

PM High Council

Quad-Swarm strategic advisory from collective product leadership wisdom

Problem Statement

Describe your product challenge in detail

The product manager I am working with is not giving me any clear directions?
How do I negotiate with him?

Convene Council

The Visionary

Vision, Intuition, Culture, Founder Mode

The challenge of unclear direction from a product manager often stems from a misalignment in understanding the vision and culture. As Brian Chesky articulated, "You can't build a product unless you know how to talk about the product." Start by ensuring that the product manager shares the overarching vision of the company and understands their role in telling its story.

Ben Horowitz emphasized the leadership aspect of product management: "Your actual job is to get a product into market that customers love." Communication should be anchored in these guiding principles. Engage the product manager in a dialogue to align on the vision, ensuring they grasp the market landscape and customer needs.

In negotiating, adopt a collaborative approach. Highlight the importance of clarity and direction to rowing in the same direction, as Chesky noted. Encourage the product manager to manage by influence and not solely rely on hierarchical authority, which can foster a more dynamic and responsive culture.

Foster an environment where product managers feel empowered but also accountable to the company's vision. As Chesky advised, avoid the temptation to find a midpoint between your vision and their preferences—clarity and alignment should prevail.

If the issue persists, consider restructuring responsibilities or providing additional training, enhancing their capability to deliver clear direction. Ultimately, maintain a shared consciousness, as Chesky suggests, to ensure consistent alignment across the leadership team.

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Sources from the collective

Brian Chesky · Brian Chesky's new playbook · 00:34:53



Ben

Horowitz · \$46B of hard truths: Why founders fail and why you need to run toward fear | Ben Horowitz (a16z) · 0

Nikita

Bier · Driving alignment within teams, work-life balance, and the changing PM landscape | Nikita Miller · 00:46:1

Dustin Ouellette · Dustin Ouellette: Product management · 00:10:00



The Scaler

Strategy, Empowered Teams, Product Discovery

In scenarios where the product manager lacks clarity, it's essential to anchor on a structured approach to strategy and discovery. As Marty Cagan emphasizes, "A product manager is a creator, not a facilitator." Hence, they should be driving the vision with clear objectives.

Start by seeking alignment on the overarching product strategy. Facilitate a discussion regarding the value and viability of current initiatives. As Marty Cagan stated, "How you decide what you're going to work on is basically the product strategy." Encourage the product manager to clarify this, so priorities become apparent.

For discovery, adopt an experimental mindset. Engage in hypothesis-driven exploration, which Marty Cagan insists is crucial: "You have to experiment. You have to embrace experimentation." Work together to frame clear problems or opportunities, then co-create solutions while validating them with real users.

To negotiate effectively, practice active listening and use open-ended questions to uncover their priorities and constraints. As Shreyas Doshi points out, sometimes what teams need most is "freedom and permission to explore." Encourage your product manager to provide that space.

Ultimately, aim to establish a shared understanding of the product's direction and a collaborative discovery approach. This helps align efforts with both user needs and business goals.

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Sources from the collective

Shreyas Doshi · The art of product management | Shreyas Doshi (Stripe, Twitter, Google, Yahoo) · 00:46:12 ►

Tomer Cohen · Why AI is disrupting traditional product management | Tomer Cohen (LinkedIn CPO) · 00:12:19 ►

Marty Cagan · Product management theater | Marty Cagan (Silicon Valley Product Group) · 01:02:40 ►

Shreyas Doshi · The art of product management | Shreyas Doshi (Stripe, Twitter, Google, Yahoo) · 01:08:51 ►

The Scientist

Loops, Acquisition, Pricing, Retention

Navigating unclear directions from a product manager can be challenging. Focus on building a clear growth framework that emphasizes systems thinking and data-driven decisions.

1. **Growth Systems and Loops**: As Elena Verna suggests, allocate 20-25% of your time to explore new growth loops annually. This can involve testing new channels or features without immediate pressure for results. Consider loops that drive user engagement and acquisition, like user-generated content or referral programs.

2. **Key Metrics**: Identify a north star metric that captures the essence of your product's value, as Sean Ellis recommends. This metric should reflect user activation and retention, like "units of value delivered" or "number of engaged users".

3. **Negotiation Strategy**: Use Patrick Campbell's approach to align on "what good looks like". Facilitate a structured conversation to define expectations and responsibilities. Propose a cadence for product launches and ensure alignment on priorities.

4. **Data-Driven Decisions**: Follow Brian Balfour's advice to measure actual adoption and usage. Go deep into data to understand user behaviors and identify bottlenecks in your growth system. This evidence can strengthen your position in discussions.

