

PRODUCT LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM
THE WORLD'S TOP TECH COMPANIES

MARTY CAGAN WITH CHRIS JONES

Silicon Valley Product Group

EMPOWERED

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Praise for *EMPOWERED*

“I recommend *INSPIRED* to every entrepreneur and burgeoning product person I talk to as the must read. That must-read list just doubled with *EMPOWERED*. It’s destined to become a classic.”

Shawn Boyer, Founder, GoHappy and Snagajob

“*EMPOWERED* dives deep into the tough organizational and cultural issues that get in the way of most companies I work with today. This is the experience and advice I’ve been waiting for in one book.”

Jeff Patton, Product Process and Design Coach

“I’ve known Chris for well over a decade. He is one of the finest product leaders I know. The product managers who worked for him went on to become great product leaders themselves, in some of the best tech companies around. If you want to learn from the best, this book captures those lessons.”

Doug Camplejohn, EVP and GM, Sales Cloud, Salesforce

“Once again, Marty’s wisdom and unique perspective have synthesized best-in-class companies, cultures, and leaders into a thesis and set of principles that are transformational. Easy to consume and apply, *EMPOWERED* is a must read for product leaders and all leaders who are convinced there must be a better way.”

Chuck Geiger, former CTO Chegg, IAC, PayPal, eBay, Wine.com, Travelocity

"If you're leading product people or even the whole product organization of your company, this book is for you. It's the first book to outline the underlying philosophy behind stellar product organizations from a leader's perspective, and its many examples make it easy to understand these concepts and apply them in your company's environment."

Petra Wille, Product Leadership Coach

"As one of the most respected leaders on product globally, Marty takes us for a fascinating ride that will help you become a better product leader so you can do what you do best—create satisfying, engaging experiences for your users and customers."

Simon Zhang, CEO, GrowingIO

"To thrive in this age of constant disruption, companies must accelerate innovation and continuously deliver products customers love. A higher level of consistent innovation can *only* come from truly empowered teams. Over the past several years, Marty's insights, practical advice, and wisdom have been immensely valuable during our transformation to a highly empowered product organization. In this book, Marty provides an essential blueprint for building empowered teams. If you are serious about achieving extraordinary business results and developing a product innovation culture you can be truly proud of, this is a must-read!"

Shamim Mobammad, SVP, Chief Information and Technology Officer, CarMax

"I've had the good fortune to work with Marty for many years, and yet, every time he comes out with a new book or article, I'm filled with both excitement and fear. What new product techniques are our competitors using that we are missing? *EMPOWERED* hits the mark dead on, and provides a recipe for creating great products. Marty has a knack for making difficult product techniques

seem both necessary and tangible. Read the book and rejuvenate your company!"

Jeff Trom, CTO, Workiva

"The core challenge of all tech companies today is to be a truly product-led organization, with continuous product innovation resulting in sustainable competitive advantage. *EMPOWERED* gives executives and leaders the key to understand how they need to change their companies in order to survive and thrive."

Frerk-Malte Feller, COO, Afterpay

"If you are wondering what will ensure your company survives, or why your products are failing, read this book. This is the 'how to' manual for building great product companies that last."

Amanda Richardson, CEO, CoderPad

"I included *INSPIRED* as mandatory reading for anyone joining my product development teams. Now I'll add *EMPOWERED* to the list of mandatory reading."

Joca Torres, CPO, Gympass

"*INSPIRED* has been a manual for our team to build better products. *EMPOWERED* is now a manual to build a stronger team. Everything I've read from SVPG is spot on, and often feels like I can use it the same day."

Ian Cairns, Head of Product for Twitter Developer Platform

"*EMPOWERED* is first and foremost about permission. Companies have to give themselves the permission to orient around a culture of product centricity. Everything from org structure, to technology, to culture and coaching derives from this. And nothing embodies this idea more than Marty's writings."

Punit Soni, founder, CEO, Suki

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INSPIRED: How to Create Tech Products Customers Love, 2nd Edition
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EMPOWERED: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Products
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TRANSFORMED: Becoming a Product-Driven Company
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This book is dedicated to Bill Campbell (1940–2016), known with affection as the Coach of Silicon Valley.

While I had met Bill a few times over the years, I was never fortunate enough to be coached by him. However, I count myself very lucky to have been managed and coached by several leaders who were coached by Bill.

Increasingly, I realize how many of the important lessons I've learned about leadership, empowerment, teams, and strong product companies can be traced back to Bill.

I hope he would approve of this book, and that he would be proud to see his teachings living on.

