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Product Competency Toolkit

A guide to getting started with a system of 12 product manager competencies you can use to level up your team and yourself.

By Ravi Mehta

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A Special Note

As I type this, we are in the middle of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Over the next couple months, I'll be releasing a set of content and tools that I hope will help people and companies deal with the challenges ahead. I've decided to start with this Product Competency Toolkit because it provides a foundation for how PM's can approach their careers and how companies can think about maximizing the impact of their product teams.

Here are some ways the 12 competencies can help:

▸ If you are a PM whose job has been impacted, use the competencies as a way to take stock of your skills. This will help you talk to those skills during interviews and may highlight development areas you can work on now. A number of companies have made their coursework free during this time which makes it even easier to grow your skills.

▸ If you are a product leader, your team and their goals have likely changed significantly. The 12 competencies can help you assess that team and put the right combination of people in place to focus on the new priorities.

▸ If you are a hiring manager, you face the difficult challenge of making hiring decisions remotely. It's imperative to standardize on decision criteria, interview questions, interview process, and hiring team to make effective, consistent decisions. The competencies can help you do that.

I cover these areas in more detail under the section *Putting the Competencies into Practice*. If can be helpful during this time, please reach out to me at **ravi@ravi-mehta.com**.

About this Toolkit

Over the course of my career, I've hired, managed, and mentored hundreds of product managers. I've always loved creating great products, but found that I love working with product managers even more. I've found it incredibly fulfilling to help new PMs climb the learning curve and help experienced PMs master their craft. I've learned a lot from them too.

This is my attempt to distill what I have learned into a system of 12 product manager competencies that can help you grow as a PM and level up your team. This toolkit contains:

▸ **Product Competencies Guide** - This getting started guide.

▸ **Product Competences One Pager** - A one-page overview of the 12 product competencies.

▸ **Product Competency Matrix** - A spreadsheet that provides detailed expectations for each competency at every level of a typical product organization.

▸ **Product Competency Worksheet** - A worksheet that people can use to evaluate themselves or work with their manager to put together a career development plan.

I hope you find this useful. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at **ravi@ravi-mehta.com**.

> You can download the latest, most complete toolkit at:
> **https://www.ravi-mehta.com/toolkit**

About Ravi

I'm a consumer tech leader who has scaled products that have impacted millions of people and scaled teams to meet the challenge.

Most recently, I was Chief Product Officer at Tinder where I led the entire product team and defined a Gen Z-centric strategy for the next generation of Tinder. Prior to Tinder, I was a Product Director at Facebook where I led a team focused on understanding how teens use social media and increasing teen engagement with Facebook properties.

Before Facebook, I was VP of Consumer Product at TripAdvisor where I led product for the company's key businesses (Hotels, Attractions, and Restaurants), the core user experience teams (Mobile, Personalization, Search & Discovery, Reviews, and Trip Planning), and led the international Market Development & Localization teams.

Earlier in my career, I led product for a VC-backed social gaming startup from launch to acquisition, launched a VC-backed fintech startup, was a product manager at Microsoft where I helped define the strategy for Xbox Live, and founded a gaming company and B2B presentation design company.

I have two beautiful daughters (who made me write this) and live in Los Angeles, CA.

Overview

Years ago, I met an early PM at Microsoft who had helped develop what we think of as Product Management today. She started at Microsoft in the mid-1990s. At that time, the PM role was in its infancy, but its importance was already clear. She told new PMs at Microsoft: "*You are like the mortar in a brick wall.*" Like mortar, you must fluidly fill the gaps between the bricks to make the whole wall stronger.

This analogy resonates even more today. Product Management is a fluid, connective role. It is highly demanding and varies considerably by the situation and from company to company.

The best PMs — the peak product managers — don't just ship features. They do whatever it takes to deliver valuable outcomes for their users, their team, and their company. They do whatever it takes to deliver business impact.

Product Managers are like the mortar in a brick wall. Like mortar, they must fluidly fill the gaps to make the whole team stronger.

The fluidity of the PM role means that it can be hard to define what traits make a PM successful. At TripAdvisor, we found that the strongest PMs are intellectual athletes who excel at a diverse, mutually reinforcing set of skills.

We codified those skills into 12 competencies organized into four areas that are critical to driving business impact: Product Execution

(the ability to build exceptional products), Customer Insight (the ability to understand and deliver on customer needs), Product Strategy (the ability to drive business impact via product innovation), and Influencing People (the ability to rally people around the team's work).

Peak product managers don't just ship features, they deliver **business impact**

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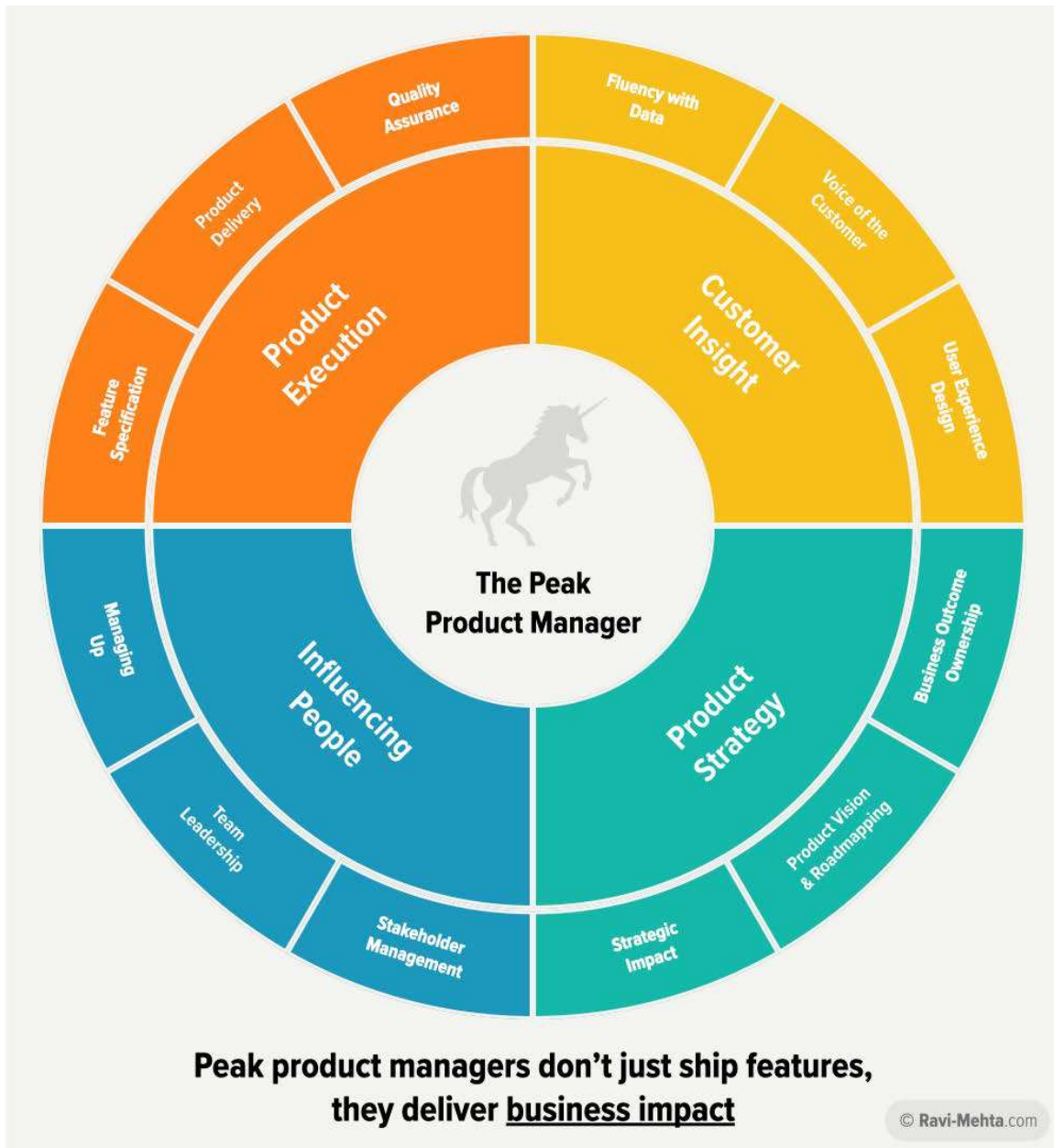
These 12 competencies are as close as I've found to a mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive (MECE) definition of product management.

