

A Post-Mortem on Product Management



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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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