

Where's the Product Manager?

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It seems like everyone is talking about this. I have to laugh and wonder if this is like hunting for Waldo or Carmen. Well, I was asked my opinion...so here we go, one more silly love song. First of all we need to be clear: the product manager is part of a team. Which makes this whole blog post kind of simple. The product manager is always on the product management team. That's where he or she is. Really, a pretty short blog post. But...it's not so simple and many issues arise because of poorly stated problems. Check out the great discussion on [Product Manager – Strategic or Not?](#) by Scott Sehlhorst.

Maybe we think that the product manager is a special person on the team. I had a person tell me once that the product manager was the team leader. I wish that was the case, but normally it's not so. The product manager might be a 'product leader', but what does that mean? I can just see the spaceman and cowboy of Toy Story chasing the product manager around, saying "Lead me, Lead me". The product manager is a team member, and has a role that is no more important than any other members' role. Much like back in the middle ages, no body part is more important than another.

Product management has always been a team sport, except for the trivial case where the whole company is one person. Even in this trivial case, product management is cross-functional, Waldo is just wearing lots of hats, but I guarantee you that Waldo isn't able to do all the activities of product management. Perhaps this is why product managers of small companies seem to be all over the place. I read an article in the Wall Street Journal on this topic that warned executives about playing too many roles. They even claimed that multitasking has been shown to increase your chances of mental disease.

So where does product management belong? That becomes more interesting, hence the real question. To answer this, I want to step back and consider where product managers come from. Not that the product manager is the boss, but because they're a key player on the product management team, and the answer will provide insight into my eventual answer. The other Val keeps screaming for me to tell everyone, "not Kansas". So there, I told everyone that stupid joke.

Product managers tend to come from three main regions of a company. Much like a Texas accent, stuff can be discerned by knowing where the product manager comes from. They may come from engineering, services, support or development (for simplicity I'll group these folks all into Development), or they may come from sales & marketing, or they may come from operations & general management. Let's take a look at each of these.

When someone from Development starts to understand the customers and the product they become to look suspiciously like a product manager. If this person begins to make decisions that indicate an understanding of business and economics, we interpret it as acting like a product manager. If they also happen to be a little social then we see it as talking like a product manager. Well, if it looks like, talks like, and acts like a duck... another product manager is born. This one will be strong in Development type characteristics, but normally light in the other areas. I'll call this person a PM_D indicating there weakness outside of development. In the case of the PM_D, normally I'd have another team member setting product strategy.

When someone from marketing & sales starts to understand the product, and business ...same thing... bang, they're a product manager. This person is indicated by PM_{M&S} indicating there weakness outside of marketing & sales. In the case of the PM_{M&S}

M&S

, normally I'd have another team member setting product strategy.

Finally, when someone from operations & general management starts to understand the market needs, and the product, yep, you got it...bam...a PM is born. Yes, PM_{O&M} indicating their weakness outside operations & management. In the case of the PM_{O&M}

O&M

, normally I'd have this team member setting product strategy.

What we have here is Sr. Management wanting, needing, and believing that Product Management is an extension of those other disciplines, instead of being a discipline on its own. Later, they'll see just how uncompetitive these extended PMs are, but that's another posting.

Consider how this impacts the question of where product management should be. The organization that has power enough to create a PM_D is being driven by development. If you put the PM_D in product

management team that reports to someone other than development, they won't have the political strength to do their job. In this case, product management belongs under development, with the rest of the team players coming from both operations & general management and marketing & sales to augment the PM

D
's
weaknesses.

Using the same reasoning, the PM_{O&M} needs to be in a team reporting to operations & general management and augmented by the rest.

PM

If you have a
M&S, then

product management needs to be owned by marketing & sales, and put the PM

M&S

on a team augmented by operations & general management, and development.

Ok, but that other Val keeps yelling at me to include this blurb. So here I go again. What if you're fortunate enough to get one of those newly qualified PMs with no weaknesses. I've had the opportunity to meet a few of these folks, they have formal training in product management, not a short two week bolt-on course. These folks planned to be product managers from the get go. They have an understanding of the best-practices. They're young, but have a lot of potential.

I say, pull these young people into an augmented mentorship supported by each of the above mentioned functions, and directed by the CEO or President of the company. They are one of the most valuable resources your company owns. In this case, product management should be owned by whichever organization has the political strength to own it. At the end of the day we want to maximize results, to do this we must get power to the product manager.

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