There is a lot to master, and there are points of tension in the PM role. It is a role that requires people to be simultaneously empathetic and analytical. Qualitative and quantitative. It requires fastidious attention to detail and grand, abstract thinking. The best PMs are both creative innovators **and** rigorous optimizers.

Most PMs, even peak PMs, excel at only a handful of these competencies. The difference between the average PM and the peak PM is an understanding of gaps and the ability to unite a team that fills those gaps.

The importance of each competency evolves as a PM becomes more senior. Product Execution is a critical area of competency early in a PM's career. As a PM leader becomes more senior, Product Strategy and Influencing People become the critical path to growth.

The best PMs — the peak product managers — don't just ship features. They do whatever it takes to deliver valuable outcomes for their users, their team, and their company. They do whatever it takes to deliver business impact.

Let's dive into each of the 12 competencies of peak product managers and learn how you can join their ranks.

Product Execution

T he foundation of successful product management is the ability to work with a cross-functional team to define, build, and launch well-designed, stable products. Peak PMs strive to **execute flawlessly**. They know there is already enough risk in understanding customer needs and crafting the strategy around those needs. They can't afford unforced errors.

Product Execution				Define, build, and launch exceptional products		
Feature Specification	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP
The ability for a PM to gather requirements, define functionality, and set goals in a clear, actionable format that can be used to communicate with the team and drive product delivery.						
Product Delivery	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP
The ability to work closely with one's immediate team (engineering, design, etc.) to iteratively and quickly deliver product functionality that accomplishes pre-defined goals.						
Product Quality Assurance	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP
The ability to identify, prioritize, and resolve technical, functional, and business quality issues across all devices, points of sale, and use cases that are applicable to the product.						

Feature Specification

The ability for a PM to gather requirements, define functionality, and set goals in a clear, actionable format that can be used to communicate with the team and drive product delivery.

Flawless execution starts here. Success flows from a PM's ability to clearly communicate what the team needs to build and why. A good feature spec does not need to be a lengthy doc — in fact, it probably

shouldn't be. Great specs can be found in JIRA tickets and Slack channels. A PM at TripAdvisor once presented a spec written on a napkin. No matter what form it takes, a good spec rallies the team around a goal and provides enough detail for the team to execute flawlessly.

Product Delivery

The ability to work closely with one's immediate team (engineering, design, etc.) to iteratively and quickly deliver product functionality that accomplishes pre-defined goals.

Next, PMs need to work effectively with their teams to turn good specs into working products. This requires a critical combination of organizational skills, leadership savvy, attention to detail, and willingness to adapt. The highest performing teams work quickly — they know that speed wins. They work iteratively — they learn more every day and they adapt based on that learning to deliver the best product.

This way of working is exhilarating, but it can also be chaotic. High performing teams ship quickly because they have a frame of reference and work against pre-defined goals. They keep themselves honest about what they set out to achieve and whether they achieved it.

Quality Assurance

The ability to identify, prioritize, and resolve technical, functional, and business quality issues across all devices, countries, and use cases that are applicable to the product.

Quality is your product's most important feature. Yet, for many companies — maybe even most companies — quality comes last on a long list of "priorities". The reason is clear.

Quality improvements don't move metrics in the sexy, easily attributable way that executives like to see. Instead, poor quality is a slow, simmering issue. It eats away at customer delight, trust, and loyalty. Poor quality may not drive your customers away today, but it will make them switch in a hurry when a better competitor comes along tomorrow.

At Spotify, quality comes first. Product managers only work on new features when the quality work is done. You can see this philosophy in their product, can't you? Can you remember the last time Spotify got in the way of your listening experience?

Customer Insight

Product managers are cultural ambassadors for their customers. They understand customer needs and they represent those needs to the rest of the team. The very best PMs go a step further. They *empathize* with the people their product serves, and they care deeply about whether that product improves people's lives.

Customer Insight						Understand and fulfill customer needs	
Fluency with Data	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP
The ability to use data to generate actionable insights, to leverage those insights to achieve goals set for the product, and to connect those quantified goals to meaningful outcomes for the business.							
Voice of the Customer	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP
The ability to leverage user feedback in all its forms (from casual conversations to formal studies) to understand how users engage with the product, make better decisions, and drive meaningful outcomes for the business.							
User Experience Design	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP
The ability, both as an individual and working with the design team, to define requirements and deliver UX designs that are easy to use, leverage UX best practices, and dovetail with the predominant UX patterns present in the product.							

Fluency with Data

The ability to use data to generate actionable insights, to leverage those insights to achieve goals set for the product, and to connect those quantified goals to meaningful outcomes for the business.

Peak PMs think about data differently than the average PM. Too many PMs think their job ends at reporting results. The best PMs dig deep to understand the "why" behind the trends they are seeing in

metrics. They translate reporting into actionable learnings, and they use those learnings to guide iterative product development.

Most of all, Peak PMs obsessively seek out the **causal relationships** between user behavior and valuable outcomes. They use that understanding to evolve the product and grow the business.

Voice of the Customer

The ability to leverage user feedback in all its forms (from casual conversations to formal studies) to understand how users engage with the product, make better decisions, and drive meaningful outcomes for the business.

Data is an incredibly powerful tool to *describe* customer behavior, but it often falls short of *explaining* why customers behave the way they do. The only way to truly understand and empathize with customers is to talk to them.

