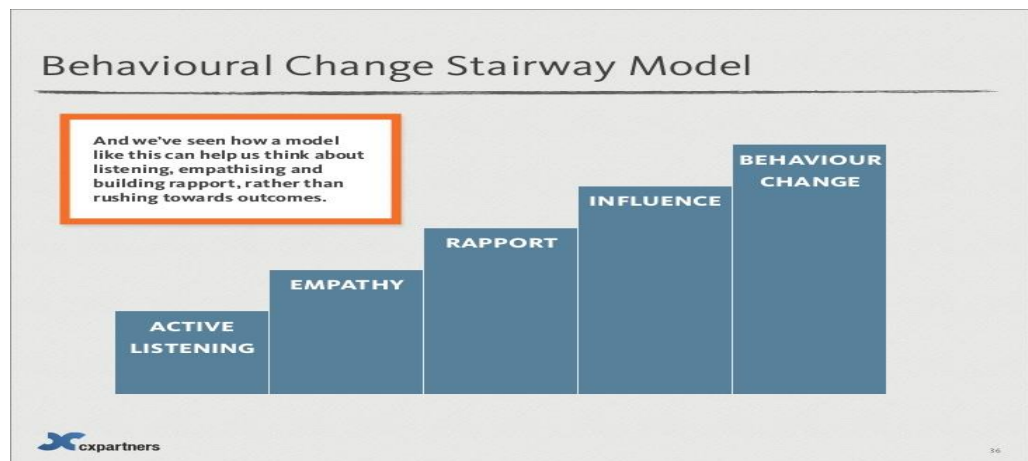


# Brief Summary of How to Lead in Product Management

By Roman Pichler

## Introduction

- There are six common challenges that make leading stakeholders and development teams special
  - Lack of transactional power
    - Unlike a line manager, you are not the boss and don't have any one reporting to you. Yet you have to rely on their work and some of them may be very influential in the organization
  - Lead comparatively large and heterogeneous group
    - Development teams are cross functional and may come from different backgrounds and skills. Stakeholders could come from different business units
    - Understanding the different perspectives and needs and effectively guiding everyone would be challenging
  - Have limited influence on group member selection
    - Often rely on the line management to staff the development team and select representatives from the business units as stakeholders
    - There is no control as to how long people will work with you
  - Actively contribute to reaching the goals while guiding others
    - Often play a dual role of a leader and contributor – ensuring that the various workstreams are aligned, encouraging key stakeholders to participate in review meetings, assess product performance and monitoring progress against the roadmap
  - Offer strategic and tactical leadership
    - Guiding the development team and stakeholders needs leadership at three levels – vision, strategy and tactics – shape the vision of the product, lead the effort to evolve an effective strategy and guide the development of a product roadmap
    - The vision should guide the strategy and strategy should direct the tactics.
  - Usually work with Agile practices
    - Agile processes puts requirements on the interaction with the development team and stakeholders.
    - You must make yourself available to the Development team to work on the Product backlog, participate in meetings, respond to queries and provide feedback on work completed by the team
- Leading people comprises influencing and supporting the individuals to jointly work towards shared goals -unfortunately as the Product person, one does not have the authority to do so.
- Behavioural Change Stairway model - In order to encourage change in the other person
  - You have to be able to influence the individual.
  - To do so, you must first establish a trustful relationship with the person T
  - This can be done only if you empathize with the individual, understand his/her perspective and take a genuine interest in the person's needs.
  - And the best way to understand someone is to actively listen to the person.



