3 Ways Product Management Leaders Can Improve Performance of Their Teams

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Initiatives: Product Leadership

Product manager teams are often built from a group with broad, cross-functional backgrounds. This allows the team to cover many different disciplines in delivering customer value, but provides challenges in developing team skill sets into product management specialists rather than generalists.

Overview

Key Findings

- Product management teams often struggle to know which skills they should focus on improving, owing to the broad remit most teams have and the variety of activities they are responsible for.

- Too often, product management teams are so entirely engrossed in tactical, execution-level actions that they cannot spare cycles to take a broader view of the efficiency of their activities, tools, and processes.

- Leaders in product management teams often struggle to separate themselves from their prior day-to-day work, and fail to properly delegate and enable their teams to execute independently.

Recommendations

There are three actions that product managers leading their teams can take immediately to improve the performance and skill sets of their team:

- Prioritize skills to improve upon, and focus on a small set of those skills at a time by selecting high-impact, low-maturity activities.

- Leverage common continuous improvement practices within the team by providing regular opportunities for inspection and adaptation to the changing needs of the organization.
Engage in collaborative delegation by empowering team members to reach decisions instead of delivering answers to questions.

Analysis

Product management teams are often made up of people from a wide variety of backgrounds with various skills and abilities that complement each other. Because of this, team and personal development can be a challenge for team leaders. However, there are some clear methods that such leaders can use to provide the appropriate opportunities for their teams to develop into high-performing, cohesive units. Figure 1 outlines three key areas that all product management teams can focus on to realize immediate gains in maturity, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Figure 1: Developing Product Team Skills

Developing Product Team Skills

- Engage in Collaborative Delegation
- Leverage Continuous Improvement
- Prioritize Skills Across Life Cycle

Source: Gartner
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Prioritize Skills Across the Life Cycle

Product management teams often struggle to focus on self-improvement and skill development because of the variety of activities that they perform on a daily basis. With this broad spectrum of potential areas of improvement, many teams run into analysis paralysis and become incapable of agreeing on which areas of focus are more important than others. As a result, product teams become frustrated in attempting to improve and simply continue working as usual.

As part of Gartner’s High Tech Product Management Score maturity model, product management leaders and teams are asked which areas of the product management process are the most important across the 22 activities identified in the Score framework. These importance ratings are then compared to the maturity result for each organization to create an “Activity Priority Index” — the higher this score, the more important and less mature the activity. These results can help teams to focus on the skills and activities that are viewed by their peers as most important, narrowing the universe of choices to something more manageable.

The top five activity areas of priority for product management teams across the profession based on the consolidated results of over 150 organizational assessments using the Gartner High Tech Product Management Score tool are:

1. Know the Customer
2. Analyze the Competitive Landscape
3. Create the Product Strategy
4. Achieve Financial Objectives
5. Innovate Product Management Approaches

Product management team leaders looking to advance the skills of their team would do well to focus on a narrower selection of these top five to achieve the highest impact on the delivery of customer value. While it may be tempting to try to cover all five of these at once, Gartner recommends focusing on one or two of these activities at a time, assigning a team member responsibility for building a program that is narrowly focused. These efforts should be placed in a documented team development roadmap that provides transparency to the team about future investment in personal and professional growth.
For more information on what areas product teams identified as key focus areas for improvement, see *What’s Important in Product Management? — A Peer Comparison of Priorities*.

**Engage in Collaborative Delegation**

Clearly, focusing on the right skills at the right time and engaging in continuous improvement are important ways to build product team competency. However, another way to build team ownership and confidence lies in how product leaders approach questions brought to them by the team. All too often, when team members bring questions to product leaders, they deliver an immediate and directive answer to that question. And while this might resolve the issue and allow forward momentum, it also ignores a critical opportunity to coach the team member raising the question.

In many instances, the team member raising the question has an idea of what they believe the outcome should be, and may simply be looking for confirmation of this belief, rather than expressing an inability to decide. Other times, multiple options may appear equally attractive (or unattractive), and the product manager is relying on the team leader to provide strategic direction. In both of these cases, however, the product team leader does the product manager a disservice by providing directive or prescriptive answers. Rather, the team leader has an opportunity to review the decision with the product manager and lead them through the reasoning process to allow them autonomy to reach the best option for the product, team, and customer.

Leading people through the reasoning process might be as easy as asking what the product manager believes the proper answer should be and confirming that they are on the right track. It can also be more in-depth, dedicating further time to analyze the options presented, allowing the other person to reason through which options are better than others. While it is tempting as a product leader to provide directive answers, it does a disservice to the team members who need to feel ownership of their product and their decisions, and confidence in future decisions yet to be made. In the long term, empowering team members to be confident in their own decisions reduces the tactical burdens placed on product team leaders and allows them to focus more on the strategic needs of leading the team.

For more information on how collaborative delegation can help product teams succeed, see *Increase Trust, Ownership and Delegation to Strengthen Your Product Management Teams*. 
Leverage Continuous Improvement Practices

Product management teams often work with engineering organizations who have adopted Agile product development processes, so it is ironic how few teams engage in active continuous improvement practices outside of that context. While it may not make sense to adopt a full Scrum or kanban approach to the daily work of the product management team, there are many ways that product teams can adapt those approaches to meet the needs of continuous improvement. Whether the team adopts a lean perspective, adapts Scrum or Kanban, or creates a system entirely unique to them, continuous improvement practices provide the most efficient way for product teams to improve their skills.

There are many different approaches to continuous improvement — lean, Scrum, kaizen — but all of these have common attributes. They encourage teams to inspect their current state and identify adaptations to this state which will make their work more effective, efficient, or impactful. They all focus on reducing waste, improving throughput, and eliminating unnecessary work so that teams can align toward those efforts they see as most valuable and important to delivering customer value through the product.

The most important and effective tool product teams can adopt to further their continuous improvement efforts is a retrospective meeting at least monthly — something that only 38% of product management teams report doing in Gartner’s Product Management Score tool. During this meeting, each member of the team can raise concerns about what is working for them, what is not working for them, and what they would like to see the team experiment with to improve. The team as a whole then reviews each piece of feedback and decides what remedial steps to take for things that are not working, as well as what new practices they want to experiment with adding to the process. To ensure that these meetings are valuable, it is critical that specific next steps be documented following each discussion, and that these next steps are reviewed at the beginning of the next meeting. This holds the team accountable to the actions that they chose to take in between meetings, and fosters transparency and ownership within the team.

For more information on how product teams can adopt and adapt agile practices in their ongoing work, see Combine Lean and Agile Practices to Drive Continuous Improvement in Product Management Processes.

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