In the early days, startups don't have much data. They rely on a close relationship with customers to make good product decisions. At small companies, product managers will often chip in by answering support requests or participating in forums. As companies grow, those informal channels start to formalize and user research can become costly, slow, and unwieldy.

As a result, the close relationship with customers starts to atrophy, and PMs over-rely on easily accessible data to make decisions. This leads to misunderstanding customer needs or, worse, optimizing for the company's goals (which are easier to measure) instead of customer needs.

Peak PMs know that talking to customers is indispensable to making great products, and they understand that effective user research doesn't need to be slow or costly. They approach user research creatively and they foster a close relationship with customers through multiple channels: casual conversations, customer support tickets, app reviews, surveys, usability tests, focus groups, co-creation sessions, and any other ways they dream up. For example, TripAdvisor PMs used to jump on the Amtrak train from Boston to New York to have impromptu conversations with travelers mid-trip.

User Experience Design

The ability, both as an individual and working with the design team, to define requirements and deliver UX designs that are easy to use, leverage UX best practices, and dovetail with the predominant UX patterns present in the product.

The average PM writes up a spec and throws it over the wall to the design team to figure out the user experience. Peak PMs know that their job is not just to understand and describe customer needs, but to work closely with design to translate those needs into an easy-to-use experience.

Peak PMs emphasize **interaction design** as an explicit and critical phase of product development. The goal of interaction design is to make it as easy as possible for customers to achieve their needs through the product.

Too often, teams conflate visual design and interaction design. For example, I can't count the number of times I've seen teams use obscure icons instead of clear labels for product functionality. These

icons look pretty and conserve valuable screen real estate, but they add unnecessary friction to a customer's experience. At TripAdvisor, we saw *a 20% increase* to a critical metric by substituting an icon-heavy UI with a more affordant user interface.

Product Strategy

In his book, <u>Good Strategy Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters</u>, author Richard Rumelt draws an important distinction between goal setting and strategy, "Unlike a stand-alone decision or a goal, a strategy is a coherent set of analyses, concepts, policies, arguments, and actions that respond to a high-stakes challenge."

Product Strategy can be similarly defined. Unlike a stand-alone feature or OKR, good product strategy requires PMs to consistently deliver features that build towards a coherent roadmap that enables a company to achieve its overall strategy. Put another way, Product Strategy is the glue that joins product development and company strategy together.

Product Strategy			Deliver business impact via product innovation				
Business Outcome Ownership	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP

The ability to drive meaningful outcomes for the business by connecting product functionality and goals to the strategic objectives of the PM's team and the company overall.

Product Vision & Roadmapping	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP

The ability to define an overall vision for the PM's area of the product that connects to the strategy for the team and the company. The ability to define a clear roadmap of highly prioritized features and initiatives that deliver against that vision.

Strategic Impact	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP

The ability to understand and contribute to the business strategy for a PM's team and the company overall. The ability to bring strategy to fruition through the consistent delivery of business outcomes.

Business Outcome Ownership

The ability to drive meaningful outcomes for the business by connecting product functionality and goals to the strategic objectives of the PM's team and the company overall.

Above all else, Peak PMs don't just ship features, they deliver valuable outcomes to the business. For this reason, Business Outcome Ownership is the most important competency for PMs — at all levels of the organization.

The word "ownership" is used deliberately. Peak PMs flock to responsibility for the business, rather than shy away from it. They understand that the product is a means to the end of creating value, not an end in itself. They hold themselves accountable to deliver outcomes over output.

Moreover, peak PMs instill that same sense of ownership in the team, helping the team understand what outcomes they are responsible for delivering, why those outcomes are important, and how they'll succeed at delivering those outcomes.

Product Vision & Roadmapping

The ability to define an overall vision for the PM's area of the product that connects to the strategy for the team and the company. The ability to define a clear roadmap of prioritized features and initiatives that deliver against that vision.

Early PMs focus on defining a good feature, executing that feature flawlessly, and ensuring the feature solves a customer need and delivers impact to the business.

As PMs get more senior, they need to think about how features connect to each other — how they ladder up to a clear, compelling, cohesive vision for the product. Peak PMs understand how to articulate and build towards that vision. They recognize when to adapt to new information or hold the course. Most of all, they connect the product vision to company strategy so that the product helps the company achieve its goals as the vision comes into being.

Strategic Impact

The ability to understand and contribute to the business strategy for a PM's team and the company overall. The ability to bring strategy to fruition through the consistent delivery of business outcomes.

TechCrunch maintains a list of products and companies that have been shutdown called The Deadpool. It's striking how many great products end up in The Deadpool — including many products that users loved. Why do great products get shutdown? Because those products may have provided value to customers, but they didn't provide value to the companies that created them.

Peak PMs know that product strategy and business strategy are inextricably linked. Successful products are valuable to both the customer and the company. Peak PM's deliver successful products by understanding what the company's strategy is designed to achieve. They use the product as a lever to achieve that strategy.

In addition, they provide strategic context to their team — making sure that all decisions, big and small, are aligned. As Peak PMs get more senior, they take a seat at the table with leaders across the business to define strategy. Peak PMs ensure that product strategy is a cornerstone of company strategy.

Influencing People

L astly, peak PMs know they are only as effective as their team. They view themselves as connective tissue within the organization. They foster strong relationships with cross-functional peers and leadership. As they take on roles of increasing scope and responsibility, they learn how to build and mentor strong PM teams. Peak PMs are able to multiply their impact by enabling the people around them to contribute to and own the business impact necessary to achieve the company's strategy.

Influencing People						Rally people around the team's work	
Stakeholder Management	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP

The ability to proactively identify stakeholders impacted by the PM's area of ownership and to work with those stakeholders to factor their requirements into product decisions.

Team Leadership	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP

The ability to manage and mentor direct reports with the goal of enabling them to successfully deliver on their product areas, continuously improve against these competencies, deliver meaningful business outcomes, and achieve their career objectives.

Managing Up	APM	PM	Sr. PM	GPM	Director	Sr. Dir.	VP

The ability to leverage senior managers and executives in the organization to help achieve goals, deliver meaningful business outcomes, and positively influence the strategic direction of the PM's team and the company overall.

Stakeholder Management

The ability to proactively identify stakeholders impacted by the PM's area of ownership and to work with those stakeholders to factor their requirements into product decisions.

Product managers at all levels are expected to lead, but they must lead through influence, not authority. This begins with knowing who

to engage. I've seen many PMs struggle because they didn't thoughtfully identify stakeholders at the outset.

Once a PM has identified the right stakeholders, they need to form that group into a team. Peak PMs will tap into the best thinking of that team and rally their support. Stakeholders don't want to be managed as much as they want to be included.

That said, the Peak PM's job is not to make everyone happy. Compromise is at the root of many bad product decisions. Compromise leads to bloated, difficult to use products. Compromised products cater to the teams who built them, not to the customers who use them. Peak PMs are willing to make the hard product decisions, and they are able to align everyone to those decisions — including the dissenters.

