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- Question asked by [Jessica Groff](#)
- [Strategy](#)
- 11 replies
- 2 years ago

What do you do when you inherit a product that's a mess?

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11 Replies



[Steve Johnson](#)

author, speaker, consultant. VP of Products @ Pragmatic Marketing.
2 years ago

Think before you act, if you have time.—A military maxim

Start by reading everything you can—business case, personas, product stories, positioning—and start documenting what you learn. Whatever you can find to give you insights on what your company planned to build and what you actually built. Interview the developers, support people, and sales folks for their perspectives. Find out what they think and get their recommendations.

Now interview a dozen customers or potential customers. Demo your product if they haven't seen it. Understand the problem they're trying to solve and how (or if) your product solves it.

Now, create and implement an action plan.

I once did an assessment for a company with "terrible developers" according to the execs. When I interviewed the developers, I learned the company was changing requirements constantly—daily!—and they couldn't come close to finishing anything before their priorities changed. They didn't have a champion who understood how to build products (their VP didn't!).

So I implemented a format process that began with product management. The developers were given permission to ignore everyone's requirements and instead, relied entirely on the published, prioritized backlog. No ideas could begin until they had gone through a intake process controlled by the product manager. The developers were thrilled—and suddenly they were shipping like clockwork.

We don't have time to do it right, so we do it over and over and over.—Saeed Khan, product management guru

This is the technique I use today in my [workshops](#) and documented in my book, [Turn Ideas Into Products](#), available from Amazon. See also the free article [Your first days... as product manager](#).

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[Geoff Anderson](#)

2 years ago

I have to laugh. You assume that there are artifacts like "Business Case", "Personas", et. al. The number of times I assumed the reins of products that had no planning documents, poorly defined scope, and no real artifacts, leads me to believe that it is the standard practice.

Or worse, the prior seat warmer took those documents to his grave.

Even at large, well run companies.

(Good advice though, but my recommendation is to not expect it to be documented)

- Comment
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[Steve Johnson](#)

author, speaker, consultant. VP of Products @ Pragmatic Marketing.

2 years ago

Sadly, that's a good point. When taking on a new product, a great deal of the first days are discovery. What documents—if any—exist for the product. And it's likely the product is a mess because the critical key documents don't exist. At best, they're in someone's head who is now long gone.

Learn first, then start documenting. And make sure what you learn is stored somewhere other than sharepoint (the document graveyard).

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[Amir Rozenberg](#)

Director, Product Management, Core Digital Platform

2 years ago

Good answers here. I've taken points at "Learn before you take action" (but know, usually you don't have infinity to do that) and "You got the mess because they know you can 'un-mess'". Or in my words, you're "[Mr. Wolf](#)" (Or Mrs., whatever works ;).

Ok, now seriously. You need to understand a few things:

- Learn
- What were we trying to do? what problems were we trying to solve and for whom? get to know the problem space
- How does the current solution solve these problems, where are the gaps? get to know the product
- Wheres the miss? commercial, technical, go to market? there's going to be more than one. Don't discourage. Prioritize.
- Realign: Given the above and where the business wants to go, drive alignment on:
- A new direction. You need to drive success. Don't make a revolution unless necessary, otherwise it will be very tough and you'll recruit enemies. drive a change that shows success and value gradually through deliverables, customer usage and internal success.
- What are the benefits in the new direction, for every constituent, internally and customers. Know that you will see resistance. Change is impactful, its personal and if possible, ideally avoidable. Convince yourself and those around you the change is the minimal necessary to make positive impact. Practice your art of convincing (with friends), the internal battle will be the toughest one and you need to win the hearts of those around you.
- Build a roadmap. Your 'MVP' is the most important milestone: it will tell your customers (for good or bad) about the new direction
- What should every team do (engineering, field, support, customer success), and, do you need new expertise in the teams? even teams you don't own, help them with the implication of this 'recovery'.
- What is going to be the impact on the customers? presumably, your approach is aligned to your customer success and market leadership. you need to arm your field and support organizations on this arguments. But there are going to be those who will suffer, maybe even churn. Drive deep analysis there and see what you can offer to minimize churn. Know that whatever you do, there isn't a solution where everyone will be happy. There's going to be churn. Name of the game = maximize happy customers and minimize churn
- Execute
- Set milestones, success KPIs, integrate, learn, stay close to customers and internal stake holders and be agile
- Ensure you have allies in every team, internal and external. So you know when the wind is blowing your way and when its not.
- Drive early customers. Goes back to early success.
- Celebrate wins and be honest about mistakes. Share the success with the team.

