Product Team Roles

Key Roles in Product Teams

1. **Product Manager (PM)**
   - Leads the product from concept to continuous evolution.
   - Works closely with UX designers and engineers.
   - **Skills and Knowledge**:
     - **Technology**: Current trends and applications.
     - **Customer Insights**: Understands user pain points, desires, and decision-making processes.
     - **Market and Industry Knowledge**: Competitor analysis, trends, and social media impact.
2. **Designer**
   - **Focus Areas**:
     - Understands user personas and customer journeys.
     - Designs the user experience (UX).
     - Conducts usability testing and ensures accessibility.
3. **Engineer**
   - **Responsibilities**:
     - Architecting the solution.
     - Developing proof-of-concepts.
     - Using Agile and DevOps methods.
     - Performing A/B testing.
4. **Product Marketing**
   - **Tasks**:
     - Understands customer segments and market positioning.
     - Develops go-to-market strategies.
     - Measures the impact of marketing campaigns.

Principles of Strong Product Teams

- **Mission-Driven**: Teams are committed to solving customer problems.
- **Empowered and Accountable**: Teams have the autonomy to decide how to achieve objectives and are responsible for results.
- **Optimal Team Size**: 8–12 members (two-pizza rule).
- **True Collaboration**: No strict hierarchy; team members work closely together.
- **Team Duration**: Teams should stay together long enough to develop synergy.
- **Defined Scope**: Each team focuses on a specific goal or problem area, such as fraud prevention at eBay.
- **Team Autonomy**: Teams have the freedom to solve problems as they see fit.

Stages of Team Development (Bruce Tuckman)

- **Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning**
  - Understanding these stages helps manage team dynamics effectively.

Case study – Stages in Team development

'Rat Fax' case study

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- What was the problem to be solved?
- How did the meetings go in the beginning?
- How did the team own up responsibility?
- What was the impact of the improvement achieved on other teams?
- What are you experiences in team formation and team maturing?

Different stages of a team
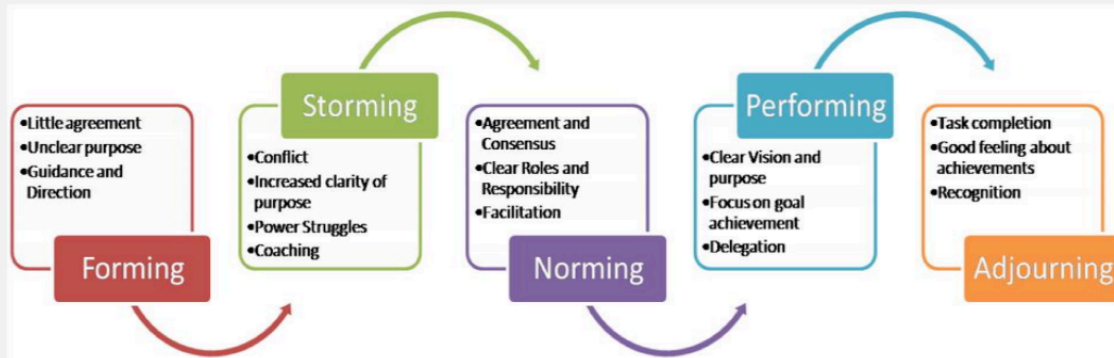
Fig 2: Team Development stages

Why teaming is important?

- The difference in productivity between an average team and a turned-on, high-performing team is not 10 percent, 20 percent, or 30 percent, but 100 percent, 200 percent, even 500 percent! —Tom Peters, management consultant and writer

- An organization succeeds when people trust each other and cooperate with each other

Case study in building a good team

Once upon a time, back in 1976, Data General Corporation needed to come up quickly with a fast, reasonably priced 32-bit mini-computer to compete with Digital Equipment Corporation's VAX. Data General CEO Edson de Castro launched the Fountainhead Project and gave it the best people and ample resources to complete the 32-bit initiative. As a back-up to the Fountainhead project, Data General created the Eagle project within the Eclipse group under the leadership of Tom West. Work on both projects began in 1978.