Team Leadership

The ability to manage and mentor direct reports with the goal of enabling them to successfully deliver on their product areas, continuously improve against these competencies, deliver meaningful business outcomes, and achieve their career objectives.

In contrast to many roles, product managers have a significant amount of leadership experience by the time they start to manage their first direct reports. They have had years of practice leading through influence, not authority.

Despite that practice, many new PM leaders fall into the trap of micromanaging their reports. Often, they know the job so well that

they don't make a clear enough distinction between doing and delegating. Sometimes, they overuse the newfound authority they've been craving.

Peak PMs see themselves as a coach, first and foremost. They give their direct reports the tools and autonomy to succeed, and they reserve micro-management for cases when performance is lackluster and needs to be improved.

Managing Up

The ability to leverage senior managers and executives in the organization to help achieve goals, deliver meaningful business outcomes, and positively influence the strategic direction of the PM's team and the company overall.

I look at Managing Up differently than a lot of people. In a well functioning organization, leadership is there to serve you, not the other way around. As Steve Jobs famously said, "It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do."

Managing Up is ultimately about getting the support you need to accomplish your goals. This is true regardless of whether your company takes the Steve Jobs approach. Communication is important to Managing Up, but the key is **alignment**. Peak PMs understand what their boss and other leaders are trying to achieve, and they align their work to those objectives.

Resources flow to the teams who are most aligned with leadership's objectives.

Putting the Competencies into Practice

The 12 competencies provide a framework you can use to evaluate yourself, your team, and PM candidates. Here are a few ways to get started:

Evaluate Yourself

Assess yourself against each of the competencies. Use the competencies to identify your strengths, understand gaps, and chart a course for your growth. You can do this quickly by rating yourself "On Track", "Over Performing", or "Needs Focus" on each of the competencies. Generally, you should have 2-3 competencies rated "Over Performing", 2-3 competencies rated "Needs Focus", and the rest "On Track".

Supercharge Your 1-on-1

Before your next 1-on-1 with your manager, spend a few minutes rating yourself "On Track", "Over Performing", or "Needs Focus" on each of the competencies. Ask your manager to do the same. Next time you and your manager meet, go through each of the competencies noting where you and your manager see eye-to-eye and where you differ.

Leave the 1-on-1 with one strength you're going to double down on and one competency that needs focus. This will be one of the most valuable 1-on-1's you have all year.

Hire Better PMs

Use the competencies to make interviews more comprehensive and standardize how multiple interviewers evaluate the same candidate. It is hard to go through all 12 competencies during a typical 1-2 round interview process. As a result, I recommend having interviewers focus on one of the four competency areas: Product Execution, Customer Insight, Product Strategy, and Influencing People. Collectively, the interviewers will have a comprehensive perspective on the candidate. You can go further by standardizing questions for each competency area and calibrating interviewers to assess the four areas. This will enable you to make better, more consistent hiring decisions.

Make Smarter Promotion Decisions

The product role should evolve considerably as people get more senior. Too often, companies aren't explicit enough about how expectations change at each level of the product org. They expect PMs to do "more" when they are promoted, but don't define what that means. The competencies can help.

Prior to making a promotion, rate the candidate "On Track", "Over Performing", or "Needs Focus" on each of the competencies. The candidate should be over-performing on most of the competencies to be eligible for the next level and shouldn't have any critical deficits holding them back. At this point, you'll be able to make a smarter promotion decision:

- ▸ If the candidate isn't ready for the next level, share your ratings with the person to provide a clear reason why they weren't promoted and what they need to do to level up.

> ▸ If the candidate is ready for a promotion, use your ratings to provide the newly promoted PM a clear picture of expectations at their new level and development areas they must focus on to succeed.

You can use this same approach to do a talent assessment of your whole team. You may find there are PMs that are operating above their level and should be promoted. More likely, you'll find there are PMs who were promoted without a detailed analysis of their performance and aren't meeting expectations at their level. Those PMs will need clear guidance on how to close the gap and may need to be re-leveled to bring them closer in line with expectations.

Build More Balanced Teams

Individual PMs are rarely able to excel equally at all of the competencies, yet they are all necessary to ship great products that deliver business impact. The competencies can help you understand the right combination of people to put on a team to make that team successful.

For example, a design-centric PM may excel at an important cluster of competencies necessary to build customer-obsessed products: User Experience Design, Voice of the Customer, and Product Vision & Roadmapping. That same PM may not excel at Fluency with Data. That's a gap that must be filled — analytics is essential to assessing the impact of any initiative and charting a course towards success.

There are a few different ways to fill this gap. In some cases, you can partner the design-centric PM with a more analytics-oriented PM. More often, you can fill these gaps by teaming the PM with strong, cross-functional partners in analytics, data science, design, engineering, marketing, and other people in the organization.

The peak product manager is an ideal worth striving for, not just as an individual, but as a team and as a company. Great products are the result of talented, complementary teams working together to reinforce each other's skills.

In the next chapter, we'll look at how to use these 12 competencies to building those teams and the people who lead them.

Building Exceptional PMs and Product Teams

Across the 12 competencies, there is a lot for product managers to master. Most PMs excel at a handful of skills. The best PMs identify their strengths, reinforce those strengths, and assess any areas holding them back. And they build complementary teams that fit together like puzzle pieces — making the sum of the parts greater than the whole.

Let's first take a look at what makes for exceptional people and exceptional teams.

In 2011, McKinsey, the renowned strategy firm, and Egon Zehnder, one of the world's leading executive recruiting companies, began an exhaustive survey of over 5,000 people. They wanted to understand the differences between rapidly growing companies and the rest of the pack. They wanted to understand how leaders factor into those differences.

What they found was surprising.

Consistently, leaders at the highest performing companies were average or even deficient at many important leadership competencies. Conversely, the average companies focused on building well-rounded leaders.

The average companies were following conventional wisdom: weaknesses hold you back — so those companies spent time identifying people's weaknesses and filling the gaps. But they were missing an essential fact about human nature.

Exceptional people have natural talents, and they are at their best when they leverage those talents. Think about something you're great at. How did it feel the last time you showed off that talent?

The outlier companies recognized that exceptional people do their best work when they are encouraged to use and grow their natural talents. They also recognized that talented people have weaknesses — often in mirror image to their strengths.

It's energizing for talented people to spend time reinforcing their strengths and demotivating for them to struggle with improving weaknesses.

Average companies spend a lot of time identifying and addressing areas of weakness. The result? Well-rounded leaders who were consistently unexceptional.

Meanwhile, the outlier companies chose to invest in people's strengths and tolerate their weaknesses. McKinsey calls this "spiky leadership." Exceptional leaders spike in critical areas and surround themselves with people who spike in complementary areas.

This is not to say that companies should tolerate incompetence. Incompetence is subtractive — it drags a team down. Every person must bring a baseline level of competence to the team so that they are adding to, not subtracting from, the team's capability.

