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## The VP of Product vs. the Product Manager

by Ellen Chisa

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Two of my friends and I had a shared goal last year. We wanted to answer a long-standing question: “What makes a great VP of Product? And how is that different from what makes a great Product Manager?”

**“We didn’t get far before I became this question’s case study.”**

**”**

After my first year at Harvard Business School, I was given a [can’t-miss career offer](#) to join Paul English’s new team at [Lola](#). I took a leave of absence from HBS, advanced to VP of Product within months — and quickly found that I’d been thrown into the deep end of the world’s best swimming pool.

The nuances of different roles are nothing new to me. I’m an experienced Product Manager. I have [also held](#) Program and Project Manager roles. So, I assumed that stepping up as VP of Product would be an extension of my Product Management role.

The truth? These two roles are totally different. Here are four reasons why:

### Strategy

As a *Product Manager*, my work was tactical. I needed to captain a cross-functional team to build, market, sell, and support my product. This was not a structure I designed — it is the nature of what it means to manage a Product team. I had the final say when it came to decisions about my product. But the structure of my Product team was not up for discussion.

As a *VP Product*, you decide where your Product team lives within your organization. Will you build a separate Product team? Or will you align this team with Engineering, Design, Marketing, or all three? Once you make these decisions, questions of scale roll up to you. As your Product team grows in size, you decide how to structure it in a way that supports your company vision. Do you divide by product area? By conversion funnel? There is a lot of nuance in these decisions — and you own them all.

### Hiring

As a *Product Manager*, you actively participate in the hiring process. You get to assess candidates and ask, “Who fits with us?” when anyone interviews to work with your team. You also often work with an established structure that was set by someone else.

For example, at Kickstarter, I was the Product Manager working on the Backer Experience. I didn't decide that I wanted to do Backer Experience — our Head of Product decided that they needed this role, and I happened to be the candidate they needed. They knew which spaces they needed to fill before I arrived on the scene. And I participated in this process once I joined the Kickstarter team.

As a *VP Product*, you don't just participate in hiring — you define what you need from the process. You get to decide when your Product team needs new additions — and whether you want these new folks to strengthen an area you're already strong in or fill a separate gap. Do you need another person with UX skills? Or is it time to find someone who is an expert at A/B testing and optimization? What do you do when an awesome candidate comes in, but does not possess these crucial skills you need? Do you find a home for them? Or move on to other candidates?

Your Product Manager will have a say, but these choices are yours to make. A Product Manager may spend a few hours per week on hiring — but the VP of Product is likely to spend a full day or even two each week on it.

### Delegation

As a *Product Manager*, your job is to be down in the details. You know every aspect of how the payment flow works, and every single error case. You should know your product better than anyone else in the world — and you take deep pride in that knowledge.

“So, you might be as shocked as I was by what happens when you get promoted: you need to let some of that knowledge go.”

As a *VP Product*, you need to trust your Product Manager to manage the details and keep you informed. This means by default that you can't possibly know every detail as well as the Product Manager who owns them does.

You must learn how to trust that the team you've hired can handle those details. That's why the hiring process is so essential.

Your core role as a VP of Product is not to lead so much as to support. You ask direct questions that force your Product Manager to explain the “why” of their decisions — and then provide your informed opinion. You are there to make sure that all choices regarding the product align at a high level — and that you've given enough structure to prompt that alignment. Your guidance matters more than ever. But if you want to be an effective leader at this level, then you must empower the Product team you've built to do their jobs.

### Standups

As a *Product Manager*, you often attend a daily “standup” with your designers and engineers. You listen to the overall cadence (do people seem happy?) and for problems that you can resolve. You can use this to help prevent any surprises in the schedule shifting. These daily standups are crucial to your work. They give you the knowledge you need to get down in the details of how your product gets built and keep your Product team on the same page.

As a *VP Product*, you might drop in on a standup, but it is no longer an essential part of your daily activity. It gets replaced with a new standup of sorts — the executive team meeting. The skill set that helped you in prior standups applies here as well. You listen to the overall cadence (do people seem happy?) and for problems that your product can solve. You also listen for things that are coming down the pipeline towards your Product team.

Ultimately, you should use this meeting to prevent any surprises. It helps you unblock your team and others in the company. You use a similar skill set in both roles. But the scale and type of problem you are solving changes.

“With so many differences between these two roles, does anything stay the same?”

One big skill always applies: **the ability to absorb feedback**. The feedback you get may be at a different scope depending on your role. Product Managers get feedback on how their user flow works, while a VP of Product is more likely to hear feedback on their team strategy.

But your process of taking and applying feedback should remain the same — no matter which role you have. The Product Manager and VP of Product are both measured by their ability to receive, internalize, and strategically act on feedback.

Keeping this in mind helps you navigate the different details of each role. This is the advice I give my product-curious friends.

*This is a guest post by Ellen Chisa. If you are looking to be a great product manager or owner, create brilliant strategy, and build visual product roadmaps — start a free trial of [Aha!](#)*

Ellen Chisa is VP of Product at [Lola Travel](#). She also teaches Product Management for Olin College and General Assembly. She attended Harvard Business School and was a Product Manager at Kickstarter and a Program Manager at Microsoft. She writes on her [personal blog](#) and plays pinball in her spare time. To read more of her writing, [follow her on Twitter](#).

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**Yuvi**

April 2, 2016 at 8:18 pm

Very well written piece. Without VP, product manager will be torn apart by the higher rank people who doesn't know about the product or strategy and eventually, the product won't be as nice.

**Harpreet**

April 11, 2016 at 4:11 pm

Great blog – hit home on all points.

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