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Coffee with Ellen Chisa

This week, we're grabbing coffee with [Ellen Chisa](#). Ellen is VP of Product at Lola, and teaches at General Assembly and Olin College. Before Lola, Ellen was a PM at Kickstarter.

Ellen [writes](#) about product and what she's learning—you may have seen her post on the [“Quitter's Mindset”](#).



How did you get into product management?

I was thinking about this earlier—[Kevin Weil](#) (Head of Product at Instagram) [tweeted](#) that he overheard someone say how they had to “do product management before there were a trove of thinkpieces on Medium”, and it made me really unhappy! I feel like it used to be that someone happened to tell you about product or you happened to know someone who did it. That's how I got into product. I went to engineering

school for undergrad, and it so happened that a lot of PM's came out of the class ahead of me.

When I was in engineering school, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do or if I wanted to be an engineer. I started hearing about this "product thing" and it turned out that that was what I'd been doing in my engineering projects. I ended up being a PM intern at Microsoft because of that.

There's failing at a project and then there's failing in a way that everyone is telling you this is the wrong career path—those are very different.

How did your internship at Microsoft lead to here?

My internship at Microsoft was really well structured. The first 2 weeks were about getting to know the product and providing feedback on what the product was. That's a really long time to think about a product, you have to get into the nuanced detail, and I found that to be a really helpful learning experience.

I had a project that went really well; I helped spec what the Closed Captioning add-in should be for PowerPoint. I remember thinking it was going to be really easy because it was so constrained. Then they asked me to redo all of commenting, and I did the same thing. I went in there like "obviously, it should be this...". The Engineering Lead eviscerated me!

I was like "oh, there's SO much stuff I don't know!". That was a good combination of learning how to evaluate work, doing work well, and realizing how much I did not know.

I spend a lot more time thinking about what I want to do for the next 50 years, and the skills I want to develop that will be useful 50 years from now.

How did you deal with that feedback?

*My friends say: "If someone tells you you can't do something, or something is hard, **you are going to do it**. You don't care what they say,*

they're throwing down the gauntlet (in a positive way)".

It's also about the feedback, and the style of the feedback. This type of "failure" showed me that I needed to go and figure things out. The same manager also told me that I had "never really failed before" and that when I did, that's when I'll know how my career is going to go. That happened later.

*I had a really bad experience when I was full-time at Microsoft. When that happened, I was like "oh, that is what that meant". There's failing at a project and then there's failing in a way that everyone is telling you this is the wrong career path—those are **very** different.*

Failure seems very private to lots of people because we don't talk about it publicly. I realize in retrospect that it felt very much like something I had to fix on my own—it was "my thing".

"You will either start your career as a PM being a good starter or a good finisher, and you're not a good PM until you're really good at both."

How do you approach personal development?

When I was in college, I thought your entire career was determined between the years of 22 and 30. I thought "I've only got these 8 years, I've got to think about how to allocate these years in the most effective way".

When you're thinking like that you have to learn really quickly because you don't have very long to do it. Now, I spend a lot more time thinking about what I want to do for the next 50 years, and the skills I want to develop that will be useful 50 years from now.

At Microsoft, I was given a piece of advice that I really liked: "You will either start your career as a PM being a good starter or a good finisher, and you're not a good PM until you're really good at both." I was naturally a better starter. That advice made me think a lot more about how to finish things—how to ship software well.

After that, I would pick individual traits from people that I wanted to emulate. For example, I like it when people are thoughtful and share

things so I started sharing more. It's about taking who you're around and learning from them.

I started writing at Kickstarter because everyone talked about writing. It was what everyone cared about, and what I could learn from Perry and Yancey. At Lola, one of the things Paul cares about is team structure—the organization, and how it works—so I spend a lot of time listening to him about how he does that.

I see an opportunity in the distance and I'm like "I'm going over there!", then I'm falling off a cliff and have to figure out how to make it work.

How have you developed as a PM?