The popular concept of "T-shaped people" offers a similar insight. The best teammates are good at many things, but spike in areas aligned with their natural talent.

Individuals should be spiky; teams should be well-rounded.

Today, the market for new products is hyper-competitive. There is no room for average products. The products that break through are exceptional. Exceptional products, like exceptional companies, are built by spiky people working together on well-rounded teams.

People need to "know their shape," so they can fit their team together like puzzle pieces. Without a thoughtful approach, teams can end up unbalanced — and unbalanced teams ship unbalanced products.

Knowing Your Shape

P lotting your shape is straightforward. Start by assessing yourself for each of the 12 competencies on a scale from "Needs Focus" to "On Track" to "Outperform" (or somewhere in between those three tiers). Then plot your assessment on the "What's Your Shape?" worksheet. The worksheet might look something like this for an execution/analytics oriented PM:
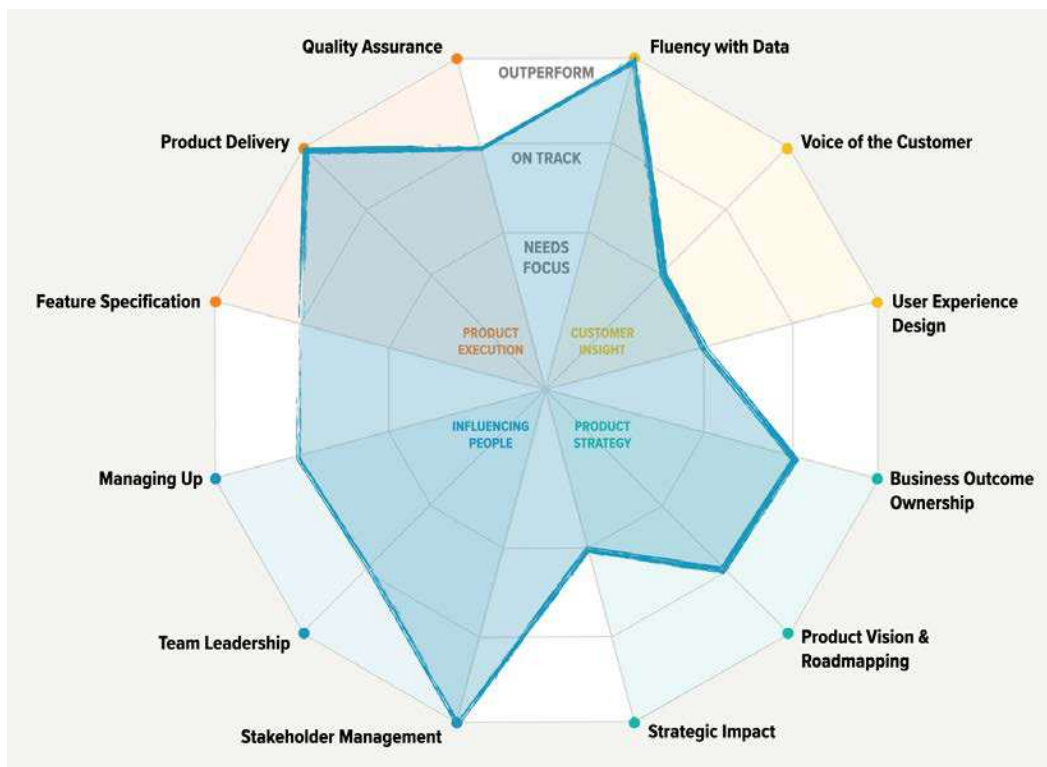
Now, let's interpret the results.

Product Builders vs. Product Architects
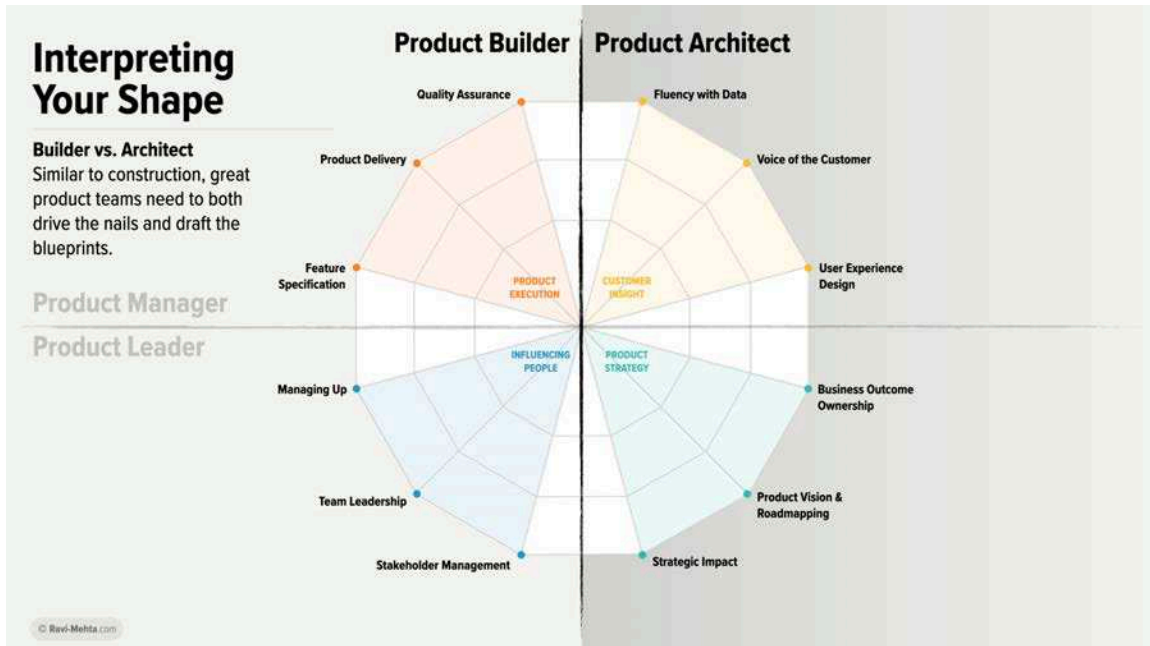
The competencies can be organized into four natural groupings —
four hemispheres that each represent different patterns that are
common in product teams.

The first two hemispheres — the "western" and "eastern"
hemispheres — contrast Product Builders and Product Architects.
Similar to construction, great product teams need to both drive the
nails (i.e., build) and draft the blueprints (i.e., design).

Often, people and teams have a bias towards one or the other type of
work, but both are critical to success. Once you've plotted your
shape, take stock of whether it is overweighted on the left or right
side of the chart.

If you tend towards the Product Builder side, you like to get shit done, and you're good at it. This is critical. But to grow, you'll need to figure out how to build the right thing.

If you tend towards the Product Architect side, you understand how to design products that move the needle for customers and the company, but you may lack some of the skills to bring those products to life.

Success requires both vision and execution.