Contents

PART I	LESSONS FROM TOP TECH COMPANIES	1
Chapter 1	Behind Every Great Company	5
Chapter 2	The Role of Technology	12
Chapter 3	Strong Product Leadership	17
Chapter 4	Empowered Product Teams	23
Chapter 5	Leadership in Action	25
Chapter 6	A Guide to <i>EMPOWERED</i>	27
PART II	COACHING	31
Chapter 7	The Coaching Mindset	33
Chapter 8	The Assessment	40
Chapter 9	The Coaching Plan	47
Chapter 10	The One-on-One	65
Chapter 11	The Written Narrative	73
Chapter 12	Strategic Context	76
Chapter 13	Sense of Ownership	81
Chapter 14	Managing Time	87
Chapter 15	Thinking	90
Chapter 16	Team Collaboration	93
Chapter 17	Stakeholder Collaboration	98

Chapter 18	Imposter Syndrome	102
Chapter 19	Customer-Centricity	105
Chapter 20	Integrity	109
Chapter 21	Decisions	114
Chapter 22	Effective Meetings	120
Chapter 23	Ethics	124
Chapter 24	Happiness	128
Chapter 25	Leader Profile: <i>Lisa Kavanaugh</i>	134

PART III STAFFING 139

Chapter 26	Competence and Character	142
Chapter 27	Recruiting	146
Chapter 28	Interviewing	151
Chapter 29	Hiring	155
Chapter 30	Remote Employees	159
Chapter 31	Onboarding	164
Chapter 32	New Employee Bootcamp	170
Chapter 33	Performance Reviews	174
Chapter 34	Terminating	176
Chapter 35	Promoting	179
Chapter 36	Leader Profile: <i>April Underwood</i>	182

PART IV PRODUCT VISION AND PRINCIPLES 187

Chapter 37	Creating a Compelling Vision	190
Chapter 38	Sharing the Product Vision	195
Chapter 39	Product Principles and Ethics	201
Chapter 40	Leader Profile: <i>Audrey Crane</i>	203

PART V TEAM TOPOLOGY 209

Chapter 41	Optimizing for Empowerment	212
Chapter 42	Team Types	216
Chapter 43	Empowering Platform Teams	220
Chapter 44	Empowering Experience Teams	224
Chapter 45	Topology and Proximity	229
Chapter 46	Topology Evolution	233
Chapter 47	Leader Profile: <i>Debby Meredith</i>	236

PART VI PRODUCT STRATEGY 241

Chapter 48	Focus	246
Chapter 49	Insights	251
Chapter 50	Actions	258
Chapter 51	Management	261
Chapter 52	Leader Profile: <i>Shan-Lyn Ma</i>	264

PART VII TEAM OBJECTIVES 269

Chapter 53	Empowerment	274
Chapter 54	Assignment	280
Chapter 55	Ambition	285
Chapter 56	Commitments	288
Chapter 57	Collaboration	292
Chapter 58	Management	295
Chapter 59	Accountability	298
Chapter 60	Objectives in Perspective	301
Chapter 61	Leader Profile: <i>Christina Wodtke</i>	304

PART VIII CASE STUDY 309

Chapter 62	Company Backgrounder	312
Chapter 63	Company Objectives	314
Chapter 64	Product Vision and Principles	317
Chapter 65	Team Topology	319
Chapter 66	Product Strategy	325
Chapter 67	Product Team Objectives	334
Chapter 68	Business Results	343
Chapter 69	Key Takeaways	346
Chapter 70	Leader Profile: <i>Judy Gibbons</i>	349

PART IX BUSINESS COLLABORATION 355

Chapter 71	The Role of Product Leaders	357
Chapter 72	Stakeholder Management vs. Collaboration	360
Chapter 73	Shared Insights and Learning	363
Chapter 74	Keeping the Lights On	365
Chapter 75	Evangelism	367
Chapter 76	Leader Profile: <i>Avid Larizadeh Duggan</i>	370

PART X INSPIRED, EMPOWERED, AND TRANSFORMED 375

Chapter 77	Meaningful Transformation	377
Chapter 78	Transformation in Action	380
Chapter 79	<i>TRANSFORMED</i>	386
Chapter 80	The Most Important Thing	389
Chapter 81	The Destination	392

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	396
<i>About the Authors</i>	398
<i>Learning More</i>	400
<i>Index</i>	401

PART



Lessons from Top Tech Companies

My first book, *INSPIRED*, discussed how strong product teams at the best product companies use the modern techniques of product discovery to solve hard problems in ways their customers love, yet work for their business.

INSPIRED brought me and my SVPG Partners into many more organizations, well beyond Silicon Valley.