- People will only follow you for two reasons – because they trust and respect you or because they fear you. Coercing people to do something is undesirable – it creates an unhealthy work environment where people work out of fear and obligation.
- If you want people to truly trust and respect you, then you should show that you genuinely care for them – empathize with them.
- Empathy is our capacity to understand other people’s feelings, needs and interests to take the perspective of the other person. It is possibly the most important leadership quality – it not only allows you to influence others and encourage change – it also creates trust and psychological safety.
- In addition to the capacity to empathize, you must have the necessary expertise to become a well-rounded product person.
- Your ability to influence and lead others is dependent on the support of the management – the more important your product is, the more senior, the sponsor should be.
- Choose your leadership style – distinguishing different styles can help you become aware of your preferred leadership behaviours
  - A Visionary leader is someone who aligns through a shared inspirational goal
  - A Democratic or participatory leader is inclusive and involves people in all decisions
  - An Affiliative leader connects people and builds teams
  - A Delegative leader empowers others to make decisions
  - A Coaching leader develops people by helping them reach their goals
  - A Directive leader sets standards and shows people how to move forward
  - An Autocratic leader makes the decisions and tell people what to do
- In order to be an effective leader, attend to the needs of the development team and stakeholders and take into account group cohesion and expertise.
- A Product person should also take into account the situation he/she is in – the company’s culture, the business context, performance of groups and individuals etc.

### Interactions

- Establishing the right interactions with the people you lead is crucial to provide effective leadership.
- Trust is the magic ingredient that allows relationships to blossom. It is crucial since if you don’t trust someone – the interactions become superficial and often avoid making tough

decisions that involve disagreements and conflict and they are unable to effectively collaborate

- Some tips to build trust include
  - Coming from a place of curiosity and care – being concerned about their well being
  - Listening with an open mind
  - Speaking and acting with integrity
  - Getting to know people and allowing people to get to know you.
  - Involving people in product decisions
  - Being supportive and offering help whenever possible and appropriate
  - Strengthening your Product management expertise
- An effective Scrum Master allows the Product person to focus on your job and avoids you to get too involved with people, process and organizational issues.
- An effective Development team helps you to come up with new ideas, refine product backlog items and make the right decisions and it is important to set up the team for success – through actions like collocating team members, forming stable teams, organizing team members around products, encouraging team self-selection, making time to interact with the team and giving the team time to learn and experiment etc.
- As a Product person you must also have good relations with the stakeholders and proactively guide the individuals to ensure that the product creates the desired values for users and business. This would include involving the right people, building a stakeholder community, involving them in Product Discovery, Strategy and Product development work

## Goals

- Goals are key to effectively guide the development team and stakeholders – they establish a shared purpose, ensure efforts are aligned, and provide with the necessary autonomy to do their work.
- The goals are linked through a chain – the product vision helps discover the right user and business goals, the user and business goals help determine the right product goals and the product goals help identify the right sprint goals.
- It is important to regularly review the goals and keep them in sync
- Product vision – describes the ultimate reason for creating a product and the positive change it should bring about. An effective vision, covering 3-5 years, inspires people and provides a motivation to work on the product. As the vision is inspirational and visionary – it cannot be measured as you may never realize the vision.
- User and Business goals are strategic goals that are derived from the vision – this describes the approach you intend to use to move towards the vision. User and business goals should be measurable and the right KPIs will let us know whether the product is meeting its goals. User and business goals will change as your product develops and matures – start-up vs established will have different goals.
- Product Goals – each product goal should be a step towards meeting a user or business goal and describe specific benefits such as acquire users, increase engagement, generate revenue etc. Product goals cover a time frame of two to six months and help align the work of the stakeholders and development team towards the goal.
- Sprint goal – states the desired outcome of a sprint. Each sprint goal must be a step towards the next product goal – it is a short tactical short-term goal – since it covers one to four weeks.

- The following criteria applies to the goals to make them effective – Shared, Realistic, Inspirational, Alignment creating, Autonomy fostering and Holistically and systematically linked.
- Vision, Goals, Objectives and OKRs
  - A vision is a high-level overarching goal that is typically ambitious and inspirational – hence it cannot be measured
  - A goal expresses an aim – something we want to achieve – should typically be SMART
  - An objective is a goal that can be measured – you can select metrics to determine progress
  - OKRs are measures used to determine if an objective has been met.
- It is important to set realistic, ethical goals and give people ownership to achieve them.