It's not an easy task, but its a great challenge. And hey- you're Mr./Ms. Wolf, right? ;)

If you want to chat offline, free of charge, ping me. Would love to help.

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[Geoff Anderson](#)

2 years ago

Ah, Winston Wolf...

- Comment
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[Eric](#)

2 years ago

Would love to chat online - Skype?

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[Nathan Bobbin](#)

Senior Director, Product Innovation at Travelport

2 years ago

What Steve said - AND..... Don't assume that you are in a special kind of mess, that you're somehow specially challenged in your role beyond what should be expected of a Product Manager. In my experience, you are far more likely to inherit a mess than anything else, especially in entry-level Product roles and early stage companies.

Once you've diagnosed the mess to the best of your ability, make sure leadership agrees with your assessment. The first rule of messes - don't try to hide them. During the interview process you should have ascertained who is empowered to makes decisions; next meet with those folks and lay it all out. Second rule of messes - you can't fix them on your own. Come prepared with a proposal, not on how to fix the mess (that's what your extended team is going to help you to do), but on what part of mess needs to be fixed first and why.

Third rule of messes - you can't fix them all at once.

If you don't enjoy fixing messes, you're in the wrong role, so roll-up your sleeves and have fun.

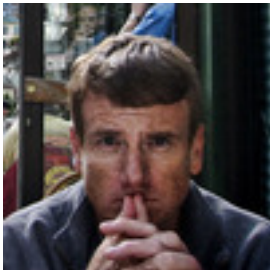
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[Cyndy Finnie](#)
Product developer with a focus on getting sh*t done
2 years ago

Been there - done that. And the answers below are good ones. You'll need to do some discovery to understand what problem you're trying to solve - whether it's the product, the development team or expectations. Do set expectation that a period of discovery is required but also try to find a "quick win" something you can change or fix sooner to alleviate pain and demonstrate success while you sort out the larger, more complex problems.

- Comment
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[Geoff Anderson](#)
2 years ago

Depends. New job, and you find a mess? Roll up your sleeves and figure it out. Steve Johnson has some good advice, but in my experience, I often find myself recreating or re-doing much of that work to document the starting state. Without a good inventory of where you are, regardless of the circuitous route to that state, you will be flailing in the dark. It is (potentially) a lot of work, so be sure you have level setting meetings with your leadership to explain what you are doing.

Already in the role, and it gets dumped on you? You have probably proven that you can deliver, and someone or some other group has failed in their fundamental responsibilities. Try to get as much as you can from the prior owner (if they are still around). Don't expect much, but do interview them creatively. I would expect to again redo much of the work, but if you have access to the original staff you can get a feel for their style/strengths/weaknesses. Don't be confrontational, you own it.

Unfortunately, I have experienced both of these, and it takes a LOT of work to get to a good state. In fact, one mess I inherited had an early design decision that cascaded into constraints that 5 years later (when I joined) that pretty much ensured a failed or muted reception of a product. An earlier PM used his biases to determine a core system parameter, and that led to the ultimate product being targeted at a non-profitable segment. The sunken costs were so great that that product line never recovered.

Good luck!

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[Nicholas Lea](#)
Global Product Manager
2 years ago

I have to agree with this! Many companies fall victim to the the "just build it" mentality and documentation is lacking or non-existent.

In the construction and building industry there are entire companies that undertake "retro-commissioning" projects. This is basically designed to do a thorough review of all systems and equipment and ensure they have been properly started and work at peak efficiency as designed. What makes this unique is that usually the commissioning authority starts by going to the owner (stakeholder) and developing the project requirements from scratch, then meeting with engineers (developers) and understanding what they built to solve the requirements.

My suggestion is to undertake a similar approach. Start at the very beginning and create missing documents, product vision, charters, goals, etc to get everyone on the same page. Then start building a plan to make the product achieve the requirements (solve the problem). You have to work step by step, release by release, to "turn the ship around" so to speak.

Have a quick Google of Retro-commissioning for some inspiration.

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[Anna Milani](#)

2 years ago

1. Define what the 'mess' is and it's tangible impact on business
2. Try to understand what the original product vision was to determine whether it's still relevant
3. Understand current and future business goals, their KPIs and then evaluate whether this product will help you to achieve them. If not, you might need to consider a new product approach

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