The most striking thing we learned was that in so many companies—even companies trying to do true, technology-powered products and services—product teams were too often not *allowed* to work the way they needed to.

We realized that it's not just the techniques that strong product teams use to discover successful products, but that the differences between how great product companies work and the rest run much deeper.

What we found in these companies was not pretty.

The Role of Technology

So many companies still have the old IT mindset when it comes to technology. It's viewed as a necessary cost rather than the core business enabler it needs to be. The people who work on the technology teams are literally there "to serve the business," and the technology managers and leaders are there to facilitate serving the business. Or it's shoved off to the side in some "digital" business unit. The technology teams are disconnected from the real customers—in fact, they're encouraged to think of their stakeholders as their customers.

Coaching

There is little if any active coaching of the people on the technology teams. And even if they wanted to coach, the managers often don't have the experience themselves. So the problems perpetuate.

Staffing

Most of these companies recognize that they don't have the staff they need, but they have very misguided ideas about how to correct that, and what to look for in product staff. So again, the problems perpetuate.

Product Vision

These companies rarely have an inspiring, compelling product vision. They may have had one during the early years of their company, but after the founders left, the vision faded. The people on the technology teams feel like they're just working in feature factories.

Team Topology

The technology people are divided up into teams where they feel like they aren't responsible for anything meaningful, they can't do much without depending on changes from several other teams, and that they're just a small cog in a giant wheel.

Product Strategy

It wouldn't be fair to say that most of these companies have a weak product strategy, because in truth, most have literally *no* strategy at all. They are just trying to please as many stakeholders as they can with the people and time and skills they have.

Team Objectives

Most of these companies have heard that Google and others use the OKR (Objectives and Key Results) technique to manage their work, and the CEO watched a video or read a book and thought it sounded easy. So they adopted the technique—layering it on top of their existing product roadmaps and culture—and every quarter there's a planning exercise that consumes a few weeks and is then largely ignored for the rest of the quarter. Most of the people on the teams say they get little if any value out of this technique.

Relationship to Business

The relationship between the technology teams and the rest of the business is not good. The stakeholders and executives have little or no trust in the technology teams. And the people on the technology teams feel like unappreciated mercenaries, subservient to the business.

Empowered Teams

Worst of all, the teams are not empowered to solve problems in ways customers love, yet work for the business. And as such, the teams can't be held accountable to results.

The product manager is really a *project* manager, shepherding the backlog items through the process. The designers and engineers are there just to design and code the features on the roadmap.

Motivation is low, sense of ownership is minimal, and innovation is rare.

It is easy to see why so many of these companies are ripe for disruption. And nothing at all like how product is done at strong product companies.¹

What is especially shocking to me is that it is really no secret how the best companies work, and how financially successful they are. Which raises the question, why is this the case?

In my experience, it's not that these companies don't *want* to transform, it's that transforming is *hard*, and they just don't know *how*. Or even what it really *means* to transform.

What they need is to move to *empowered product teams*.

Now, you may not be using that term, and you may not even realize there are different types of technology teams.

But if what I described is similar to your organization, I need to share with you a few very hard truths:

- First, you have very little chance of getting meaningful business results, let alone actually innovating, from your way of working
- Second, your customers are big, ripe targets for a competitor that does not operate this way (e.g., Amazon), and knows how to provide products customers love, yet work for their business
- Third, you are largely wasting the talents and capabilities of the people you have hired, and your best people—the ones you desperately need to survive and thrive—will likely leave
- Finally, if you think that by moving to Agile you've already done some form of digital transformation, I am sorry to tell you, but you haven't even gotten started

I'm hoping that the reason you're reading this book is because you are convinced there must be a better way.

And there is.

¹To be very clear, we have found exceptionally strong companies well beyond Silicon Valley, including in Shanghai, Melbourne, Tel Aviv, London, Berlin, Bangalore, and beyond, just as we have found very weak companies in the heart of San Francisco. It is the *difference* between the best and the rest that we focus on in this book.

CHAPTER

1

Behind Every Great Company

In this book, I want to share and highlight the differences between how *the best* companies create technology-powered products and how *most* companies create products.

The differences are both fundamental and striking.

The differences certainly include what many people think of as “product culture,” but strong product companies often have very different cultures from one another, so it clearly goes beyond that.

For example, consider Amazon, Google, Apple, and Netflix. I would argue all four are very strong product companies, having consistently innovated for many years, yet they each have very different cultures.

I still believe culture is extremely important, but there is something about great product companies that is more fundamental.

It comes down to the views they have on the role of technology, the purpose of the people who work on the technology, and how they expect these people to work together to solve problems.