### Conversations

- Conversations are the heart of what we do as Product people – effective conversations not only exchange information between people but also create a shared understanding, build connections and establish trust.
- Listening is at the heart of every successful conversation. It helps you acquire new information, increase people's support in product decisions and allows you to build and strengthen connections. Effective listening now only helps you to receive what is being said, but also allows you to tune into the speakers emotions and empathize with the person. Steven Covey talks of five different listening levels –
  - Level 1 – Ignore
  - Level 2 – Pretend to Listen
  - Level 3 – Selective Listening
  - Level 4 – Attentive Listening
  - Level 5 – Empathic listening
- Listening comes in two flavours – listening to another person and receiving what is being said and listening to the reactions triggered in our minds, noticing the thoughts and emotions that come up. Listening inwardly helps you to avoid replying in an unhelpful way – saying something that you will regret or using harsh, hurtful words.
- Try to give your full and undivided attention to the other person – particularly when you are having an important conversation – this makes the other person feel appreciated.
- It is also important to make a conscious effort to listen with an open mind and be respectfully curious – be mindful of how receptive you are during a conversation, develop a warm-hearted attitude towards the other person, reflect on your ideas and view and why they are important to you.
- Whenever in a conversation – listen not only to the facts, but also to the feelings and needs.
- To ensure that you have correctly understood what someone said, ask clarifying questions or summarizing what you have heard.
- Feelings are the emotions that are present when we express our thoughts, such as excitement, enthusiasm, frustration or sadness.
- A great way to discover the needs behind people's words is to ask "why" question.
- Pay attention to the person's body language to understand his feelings. Taking a few deep breaths, being mindful of body language, being comfortable with silence and consider timeboxing people's contributions in meetings to avoid the risk of long monologues are some of the techniques one can follow.

- One can avoid friction and conflict by following these guidelines
  - Positive first – share a positive observation before saying something critical
  - Flipping and framing – these are Appreciative Inquiry techniques – where you communicate the positive opposite together with the desired outcome. These techniques help you avoid being overly critical and dwelling on the negatives.
  - Separate the problem and the person
  - Responding to difficult messages – by caring about the effect your words are likely to have on the other person and avoiding harsh, offensive, dismissive, cynical speech.
- In order to speak kindly, one needs to keep his speech free from anger or unwholesome emotions, be grateful for the other person's time and interest and apply kind speech not only to the people who are present but also to those who are not.
- Saying no is a part and parcel of a product person's job – it is impossible to please everyone. It is however important to say no in a firm but caring way – by empathizing with the individual and be grateful for the suggestion even if you disagree with it.
- Make sure you speak at the right time, in the right place and through the right channel to maximize the chances that your message will be understood.
- Also consider the best way to communicate the message – email, text messages, face to face or video call.
- Some of the techniques for conversation are
  - Paraphrase – in your own words, say what you think the speaker has said and check
  - Summarize – Sum up what the other person says
  - Clarify – Ask clarifying questions to ensure that you have understood correctly
  - Mirror – Repeat the exact same words in a warm accepting voice.
  - Draw out the other person – paraphrase the speaker's statement and then ask open-ended non directive questions to get more information
  - Acknowledge the feelings of the other person – People often communicate their feelings indirectly using non verbal means – it is important to acknowledge them by asking questions like – “You are looking concerned”
  - Encourage – encourage the speaker to continue
  - Pause – intentionally stay silent for a moment
  - Postpone the conversation – postpone if you feel there can be no meaningful progress can be made right now.
  - Chunk – share one piece of information at a time
  - Positive first – saying something positive before you share something critical
  - Flipping – instead of discussing what's wrong, communicate the positive opposite, the outcome you would like to achieve.
  - Track – Keep track of the topics the conversation touches upon to avoid going off tangent
  - Redirect – Acknowledge what the other person has said and state your desire to return to a previous topic or move to a new one.

