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Chaos does not a successful product make

By Brian Lawley, 280 Group CEO

In the tech world the mantra oftentimes in companies is that they need to be “fast and nimble”. Plans change quickly, both in terms of products and marketing. Executives, board members, sales people, customers and team members come up with great new ideas and there is a sense of urgency that everyone should drop everything and respond. Oftentimes one meeting or one idea can change plans overnight. I call this the chaos strategy.

There is definitely some merit in running your company this way, particularly if you are a startup. For example, you may have no choice but to completely change plans in order to land a deal that will bring in enough revenue to keep the company going. Or you may have a new competitor show up that will steal your market if you don’t respond. Or your board may simply tell you that you are going to change your plans whether you like it or not, period.

That said, the reality is that the chaos strategy is far more prevalent and destructive than it need be, and the results can oftentimes be what makes a product (or an entire company) fail or suffer poor results in the marketplace. The damage from constantly shifting priorities and demands will inevitably show up. Ship dates for products slip, or they are released with poor quality. Product launches and marketing programs end up being ineffective and don’t generate the revenue they could. Teams become frustrated with each other, burned out and play group politics rather than working towards the common goal of winning.

There is a better way. By doing some basic planning and making it clear who owns what and what will be delivered when a company can ship better products, increase their revenues AND deliver better product more reliably.

So what is the secret? Implementing and leveraging some of the product management and marketing best practices that have evolved over the past few decades.

Every week we speak with one or more companies that either have no product management, no product process or no clarity in terms of roles and responsibilities. They have no method for capturing and prioritizing features requests from customers, sales, technical support and the team itself. They have no well-thought-out product roadmap or they are launching a product without a solid plan in place and they are unrealistic about the budget, resources and time to do it right.

One client that we worked with was in just this situation. They had been very successful, had grown to over 70 people, had many customers and by all accounts were doing well. Because they had been successful their philosophy was that they didn’t need to think about improvements or a different way of doing things. But the reality was that the founder was calling all of the shots. Commitments were being



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made to customers by sales and technical support without any formal approval. Products were slipping and quality was suffering because features were added at the last minute without adequate time to think them through or test them thoroughly. And worse, the marketing team could never plan and execute effectively because there were no reliable dates and they had no idea what would actually be in the product until just before it actually shipped.

The teams were frustrated. The products were suffering. And the company was leaving a significant amount of money on the table.

For this client we helped them to begin capturing and prioritizing requirements in a methodical way. We built a roadmap for them and assigned engineering estimates that showed that they were completely overcommitted. We helped to clarify roles and responsibilities. And we put some basic process into place so that people had to sign off on what was going to be delivered when, and if anyone wanted to request a change in the plans it needed to get approval before they could promise anything.

The result? First, they used the roadmap to determine where to draw the line and which products and projects to cut. This gave them a prioritized list of where the engineering efforts were focused to ensure that engineers were working on the most critical things for the company. Second, since there was now a well-known and understood process for requesting features (with justification necessary for why the feature should be considered), everyone began to feel like their ideas were being heard and were given a fair shot at being implemented. Third, with more reliable release schedules and an earlier idea of what each product release would include the marketing department was able to create dramatically more effective campaigns to drive extra revenue at launch.

No company wants to have to implement a bulky and painful process, but with just a little bit of effort a company can work much more as a team and have a greater chance of success. Who wouldn't want to build products that are more customer-focused and that bring in significantly more revenue? And if you can reduce the stress level and increase your employee's job satisfaction it is even more worth it.

For additional ideas about how to implement a process and do things the right way take a look at these resources:

- White papers at <http://www.280group.com/whitepapers.htm>
 - o How to Implement a Lightweight Product Process to Deliver Better Products Faster
 - o How to create a compelling product roadmap
 - o How to plan and execute a high-impact product launch

- Expert Product Management, the best-selling Product Management book by 280 Group CEO Brian Lawley (available on Amazon.com and www.280group.com)

- The 280 Group toolkit and PM Office series (including on-demand training, templates and tips, strategies and best practices) at <http://www.280group.com/productmanagementtoolkits.htm>.



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About the author

Brian Lawley is the President and Founder of the 280 Group, a Product Management services firm that provides consulting, contractors, training and templates. He is the former President of the Silicon Valley Product Management Association, the world's largest Product Management Association. During his twenty year career in Product Management he has defined, launched and marketed over fifty successful products for companies such as Apple, Symantec, Adobe, Palm, SAP, Nokia and dozens of startup and mid-sized companies.

Mr. Lawley is the Author of the Book "Expert Product Management: Advanced Techniques, Tips & Strategies for Product Management & Product Marketing." He won the 2008 Product Management Excellence Award for Thought Leadership by the Association of International Product Marketing & Management, and the Product Management Toolkits and PM Office that he created has been nominated for "Best PM Tools" by the AIPMM as well. He is the editor of Product Management 2.0, a newsletter and Blog devoted to excellence in Product Management and routinely writes guest articles for a variety of other publications.

He frequently speaks on the topic of Product Management, has delivered several keynote addresses at well-known conferences and has been featured on CNBC's World Business Review and the Silicon Valley Business Report. Mr. Lawley is a Certified Product Manager (CPM) and Certified Product Marketing Manager (CPMM). He earned an MBA with honors from San Jose State University and Bachelors Degree in Management Science from the University of California at San Diego with a Minor in Music Technology.