In 1980 Data General announced its new computer, featuring simplicity, power, and low cost. This computer was not the Fountainhead from the well-funded "best" DG group but the Eagle from Tom West's under-funded Eclipse team. Tracy Kidder saw all this happen and told the story in *The Soul of a New Machine,* which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1982. This book, which Kidder thought might be of interest to a handful of computer scientists, has become a project management classic.

In the beginning of his book, Kidder introduces the readers to the book's protagonist Tom West by telling the story of him sailing a yacht across rough seas off the coast of New England. Kidder's title for the prologue was "A Good Man in a Storm."

Twenty years after Kidder's book was published Tom West was interviewed by Lawrence Peters for the *Academy of Management Executive.* Below are some excerpts that capture Tom's views on managing innovative projects:

On selecting team members:

You explain to a guy what the challenge was, and then see if his eyes light up.

On motivating team members:

. . . Challenge was everything. People, especially creative technical people who really want to make a difference, will do whatever is possible or whatever is necessary. I've done this more than once, and I've repeated it over and over. It seems to work.

On the importance of having a vision:

. . . you've got to find a rallying cry. You need to have something that can be described very simply and has that sort of ring of truth to an engineer that says "yes that's the thing to be doing right now." Otherwise you're going to be rolling rocks up hill all the time.

On the role of being a project manager:

You have to act as a cheerleader. You have to act as the instructor. You have to constantly bring to mind what the purpose is and what's moving the ball towards the goal post, and what's running sideways, and you have to take up a lot of battles for them. I mean you really don't want your design engineer arguing with the guy in the drafting shop about why he ought to do it the designer's way. I can do that, and I can pull rank too, and sometimes I did just that.

* Tracy Kidder, *The Soul of a New Machine* (New York: Avon Books, 1981); Lawrence H. Peters, "'A Good Man in a Storm': An Interview with Tom West," *Academy of Management Executive,* Vol. 16, No. 4, 2002, pp. 53–60.

Data General case study

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- What lessons in team building can we learn from Tom West?

Lessons in team building from Tom West include:

1. **Motivate with Challenges:** Tom emphasized presenting clear challenges to inspire the team, particularly technical individuals eager to make a difference.
2. **Create a Clear Vision:** He believed in finding a strong, motivating vision that the team could rally around, ensuring that it resonated with their goals and values.
3. **Be a Supportive Leader:** Tom acted as both a coach and a cheerleader, advocating for his team, protecting them from external distractions, and focusing on moving toward project goals.

4. **Adaptability:** He demonstrated flexibility in managing both resources and team dynamics, pulling the team together despite limited funding and resources.
5. **Encourage Ownership:** By ensuring team members felt involved in shaping solutions, he fostered a sense of ownership and dedication.

Creating a good vision

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Discuss with all

Communicate   Strategic sense

VISION

Passion   Inspire others
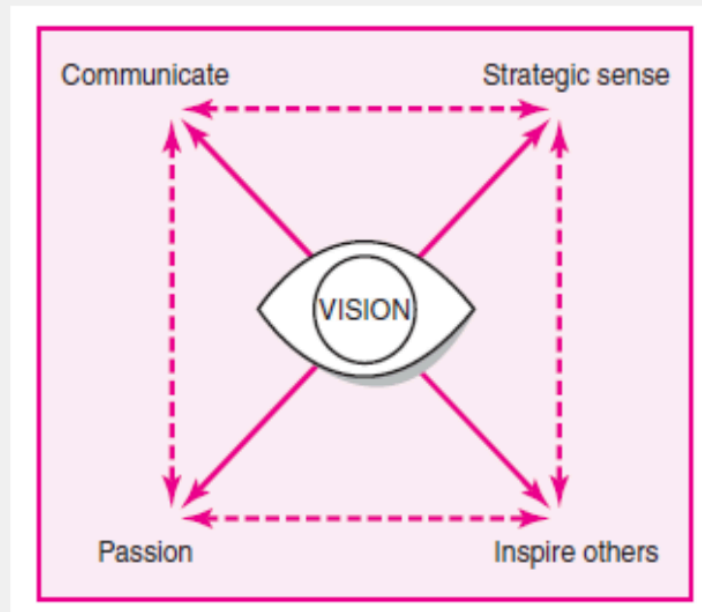
Something that aligns with the strategy of the org.