Moreover, I don't think it's an accident that, despite their different cultures, these four companies have the most important elements in common.

What I will try to do in this book is untangle the parts of the cultures of these companies that are more a reflection of their founders' personalities from those that are essential to consistent innovation.

I want to share the important lessons I've learned regarding what separates the best from the rest.

One surprising common thread among many of the best product companies is the legendary coach, Bill Campbell. During their formative years, Bill literally provided executive coaching to the founders of Apple, Amazon, and Google, as well as several others.

To get a sense of Bill's views and values, here is one of my favorite quotes about the role of leadership in a strong product company:

Leadership is about recognizing that there's a greatness in everyone, and your job is to create an environment where that greatness can emerge.

This book is all about identifying what makes such an environment, and I want to encourage you to consider adopting these important practices and behaviors.

Please note that I am not arguing that these strong product companies are models of virtue. All of them have been justifiably criticized about some of their policies and practices.¹

But when it comes to the ability to consistently innovate, all four of these companies have demonstrated their skills, and I believe there is much to be learned from them.

At the core, I see three critically important differences between the strongest product companies and the rest:

The first is how the company views the role of technology.

The second is the role their product leaders play.

The third is how the company views the purpose of the product teams—the product managers, product designers, and engineers.

Let's take a closer look at each of these.

¹For an unflinching critique of these companies when it comes to their policies, see the writings of Professor Scott Galloway (www.profgalloway.com).

The Role of Technology

There is a fundamental difference between how strong companies view the role and purpose of technology as compared to most other companies.

At its most basic level, the vast majority of companies view technology as a necessary expense. They know it's important, but they think of it more as a cost of doing business. If they can outsource the labor, even better. Fundamentally, they don't really consider themselves in the technology business. Instead, they think of themselves as in the insurance business, or the banking business, or the transportation business, or whatever. Certainly, they need some technology to operate, but it's viewed as a subservient role to "the business."

Because of that, in most companies, technology teams exist *to serve the business*. That is very often the exact phrase you will hear. But even if they aren't explicit about it, the different parts of "the business" end up driving what is actually built by the product teams.

In contrast, in strong product companies, technology is not an expense, it *is* the business. Technology enables and powers the products and services we provide to our customers. Technology allows us to solve problems for our customers in ways that are just now possible.

Whether the product or service is an insurance policy, a bank account, or an overnight parcel delivery, that product now has enabling technology at its core.

As such, in *strong* product companies, the purpose of the product team is *to serve customers by creating products customers love, yet work for the business*.

That is a profound difference, which impacts nearly everything about the company and how it works, and results in much higher motivation and morale. And most important, it results in a much higher level of innovation and value for customers and the business.

Strong Product Leadership

In *most* product companies, the role of true product leadership is largely missing in action.

Instead, they are mainly there as facilitators, responsible for staffing the in-house (or even worse, outsourced) feature factory, and keeping the trains running on time.

In *most* companies, there is no product strategy. Notice I didn't say a bad product strategy—I mean literally *no* product strategy. The feature teams are simply there “to serve the business.”

The business certainly has reasons for what they request or put on the roadmaps, but they very rarely have a product strategy, or even the skills or data required to create one.

The stakeholders end up providing product teams with a prioritized list of features and projects that they need completed this quarter or this year. So, the “product strategy,” if you could even call it that, is really about trying to please as much of the business as possible.

When technology product companies moved to Agile methods over the past 10–20 years, many managers and leaders questioned whether they were still necessary, since team members would be expected to take a much more active role in how they work.

I realize this is counterintuitive to many people, but while moving to truly empowered teams does require moving away from the old command-and-control model of management, it does *not* mean you need fewer leaders and managers. It means you need *better* leaders and managers.

It's actually easier for a manager to manage (often micromanage) in the old command-and-control style. It's not hard to assign a team a list of activities, or a list of features to build, and just tell them to do the work as fast as they can.

While this command-and-control style may be easier for the manager, it creates teams of mercenaries with no empowerment in any meaningful sense.

In contrast, in *strong* product companies, the product leaders are among the most impactful leaders in the company.

They are responsible for staffing and coaching the product teams; they are responsible for the product strategy and converting the strategy into action; and they're responsible for managing to results.

Empowered product teams depend on skilled product managers, product designers, and engineers, and it is the leaders and managers who are responsible for recruiting, hiring, and coaching these people.

Further, a focused and compelling product strategy—based on quantitative and qualitative insights—is among the most important contributions of product leadership.

Empowered Product Teams

In *most* companies, the technology teams are not *empowered* product teams, they are what I call here *feature teams*.