At the beginning, I worried about having good ideas. I had friends in college who—Paul is like this too—come up with thousands of ideas everyday. That was never the thing that I was good at. I used to worry that people would find that out and I wouldn't get to do any work. As time has gone on, that's felt like more of an asset—it's easier for me to look at all of the ideas we have and evaluate what's right.

For a long time, I wanted to do all the fun work—I didn't like working on the stuff I thought was boring. Now, I give the "fun work" to other people. I'm happy when people on the team get to do the things they like.



"I'm going over there!"

I picture my career like the game Lemmings. The Lemmings are constantly falling off cliffs and have to save themselves on the way down. I see an opportunity in the distance and I'm like "I'm going over there!", then I'm falling off a cliff and have to figure out how to make it work.

Teaching and speaking are like that for me—I say yes and I'm excited. Twenty-four hours before I'm talking, I'm miserable, then as soon as I get up there, I'm happy! I'm shaking uncontrollably but I'm happy.

Discovering that other style was the most "different" I had ever felt.

What has been your biggest "jump" so far?

Going to Harvard Business School—everyone talks about how it's "not academically hard", and it's not hard in the way that engineering is but it's certainly not easy. It's a lot of volume. If you want to get the most out of it, I think it is hard academically.

The biggest thing I learned there is that there's two different communication styles. A lot of people at HBS are very good at "talking to talk to the other person", it doesn't matter what their conversation is about, it's about the human connection. To me, that's always felt weird

and shallow. Engineers and product people tend to “talk about something”—you’re working on this thing together, you’re collaborating, you’re learning—it’s more like the conversation is an object, and that feels much more comfortable to me. Discovering that other style was the most “different” I had ever felt.

What books do you recommend to PM’s?

- *The Design of Everyday Things*—on building a mindset where you think about how what you’re building impacts people.
- *Making Things Happen*—on the project management side of getting stuff done everyday.
- *The Mythical Man-Month*—on understanding technical constraints and being able to explain them well to other teams.
- *The Interestings*—on the fiction side, I love this book. It’s about a group of gifted, artistic students and how their lives play out, why their trajectories change, and where they get to by the time they’re 50. I thought it was an interesting commentary on what success means, how things work out, and how they make people feel.

It can be hard early in your career to realize that everything is not about you. When people do something, chances are it has nothing to do with you.

What advice would you give yourself if you were starting out today?

I wish I would’ve done engineering or design before product. Once you go down the PM rabbit hole, it’s difficult to go backwards—you can do it, but that’s usually when people decide they want to be an engineer or designer forever, or that being a PM wasn’t the right fit. It’s hard to be like “Okay, I’m going to duck out for 6 months and do this other job”.

I don’t think I could now; I’m so committed to what I’m doing, I want to get better at this, and I have a role that’s really challenging. That might change, but it doesn’t feel like it, so I wish I would have done that first.

I thought managers knew a lot more than they did. I was expecting all this coaching and feedback, when actually your manager isn't in your head all day. They don't know what you're thinking or how you're getting things done. They're just trying to do the best that they can.

I wish I had understood that more—how it actually works, and been more self-directed in figuring out what I wanted to learn or how I wanted to structure the managerial relationship.

It can be hard early in your career to realize that everything is not about you. When people do something, chances are it has nothing to do with you. I don't think I realized that soon enough.

What do you consider the traits of a great PM?

1. ***Be curious about everything.*** *I think that's the trait of good people, not just PM's but particularly for PM's.*
2. ***Be willing to be a good team player.*** *My least favorite thing that I see in people who are regarded as "good PM's" is to let a long conversation go on and then—at the end of the meeting—be like "boom, you're all wrong". That's super unhelpful! You should be looking for how to make the whole company better, not just how to make yourself look "smart".*

I left coffee with Ellen inspired by the leaps she's taken (and to play Lemmings ;)). The amount of "inner work" Ellen's done comes across—from developing resiliency to "failures" to having the confidence to take those leaps in the first place. You're badass, Ellen. Thanks for grabbing coffee :)

And thank you for reading. Let me know what you think of this series on [Twitter](#)—I'd love to hear from you!

Fancy another coffee? [I got you](#) :)

