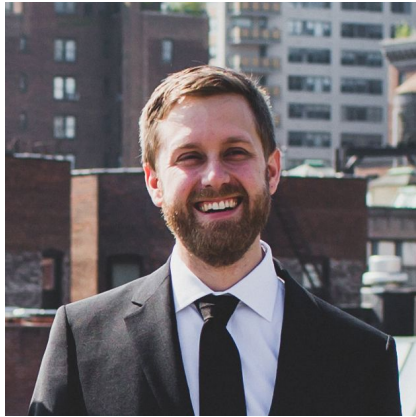


Title:

The product manager's concerns

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Headshot:



As an engineering leader, you can improve the quality of the product you deliver by helping your team interface effectively with product managers. To do this it helps to open a dialog with the PM about their requests. Here are some common concerns they have and ways to open up a conversation about them.

Users

A core responsibility of the PM is to know what's important to the user, so it's normal for them to come to you excited at having just learned something about the users. They want to reflect that feedback in the product. As a manager, it's helpful for you to dig into why they're excited so you can transmit it to your team. Understanding where the feedback came from and how they intend to make your users' lives better will also help you make sure the implementation delivers the impact the PM is excited about.

Money

What a feature will cost, and how much revenue potential it has are the basis for forecasting the return a PM will get from an investment of your team's attention. The expected return on investment (ROI) is one of the most basic ways a product manager can prioritize. Often, this is expressed in terms of *effort*. Asking "How much effort is X vs. Y vs. Z and what will I get out of them?" can be a proxy for "I want all three, but I know I have to fit inside a budget and hit a target" — in these situations, you can help them understand the trade-offs, and in turn, gain a better understanding of their priorities.

Time

Like money, time is also a finite resource that the PM will need to budget. Time has an added wrinkle because it's not fungible, so getting something shipped before a deadline can hold significant value. For instance, if there's a big marketing spend that's been scheduled, the PM will probably have specific features that need to be shipped beforehand. When in doubt, ask what's driving a deadline so that you can align your team's schedule with the product's.

Just because the timing of an ask is flexible when it's first mentioned, it may not remain so. If it sits in the backlog for too long, it will eventually sprout a deadline. When that happens too frequently, a defensive mode many organizations fall into is to assume everything must be scheduled before it's requested. This takes away your ability to plan your team's time, which is ultimately less efficient for everyone.

Impact

What is the effect that a PM hopes to achieve? For a nascent product, driving sign-ups might be the highest impact activity at the beginning. For a more mature product, impact may come from changes to users' patterns of behavior within your product. To understand how the PM is thinking about impact, open a conversation about the metrics that a PM is watching and the key use cases they hope your product will serve.

Other features are more obligatory: a password reset page may not move the needle, but is critical to the product's existence. It can be harder to motivate your team to build these features, but it will help if you and they understand the rationale behind them.

Bugs

Bugs happen, and are often laden with tension. Both the PM and your team will feel frustrated by a setback: PMs hate having their budgets drained with an unexpected expense, and your team will likely feel that someone, somewhere, messed up and they're being blamed for it. In the moment, your ability to focus everyone on a constructive response rather than blame is critical to getting the team fully engaged in fixing it.

Longer term, work with both PMs and your team to establish a culture that understands how blameless debugging will help you solve bugs faster. That tendency will also make your team more likely to spot issues before they ship. You can also help the PM understand the trade-offs early in the planning process so they're aware of the technical debt and risk it creates.

Sometimes they'll choose to pay down that debt and will look to you to guide that investment. Finally, accept as inevitable that some bugs will happen. In many businesses, software that ships without bugs has probably taken too long to build; as a manager, it's your job to work with the PM to find the balance between speed and correctness that's appropriate for your product.

Obviously, there's no one-size-fits-all way of understanding every request you'll receive, but as a manager, there's value in your opening the conversation up with PMs. By learning to talk with

the product leaders about their requests, you'll gain a deeper understanding of what they're trying to accomplish. A good PM will use the same conversations to learn your language as well. Over time, the requests you receive will be easier to understand because you'll share more context. Ultimately, the product you ship will reflect the quality of that conversation.

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