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Product Management Tips and Best Practices: Humility

Eric Krock

A product manager must take an intellectual stance of humility to be successful. (I write this as one who's never been confused with a modest man!)

Product management's goal is to make sure that on the vast majority of issues, a decision is made that is at least "good enough" for success in 20/20 hindsight. Ideally, product managers want to determine the best feasible course of action (given available time, resources, and conflicting priorities) on every issue, but it's unreasonable to expect a product manager to identify the best option every time. Realistically, a product manager will sometimes choose a path that in 20/20 hindsight was good enough for success, but not optimal. Other times, a product manager will make a choice that in 20/20 hindsight is simply incorrect and has to be reversed. Product managers are not psychic and do not have perfect predictive powers.

As a product manager, you will have the highest long-run average success rate on decisions if you consistently perform rational analysis on every issue where time permits. "Going on instinct" should be the last resort, not the first resort. Don't assume that you adequately understand an issue. Gather data. Ask open, non-leading questions to avoid biasing the input. Listen before you speak. Verify that you have correctly understood the data by repeating it back to your source, such as a customer, and getting their confirmation that you've understood them correctly. Don't assume that the data source understands the data either. Be alert to possibilities such as the customer honestly reporting to you what they believe

the problem and/or a solution to be but perhaps not fully understanding the situation themselves. Make sure that no significant source of data or data point is overlooked. Seek out people with different opinions and perspectives and listen to each one to ensure you've gotten the benefit of their input. Evaluate and weight the data. Brainstorm solutions. Investigate further where needed. Propose a choice. Get review feedback. Make a decision and move on without looking back. Make sure that you don't spend more time on any step, or any issue, than it deserves given the other issues you have to deal with.

Overconfidence or arrogance will fatally distort the decision making process. If you assume that you understand a problem without confirmation, sometimes you will fail to catch your own misunderstanding and will therefore make the wrong decision. If you assume too soon that you adequately understand a problem, sometimes you won't investigate a problem deeply enough and will fail to see the true problem or the best solution. If you assume your gut instinct for solutions or your own ideas are always right, sometimes you will fail to seek out other ideas that will turn out to be better than your own. If you assume the customer is always correct, you'll fail to catch the situations where they are mistaken; customers are human too, and you mustn't assign excessive confidence to their statements either. If you assume your proposed solution is the best one and don't get review input from others, you'll fail to catch the situations where you overlooked something that a reviewer would have noticed. Humility about your likelihood of being correct prevents these problems.

Being perceived as overconfident, arrogant, or dismissive will discourage others from speaking up and providing what would have been the pivotal input or idea necessary to identify the optimal path forward. Taking a stance of humility and listening patiently whenever people come to you with an idea or concern creates a culture in which people feel safe speaking up, are more likely to do so, and therefore ideas and information will circulate more freely. The higher your rank in the organization, the greater the danger you will discourage others from speaking up, and the more careful you must be to encourage others. People who are shy may hesitate to speak up because they fear the emotional pain of rejection. People who are lower in rank may hesitate to speak up because they fear retribution from higher-ranking staff in a dysfunctional office environment. If you listen patiently to what others have to say, you may waste some time listening to others saying things you in fact already know are incorrect or irrelevant, but you'll establish a culture in which people feel free to speak up, and

those benefits will greatly outweigh the cost of occasionally listening to input that's not helpful. Intellectual humility and patience prevent these problem.

Sometimes, you will make a decision and later begin to receive evidence that the decision was wrong, or at least non-optimal. What you do next is critical. If you open-mindedly evaluate the data without any emotional investment in the fact that you already made one decision, you will maximize the odds of quickly and correctly determining whether a change in plan is needed. If, on the other hand, out of pride or insecurity or a foolish belief that you never err you dismiss, ignore, or deny the contradictory information, you will ignore the signs that you're off course and may pilot your product right into the side of a mountain. (Reading articles about National Transportation Safety Board investigations of plane crashes provides excellent insight into classic mistakes in decision making as well as their costs. Pilot error is a common cause of both plane crashes and product disasters.) As product manager, you must be perpetually open to the possibility that you were wrong and ready to change you mind when presented with new data. Humility and openness to the possibility that in 20/20 hindsight your decision was wrong or non-optimal minimizes the cost of bad decisions and reduces the time required to remedy them.

By contrast, I can't think of any advantages that pride, overconfidence, arrogance, or insecurity provide for a product manager, or for anyone else for that matter! It's true that prideful, overconfident, arrogant, or insecure people sometimes are successful or very successful, but I see no evidence that those traits are the cause of their success or necessary for their success. I see enormous evidence that people with those traits are usually succeeding in spite of those traits due to other strengths and often ultimately are undone by those traits.

Humility is an asset. Pride, overconfidence, arrogance, and insecurity are liabilities. Which do you want to own?

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