Vision should have a higher purpose

Something that excites the team

Source: Book: Project Management – A Managerial process, by Erik Larson

Ex. The CEO of a pharma company said – let us develop a drug that will eradicate Malaria from Africa. This inspired the whole org

Exercise: Defining a vision

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- Design a vision / goal for your product / project that will truly inspire the entire team

Step 1: Define Purpose

- Ask: What fundamental problem is the product/project solving?
- Example: "We aim to empower users by giving them real-time insights for better financial decisions."

Step 2: Make It Aspirational

- Ask: What's the big, bold ambition?
- Example: "Build the most trusted AI assistant for mental well-being that's accessible to everyone, anytime."

Step 3: Focus on Impact

- Ask: How will the product/project change users' lives?
- Example: "Enable 1 million small businesses to go global with a seamless e-commerce experience by 2025."

Step 4: Keep It Clear & Simple

- Ask: Is it easy to understand and rally behind?
- Example: "Create a safer, greener city with the first zero-emission public transport app."

Example of an Inspiring Vision:

- "Create a world where learning is as easy as breathing, with personalized education for every student, anywhere."

Characteristics of Good Teams

1. **Compelling Vision**: Pursue goals with passion.
2. **Customer Insights**: Draw inspiration from observing customer struggles.
3. **Rapid Experimentation**: Use various techniques to quickly test ideas.
4. **Cross-Discipline Collaboration**: Regular brainstorming and discussion across functions.
5. **Co-location**: Product, design, and engineering teams sit side-by-side.
6. **Customer Engagement**: Regular interaction with customers for feedback.
7. **Iterative Mindset**: Understand that not all ideas will succeed, but rapid iteration leads to innovation.

Importance of Teaming

- **Common Vision**: Successful teams rally around a shared goal (e.g., Apollo 11 mission).
- **Examples of Teamwork**:

- ○ **Geese Formation**: Geese's V-formation reduces air drag, symbolizing teamwork where everyone shares the load.
- ○ **Lessons for Human Teams**: Clear communication, shared effort, and mutual support are key to high performance.

Role of the Product Manager (PM)

- ● **Variations Across Companies**:
  - ○ Companies differ in how they prioritize PM skills: communication, execution, product sense, design/UX, etc.
  - ○ PM influence varies by company culture (e.g., PMs have more influence at YouTube and Airbnb, less at Apple and Tesla).
  - ○ Leadership styles and technical requirements impact the PM role.

Survey results…

What skills are most valued when hiring a PM?
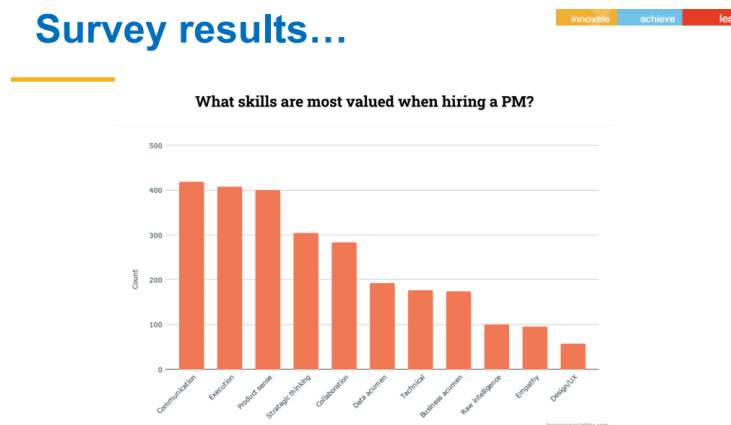
- ▪ **Most frequently valued**: Communication, execution, product sense
- ▪ **Least frequently valued**: Design/UX, empathy, raw intelligence