In his article, "[Why Tim Cook is Steve Ballmer and Why He Still Has His Job at Apple]", Steve Blank describes the distinction between Visionary CEOs and Execution CEOs. This mirrors the distinction between Product Architects and Product Builders.
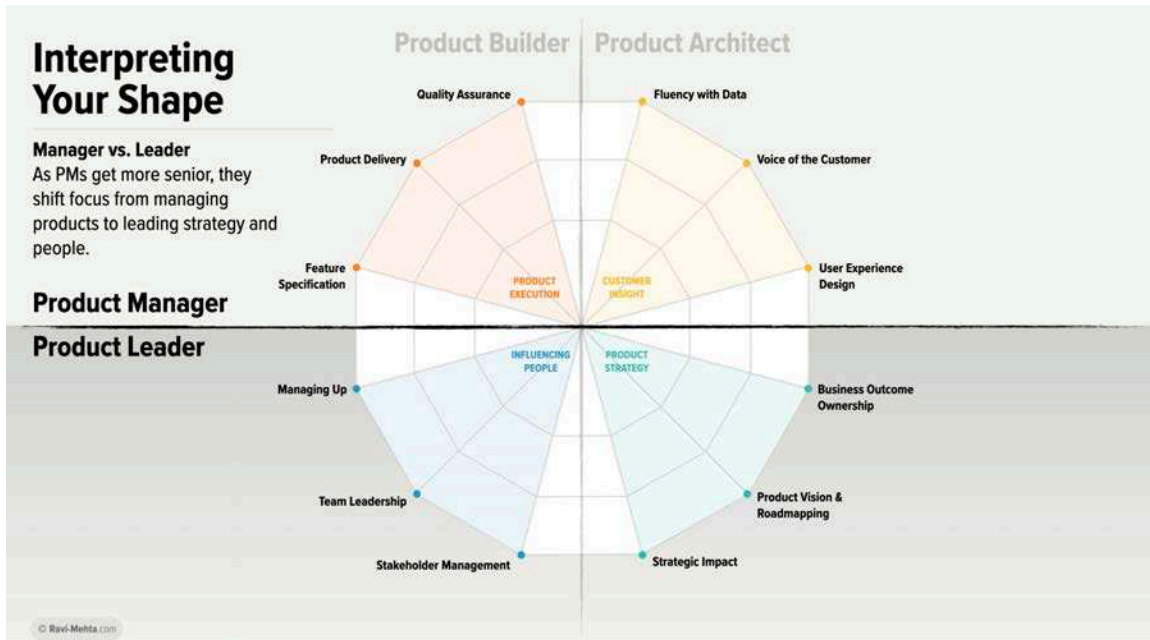
Success requires both vision and execution. However, Steve Blank concludes that vision is increasingly vital given the fast-paced, technology-driven changes of the 21st century. He councils boards to appoint Visionary CEOs over Execution CEOs.

Similarly, product teams require both Product Builders and Product Architects, but the Product Architecture competencies are of outsized importance in today's world.

If you are a Product Architect, then you can grow by investing in your strengths and pairing yourself with strong Product Builders.

If you are a Product Builder, the path to growth looks different. In addition to pairing yourself with teammates who augment your skills, you must personally level up your Customer Insight and Product Strategy capabilities.

Product Managers vs. Product Leaders

Interpreting Your Shape

Manager vs. Leader
As PMs get more senior, they shift focus from managing products to leading strategy and people.

Product Manager
Product Leader

Product Builder | Product Architect

Quality Assurance
Product Delivery
Feature Specification
Fluency with Data
Voice of the Customer
User Experience Design
Managing Up
Team Leadership
Stakeholder Management
Business Outcome Ownership
Product Vision & Roadmapping
Strategic Impact

PRODUCT EXECUTION
CUSTOMER INSIGHT
INFLUENCING PEOPLE
PRODUCT STRATEGY

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The second two hemispheres — the "northern" and "southern" hemispheres — contrast Product Managers and Product Leaders. As PMs get more senior, they shift focus from managing products to leading strategy and people. As this shift happens, the importance of each competency evolves.

During the journey from Product Manager to Product Leader, PMs work clockwise around the competencies starting with Product Execution.

PMs need to master Product Execution early in their careers — shipping product is the foundation for success as a product manager. At this stage, junior PMs need the time and space to learn how to execute. They can and should rely on their managers to help them define what to build.

As PMs progress in their careers, they should take a more active role in architecting the product. This is where the skills of Customer Insight come into play — initially at the feature level. Strong PMs and Senior PMs are able to **define**, **build**, and **evaluate** successful features.

Next, PMs must learn to think beyond a single feature and start thinking about how features connect to each other — how they ladder up to a clear, compelling, cohesive vision for the product and how they connect to the company's strategy. This is the point at which PMs, at the GPM and Director level, begin to shift from Product Managers to Product Leaders.

As Product Leaders become more senior, they increasingly work through people. There may be dozens or even hundreds of people mobilized to bring a Product Leader's vision to reality. These senior leaders must master the art of Influencing People throughout the organization.

Great Product Leaders build strong product teams, but this is just one component of product leadership. Product Leaders must manage up and across. They must act as the connective tissue that brings people across the company together to achieve product goals, and they must work effectively with executives to achieve company strategy.

Throughout this journey from Product Manager to Product Leader, the competency that remains equally important at all levels is Business Outcome Ownership. No matter their level, the best PMs focus on delivering business impact, not just shipping features.