Feature teams look superficially like a product team. They are cross-functional, with a product manager, a product designer, and some number of engineers. The difference is that they are all about implementing features and projects (*output*), and as such are not empowered or held accountable to results.

The feature teams get to work first designing the features on the roadmap, maybe doing a little usability testing, and then proceeding to building, QA testing, and deploying the features (known as *delivery*).

These feature teams sometimes claim they're doing some product discovery, but they rarely are. They've already been told what the solution should be; they're not empowered to go figure out the solution themselves. They're just there to design and then code.

In these feature teams, there is usually a person with the product manager title, but they are mainly doing *project* management. They are there to ensure the features get designed and delivered. Necessary perhaps, but this is not *product* management.

Because the teams are provided, or are pressed to provide, roadmaps of features and projects, the focus of the team is *delivery*—delivery of these features. And features are output. Even if someone were to complain of lack of business results, who would you hold accountable?

In contrast, in strong product companies, teams are instead given *problems to solve*, rather than features to build, and most important, they are *empowered to solve those problems in the best way they see fit*. And they are then held accountable to the results.

In the empowered product team model, the product manager has a clear responsibility, which is to ensure that the solutions are *valuable* (our customers will buy the product and/or choose to use it), and

viable (it will meet the needs of the business). Together with a product designer who is responsible for ensuring the solution is *usable*, and a tech lead who is responsible for ensuring the solution is *feasible*, the team is able to collaborate to address this full range of risks (value, viability, usability, and feasibility). Together, they own the problem and are responsible and accountable for the results.²

So, to summarize feature teams vs. empowered product teams:

Feature teams are cross-functional (a product manager doing mainly project management, a product designer, plus some engineers), and assigned features and projects to build rather than problems to solve, and as such they are all about output and not business results.

Empowered product teams are also cross-functional (a product manager, a product designer, and engineers), but in contrast to feature teams, they are assigned *problems to solve*, and are then empowered to come up with solutions that work—measured by outcome—and held accountable to results.³

Product Discovery

If you have not yet read *INSPIRED*, then you might be wondering: *What is so wrong with the business owners and stakeholders deciding what goes on the roadmap*, and therefore what the engineers should build?

This is considered the first and most important principle of product discovery: *our customers, and our stakeholders, aren't able to tell us what to build*.

It's not because our customers or stakeholders aren't smart or knowledgeable.

²To be clear, the designer and tech lead contribute much more than simply ensuring usability and feasibility respectively; what I'm referring to here is who we hold responsible and accountable for each risk.

³There is actually a third type of technology team, which is referred to as a *delivery team* (or "Scrum team" or "dev team"). A delivery team doesn't even pretend to be a true product team. They are not cross-functional, and they are not empowered. There is a product *owner* (responsible for administering the product backlog) and some number of engineers. They are purely about output (code and ship). If you're running a process like SAFe, then this is unfortunately you, and truthfully, I have no idea why you would want to read this book, since what I describe here is the polar opposite both philosophically and practically.

There are two fundamental reasons why our customers and stakeholders aren't able to tell us what to build:

First, the customers and stakeholders don't know what is just now possible—they are not experts in the enabling technologies, so they can't be expected to know the best way to solve the problems we're focused on, or even if the problem is possible to solve. It's often the case that innovations solve problems in ways that customers and stakeholders had no idea was possible.

Second, with technology products, it's very hard to predict in advance what solutions will work. There are many reasons why product ideas don't deliver the results we hoped. All too often we are excited about some idea, but our customers are not, so they don't buy what we thought they would. Or, we discover the idea has major privacy or security issues. Or we find out the idea will take much longer to build than anyone expected.

Empowered product teams understand these inherent issues, and product discovery is about *discovering a solution that our customers love, yet works for our business*.

We refer to this as product *discovery* to acknowledge that we understand what we can't know in advance, and to emphasize that our task is to *discover* a solution that is *valuable, usable, feasible, and viable*.

CHAPTER

2

The Role of Technology

I promise that this book is very practical, and you'll be able to directly apply everything we discuss. But in this one chapter, if you'll bear with me, we need to get just a little philosophical.

It is plain to see the difference between feature teams and empowered product teams.

It is plain to see when companies view teams as there to serve the business, versus when they're there to serve customers in ways that work for the business.

It is plain to see when a company is just trying to please as many stakeholders as possible, versus when they have a clear and intentional product strategy.

But while these differences might be plain to see, that does not explain *why* these differences exist.

If we hope to close the gap between the best and the rest, we need to look at the root cause of this gap.