

What distinguishes the Top 1% of product managers from the Top 10%?



Ian McAllister

Director at Amazon · Featured on Forbes and Inc · Upvoted by Sean Rose, product at slack and Kartik Murthy, I was a Product Manager at Google and now I'm a Product Manager at Quora · Author has 142 answers and 4.1M answer views · 13y

Originally Answered: What distinguishes the top 1% of product managers from the top 10%?

The top 10% of product managers excel at a few of these things. The top 1% excel at most or all of them:

- **Think big** - A 1% PM's thinking won't be constrained by the resources available to them today or today's market environment. They'll describe large disruptive opportunities, and develop concrete plans for how to take advantage of them.
- **Communicate** - A 1% PM can make a case that is impossible to refute or ignore. They'll use data appropriately, when available, but they'll also tap into other biases, beliefs, and triggers that can convince the powers that be to part with headcount, money, or other resources and then get out of the way.
- **Simplify** - A 1% PM knows how to get 80% of the value out of any feature or project with 20% of the effort. They do so repeatedly, launching more and achieving compounding effects for the product or business.
- **Prioritize** - A 1% PM knows how to sequence projects. They balance quick wins vs. platform investments appropriately. They balance offense and defense projects appropriately. Offense projects are ones that grow the business. Defense projects are ones that protect and remove drag on the business (operations, reducing technical debt, fixing bugs, etc.).
- **Forecast and measure** - A 1% PM is able to forecast the approximate benefit of a project, and can do so efficiently by applying past experience and leveraging comparable benchmarks. They also measure benefit once projects are launched, and factor those learnings into their future prioritization and forecasts.
- **Execute** - A 1% PM grinds it out. They do whatever is necessary to ship. They recognize no specific bounds to the scope of their role. As necessary, they recruit, they produce buttons, they do bizdev, they escalate, they tussle with internal counsel, they *.
- **Understand technical trade-offs** - A 1% PM does not need to have a CS degree. They do need to be able to roughly understand the technical complexity of the features they put on the backlog, without any costing input from devs. They should partner with devs to make the right technical trade-offs (i.e. compromise).
- **Understand good design** - A 1% PM doesn't have to be a designer, but they should appreciate great design and be able to distinguish it from good design. They should also be able to articulate the difference to their design counterparts, or at least articulate directions to pursue to go from good to great.
- **Write effective copy** - A 1% PM should be able to write concise copy that gets the job done. They should understand that each additional word they write dilutes the value of the previous ones. They should spend time and energy trying to find the perfect words for key copy (button labels, nav, calls-to-action, etc.), not just words that will suffice.

I'm not sure I've ever met a 1% PM, certainly not one that I identified as such prior to hiring. Instead of trying to hire one, you're better off trying to hire a 10% PM who strives to develop and improve along these dimensions.


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Ian McAllister · 13y

Definitely agree.




Abhishek Dhas · 8y

Well thought, I'm a huge fan of Sundar Pichai who came from same PM background.



Andrew Hamada · 13y


This was the answer I was hoping existed when I asked the question--thanks, Ian.



Wan Chen · 12y


reply to this thing

Wan Chen a reply to this reply




Billy Leung · 13y

Good list, but I would argue that the "top 10%" PMs should already be doing this as well. If you think of what what the top 1% of any population do, these people are outliers and do not think like normal people. They don't think big, they [\(more\)](#)




Rob Fagen · 13y

Dear Billy, I really wish that Apple hadn't given "differently" an adverbendectcomy. If you're going to "think", then you want to "think differently". I suppose if you were to hold a "think" in your hands, then you could describe it as a "different think". -- Regards, Rob




Daniel Lizio-Katzen · 13y

I would argue that what you describe is not the 1%, but the .01%.



Bert Armijo · 12y

Having been a PM in a dozen companies, having gone 0 to \$1B+ more than once, and having had a few succesful exits - a great deal of the difference between the 1% and the 10% is the environment. When senior management allowed me [\(more\)](#)




Brian Gupton · 13y

I'd like to start a Kickstarter project to get Ian to write a book on product management. Consistently awesome answers. Who's with me? ;)

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About the Author





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