We can see how PMs evolve from APM to CPO by plotting the relative importance of each competency by level:
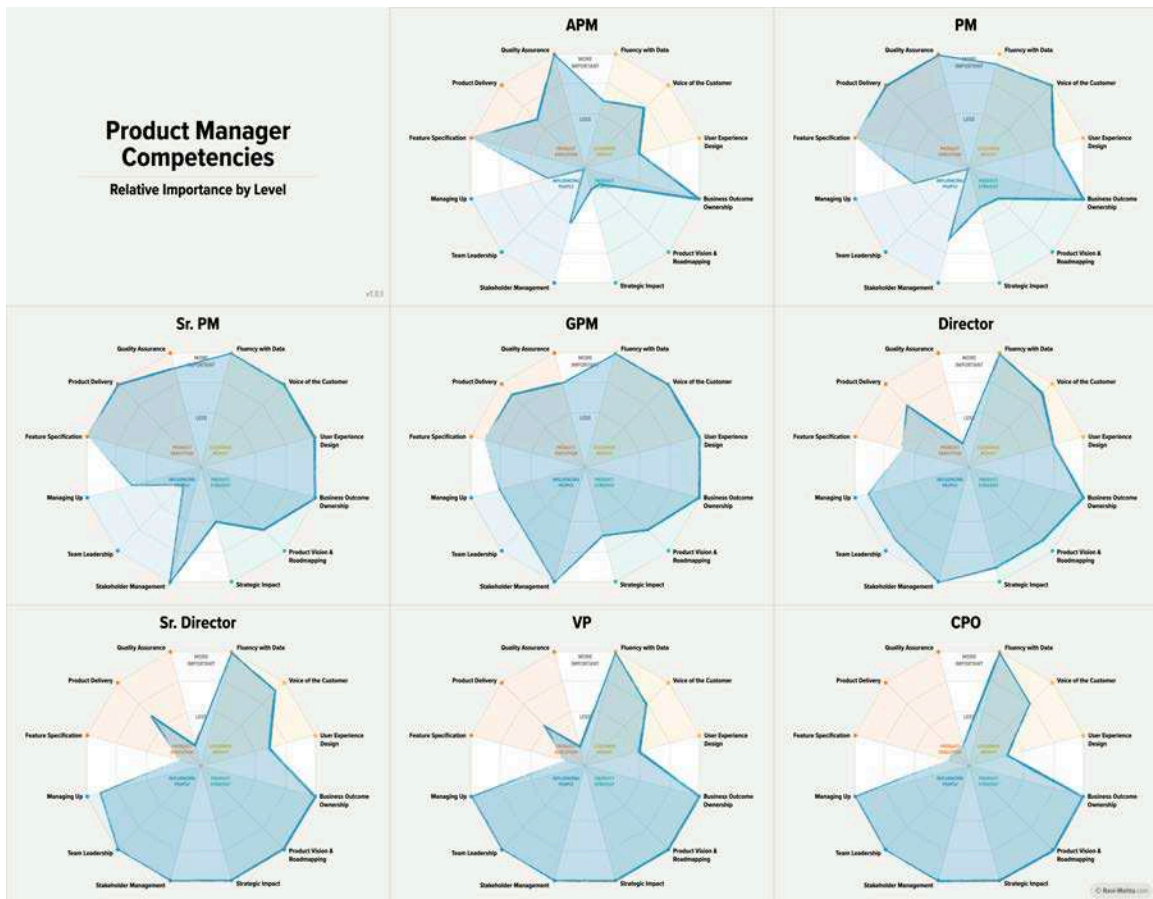
Product Manager Archetypes

Everyone's shape is different, but there are some patterns. Let's take a look at four common archetypes. These archetypes may resemble people you know or how you see yourself. I've exaggerated each archetype's strengths and weaknesses to illustrate opportunities for growth and discuss how they fit into a product development team.

The Project Manager
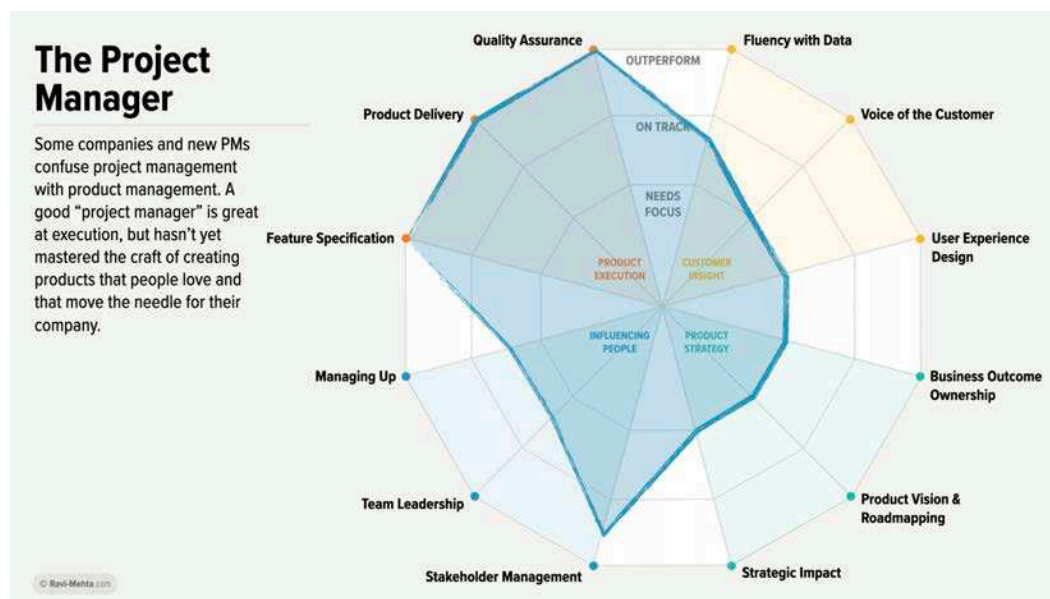
Some companies and new PMs confuse project management with product management. A good "project manager" is great at execution, but hasn't yet mastered the craft of creating products that people love and that move the needle for their company.

Companies need to draw a clear line between project management and product management. If they don't, companies run the risk of

fostering teams that know how to build but can't figure out what to build.

Project managers **must** work on Customer Insight and Product Strategy skills to grow as product managers. Companies should resist promoting PMs who haven't started developing those skills — even when they have a strong track record of shipping.

The People Manager
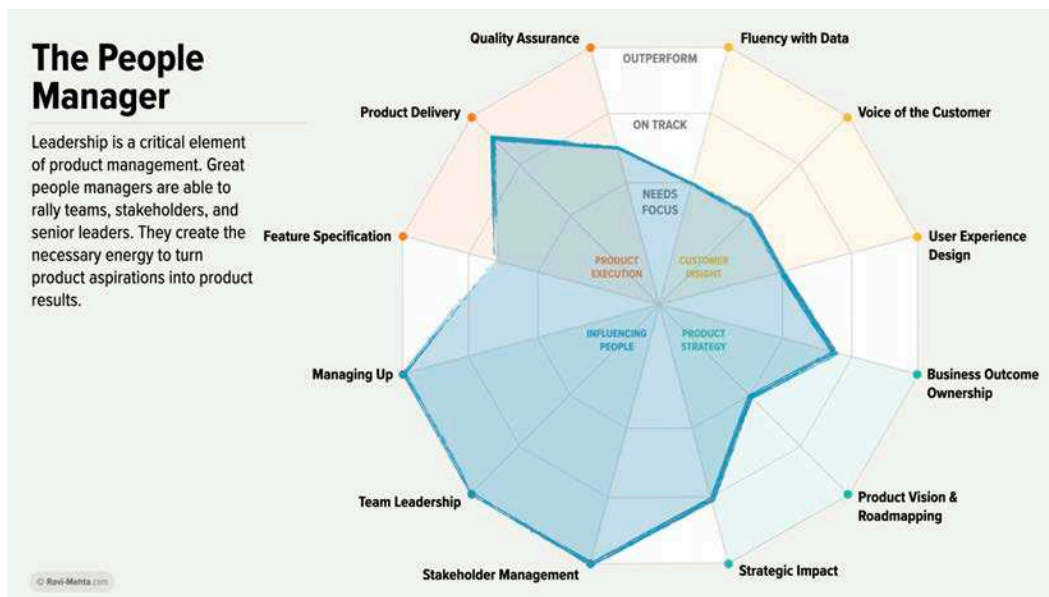
Leadership is a critical element of product management. Great people managers rally teams, stakeholders, and senior leaders. They create the necessary energy to turn product aspirations into product results.

