products, and multiple autonomous teams work on similar ideas simultaneously. That creates room for experimentation (and many sunset products). Apple’s craftsmanship is supported by effective conflict management between its functional departments. Their culture is built around healthy internal conflict because it produces craftsmanship.

Ultimately, collaborative building is what differentiates a product company from a non-product company. In the former, collaboration is a first-class citizen – in the latter, it’s just an afterthought. As management, your value-add is to create a societal space for that to happen.

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