5. **Collaboration**: Emphasize the importance of cross-functional alignment. Highlight the

need for marketing, product, and growth teams to work together, as Campbell noted, to streamline efforts and reduce friction.

By focusing on these elements, you can create a constructive dialogue with your product manager and establish a shared vision for growth.

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Sources from the collective

Elena

Verna · 10 growth tactics that never work | Elena Verna (Amplitude, Miro, Dropbox, SurveyMonkey) · 00:06:36 ▶

Patrick

Campbell · 10 lessons on bootstrapping a \$200m business | Patrick Campbell (ProfitWell) · 00:37:22 ▶

Sean

Ellis · The original growth hacker reveals his secrets | Sean Ellis (author of "Hacking Growth") · 00:08:33 ▶

Brian

Ralfour · Why ChatGPT will be the next big growth channel (and how to capitalize on it) | Brian Ralfour · 01:14:15

The Architect

Systems, Technical Debt, Feasibility

Navigating a situation where a product manager (PM) isn't providing clear directions requires both technical and interpersonal strategies.

First, understand the technical landscape. Identify key priorities: "Are we reducing the cycle time for engineering tasks? Are we solving problems that are preventing products from launching and scaling?" as Camille Fournier suggests. This understanding helps you propose technically feasible directions.

Feasibility concerns include ensuring that engineering efforts are aligned with business goals, avoiding over-engineering, and maintaining system architecture integrity. As Geoff Charles notes, alignment on strategy and roadmap is crucial: "As long as we are aligned on the strategy, and we can get into that, and aligned on the roadmap and the timing, that's their contract."

To negotiate with the PM effectively:

1. **Clarify Requirements**: Initiate a conversation to articulate and document the product goals. Will Larson emphasizes the importance of written strategies, saying, "The first rule of strategy is that if you write it down, then you can improve it."

2. **Understand Incentives**: Recognize the PM's objectives and constraints. According to Larson, understanding incentives can help "find a compromise" when priorities seem misaligned.
3. **Propose Solutions**: Present a draft strategy or roadmap based on technical insights, focusing on impact and feasibility. This demonstrates leadership and provides a starting point for discussion.
4. **Build Relationships**: Foster open communication, ensuring both parties feel heard and understood. As Fournier notes, "When product managers take the time to build those relationships," it improves collaboration.

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Sources from the collective

Camille

Fournier · The things engineers are desperate for PMs to understand | Camille Fournier ("The Manager's Path") ·

Will Larson · The engineering mindset | Will Larson (Carta, Stripe, Uber, Calm, Digg) · 00:16:52 ►

Geoff

Charles · Velocity over everything: How Ramp became the fastest-growing SaaS startup ever | Geoff Charles · 0

Camille

Synthesis

Strategic recommendations balancing all perspectives

THE CORE TENSION

The fundamental disagreement is whether to prioritize immediate alignment with the product manager by reshaping their understanding of the company's vision (as emphasized by The Visionary and The Scaler), or to adopt a more structured, data-driven approach that emphasizes technical and growth-driven execution (as advocated by The Scientist and The Architect). The challenge lies in choosing between a path that may catalyze quick cultural and directional cohesion but risks overlooking the rigor of strategic execution, versus a path that ensures systematic, evidence-backed progress but may sideline immediate vision alignment.

PATH A: THE BOLD MOVE

- First, engage the product manager in a comprehensive dialogue about the company's vision and culture. Reiterate their role in embodying and communicating this vision clearly.

- Then, provide them with the freedom and resources to experiment and explore product strategies that align with user needs and business goals, fostering a sense of empowerment and ownership.
- Prepare for potential initial missteps or misalignment in execution, requiring ongoing coaching and possibly restructuring responsibilities if alignment does not improve.

PATH B: THE MEASURED MOVE

- First, establish a clear growth framework that includes defining key metrics and a structured roadmap based on technical feasibility and data-driven insights.
- Then, facilitate cross-functional collaboration to ensure the PM is not only aligned with but actively contributing to data-driven decisions. Encourage regular documentation and strategy reviews to maintain alignment.
- Prepare for slower initial progress in cultural alignment and potential resistance from the product manager who might feel constrained by the structured approach.

THE COUNCIL'S RECOMMENDATION

Choose Path B: The Measured Move. This approach mitigates risk by grounding decisions in data and technical feasibility, ensuring that any strategic direction is backed by evidence and aligned with business goals. While this means potentially sacrificing immediate cultural cohesion, it provides a solid foundation for sustainable growth and consistent product delivery. The leader should ask themselves, "Am I willing to prioritize long-term strategic rigor over short-term alignment?" This question will help validate the decision, ensuring it's rooted in the company's broader objectives and growth trajectory.

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