Survey results…

How much influence do PMs have vs. other functions?
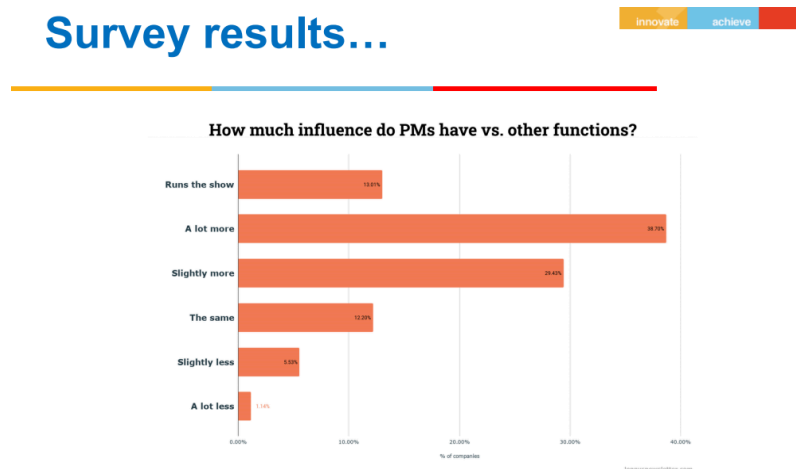
- · **Noteworthy companies where PMs have a lot more influence**: YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Uber, Robinhood, Lyft, Coinbase, Asana, Airbnb
- · **Noteworthy companies where PMs have relatively less influence**: Apple, Oracle, Stripe, Tesla

Survey results…

Heart vs. Hands vs. Head

It's often said that companies are defined by how they index on Heart (e.g. empathy, culture) vs. Hands (e.g. execution) vs. Head (e.g. intelligence).

Takeaways:
- Companies who spike on **Heart**: Asana, Spotify, WhatsApp
- Companies who spike on **Hands**: Flipkart, Okta, PayPal, Quora, Tesla, Wayfair, Yelp
- Companies who spike on **Head**: Coinbase, Uber, YouTube, Zynga

To which category does your company largely belong?

What It Takes to Be a Good PM

1. **Core Competencies**:
   - Customer interviews, design sprints, road mapping, resource allocation, market assessments, etc.
2. **Emotional Intelligence (EQ)**:
   - Defined by Daniel Goleman as the ability to understand and manage emotions (both personal and others').
   - Crucial for leadership, EQ is often more important than IQ for PM success.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional Intelligence Domains and Competencies

SELF-AWARENESS	SELF-MANAGEMENT	SOCIAL AWARENESS	RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT
Emotional self-awareness

Emotions, strengths, weaknesses, drives, values and goals | Emotional self-control | Empathy | Influence |
	Adaptability		Coach and mentor
	Achievement orientation	Organizational awareness	Conflict management
			Teamwork
	Positive outlook		Inspirational leadership

Leadership Styles

- **Democratic**: Best when employees are knowledgeable.
- **Authoritative**: Effective when the team is less skilled, and the PM is an expert.
- **Coercive**: Necessary in crises or with problematic employees.
- **Coaching**: Suited for long-term engagements, focusing on personal development.

Company Fit

- **Factors Influencing PM Roles**:
  - **Technical Requirements**: Some products require deep technical skills (e.g., AI).
  - **Company Philosophy**: Relationship with engineering varies—some companies let PMs drive engineering, others prioritize partnership.
  - **Company Stage**: Startups offer broad exposure, while mature companies have more focused roles.
  - **Leadership Relationship**: Level of PM autonomy is shaped by management style.

Case Study: Jane Manning of Google AdWords

Questions:

• What challenges of a PM are highlighted in this article?

•   What qualities of Jane do you appreciate and why?

> **Challenges of a PM highlighted:**
>
> ● Balancing customer needs with business goals.
> ● Managing rapid growth while ensuring product quality.
> ● Adapting to changing market dynamics and competition.
>
> **Qualities of Jane I appreciate and why:**
>
> ● **Customer-Centric**: She prioritized user feedback, driving product improvements.
> ● **Adaptable**: Jane navigated changes and growth with resilience.
> ● **Collaborative Leader**: She fostered strong cross-team communication, ensuring alignment.

Final Thoughts on Team Dynamics

● **Power of a Common Goal**: Aligning teams towards a singular vision (e.g., Apollo 11 mission) leads to extraordinary results.
● **Examples from Nature**: Geese showcase effective teamwork and shared leadership, demonstrating the benefits of cooperation and communication.