Great people managers are rare, so they get rewarded within an organization. However, it's important to recognize that Product Leaders must build both people **and** products. Accordingly, naturally

talented people managers should focus on developing Customer Insight and Product Strategy skills. This will give them the tools to not only lead, but lead to the right destination.

The Growth Hacker
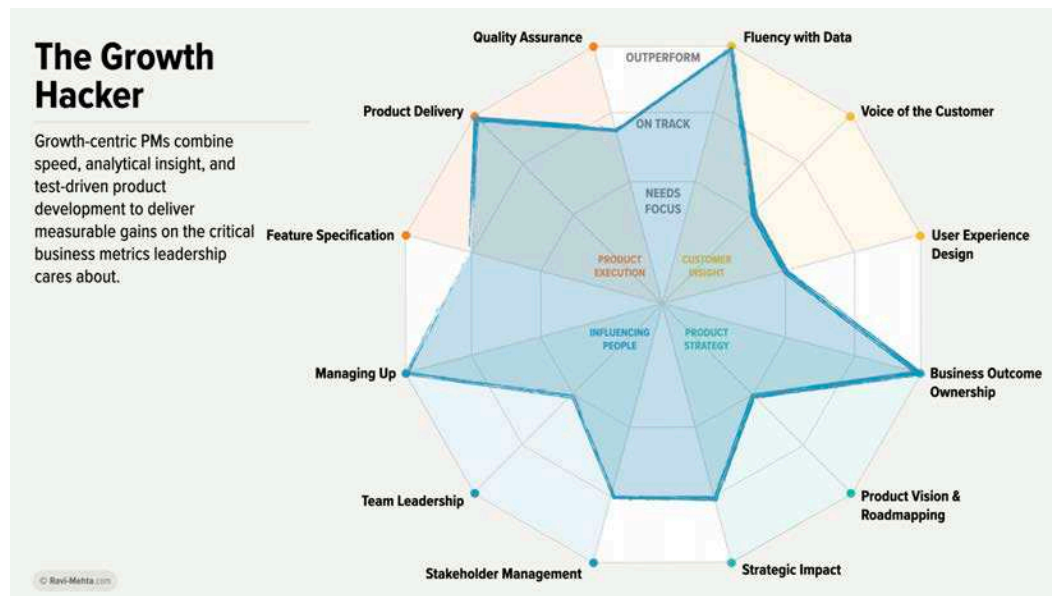
Growth-centric PMs combine speed, analytical insight, and test-driven product development to deliver measurable gains on the critical business metrics leadership cares about. They drive growth at each stage of the product lifecycle: acquisition, activation, engagement, retention, and monetization.

Growth has become a critical facet of product management, and every tech company should foster a strong growth team. That said, companies should be careful not to mistake growth optimization with product innovation. If they do, they run the risk of being disrupted by more innovative competitors.

For example, Facebook has one of the strongest growth teams in the tech industry, and that team has been instrumental in increasing Facebook's reach to 2 billion people. However, Facebook has reinvented itself many times: the transition from profiles to news feed, the transition from desktop to mobile, and most recently with the transition to stories. Facebook simultaneously optimizes to find the local maxima while innovating to find the global maxima.

Companies need to invest in both growth and innovation, but individual PMs may **choose their path**. A growth-centric PM can reinforce their skills by further developing strengths like Fluency with Data and Business Outcome Ownership or evolve by focusing on skills like Voice of the Customer and Product Vision & Roadmapping.

The Product Innovator
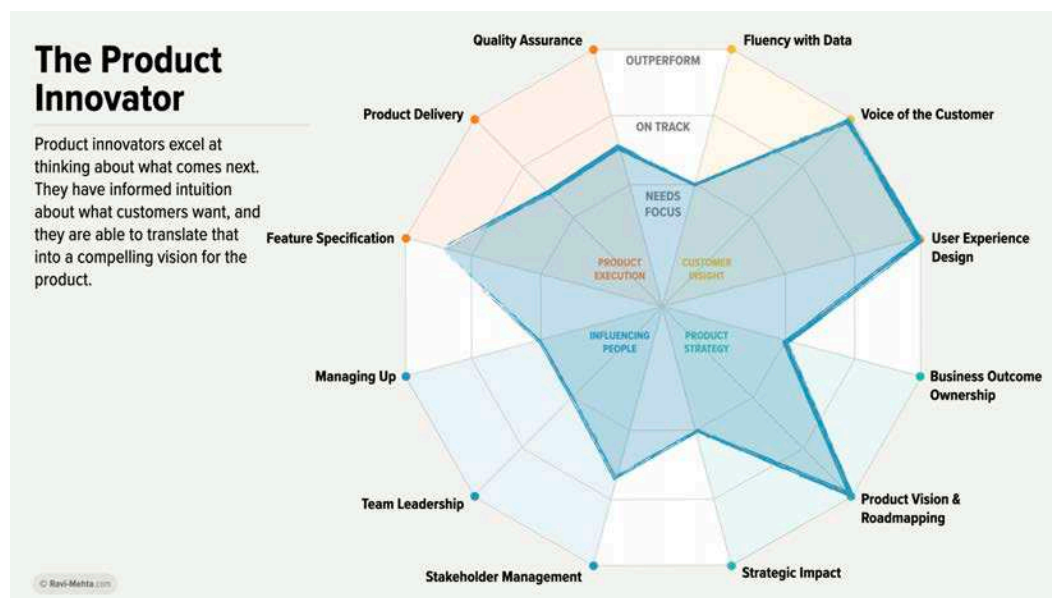
Product innovators excel at thinking about what comes next. They intuitively understand what customers want, and they can translate that understanding into a compelling vision for the product.

Innovative PMs are a vital force within their organization — they encourage companies to think disruptively rather than incrementally. This is crucial to the survival of fast-moving tech companies.

However, innovative PMs often suffer a weakness that is a mirror image of their strength — they may have a hard time breaking their big ideas into iterative, measurable pieces. But companies need to move quickly and validate their innovative bets. Otherwise, they risk over-investing on the wrong path.

Companies can achieve this in one of two ways: by pairing innovative PMs with execution-oriented, data-driven teammates or by encouraging individuals to improve their Product Delivery and Fluency with Data. Either way, companies will improve their success rate if they counterbalance intuition with empirical results and analytical thinking.

Final Word - What's *Your* Shape?

Product management is a rare role that requires excellence at opposite ends of many spectrums — analytics and intuition, optimization and innovation, strategy and tactics, team leadership and task management, and, most importantly, building value for customers and building value for the company.

You can't excel across all of the PM competencies simultaneously. But you don't need to. The path to success begins with knowing your strengths. Along that path, you'll meet the complementary people who will make you even better. Together, you and your team will be able to reach the most ambitious goals.

Any questions? You can contact me at:
ravi@ravi-mehta.com

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