### **Conflict**

- Conflict happens when one or more people are in disagreement and experience a clash of interests.
- It is perfectly normal – effective collaboration is hard to achieve if we haven't learnt to constructively deal with conflict – if we are able to do that, conflict will become a source of creativity and innovation for our products

- Five common pitfalls to be avoided while dealing with conflicts are
  - Win Lose - Typically in every conflict one person wins, the other loses. These could be
    - Competitive confrontation (being forceful and pushing for what you want)
    - Passive aggression – indirect form of confrontation – pretending all is well, express displeasure
    - Conflict avoidance – Avoid conflict to preserve harmony and maintain relationships
    - Passivity - opposite of confrontation – give up what you want and agree to the other person’s interests.
  - These four strategies would not result in sustainable positive outcomes.
- We should not see conflict as something that produces winners and losers but as an opportunity to connect, learn and generate mutual gains. This requires a willingness to cultivate an open mind, attentively listen to the other person and empathise with the individual.
- We often disagree with someone due to three main reasons
  - We assume that our perception of reality and perspective is correct – hence I am right, you are wrong
  - We are attached to our ideas and opinions – that we often identify with them – hence any disagreement is deemed as a personal attack.
  - We find it hard to admit we are wrong – as we are driven by a desire to be right
- Sometimes disputes aren’t visible but are hidden underneath a blanket of artificial harmony. People often opt for artificial harmony assuming the problem is addressed but this could flare up at a later point of time. Some of the reasons for this behaviour are
  - Fear of confrontation – concerned that this could cause more harm by addressing the issue now and feeling that eventually it would go away
  - Wrong priorities – Belief that addressing a conflict is not a priority and attend to other more pressing matters
  - Work culture – some organizations see conflict as a necessity for collaboration, innovation – whereas other regard it as undesirable or unacceptable.
  - Lack of trust – people hold back their opinions and concerns and complain behind their backs
- Resolve conflict through Non Violent Communication (NVC) - Framework developed by Marshall Rosenberg to resolves conflict – suggests that true conflict resolution is possible when we are willing to move beyond blame and ill will and have compassion for the other person and ourselves – hence also called “Compassionate communication”
- NVC framework encourages us to establish a dialogue with the other person, share other person’s perspectives, explore the feelings that are present and connect them to underlying unmet needs. “When I see/hear [observation], I feel [emotion] because I need/value [need] would you be willing to [request]”
- NVC Consists of four components
  - Observations – what did you see and hear? What is the other person’s story? Tell or listen to the story without judgement, blame or criticism.
  - Feelings – how do you feel about it? What emotions is the other individual experiencing?

- Needs – why do you feel the way you do? What underlying needs are not being met? Which unmet needs does the other person have?
- Requests – What specific actions you would like to ask for in order to meet your needs and prevent the conflict from recurring? What actions would help the other individual
- It is important to let go of difficult feelings like anger and ill will to embrace a more open warm-hearted attitude towards the other person
- Conflict resolution is not about winning – but about developing a shared perspective on what happened and re-establishing trust. This requires a willingness to forgive the other person and yourself

### **Decision Making and Negotiation**

- While you usually make simple (BAU) decisions on your own, complex or high impact decisions are best made together with the development team and stakeholders.
- Collaborative decision making helps in arriving at better decisions, stronger alignment and increased motivation among the various parties concerned.
- Successful collaborative decision making requires a lot of preparation and sufficient guidance and involves
  - *Engaging the right people in the right way* – involve the development team, stakeholders, sponsors and other representatives for decisions which have a big impact – such as deciding to pivot or retire a product, developing a roadmap, replacing goals or changing important dates.
  - *Bringing on board a facilitator* – In diverse groups with a profound power distance index, it is beneficial to have a dedicated skilled facilitator who would encourage every one to fully participate and guide them towards the decision making process.
  - *Fostering a collaborative mindset* – this is key in making collaborative decision making and requires members/stakeholders to participate fully, have mutual respect and understanding and have an open mind – so that every one’s perspective matters.
  - *Establishing a set of ground rules* – These are guidelines that help participants to treat each other with respect, that every one is heard and nobody dominates. Examples of ground rules include
    - Always speak from a place of respect for other and assume good intentions on the part of the group members
    - Respect differences of opinion and value the diversity of the group members
    - Listen with an open mind, be receptive and refrain from making premature judgements
    - Speak honestly and openly – stick to observable facts
    - Refrain from judging and labelling people – separate individual and opinion
    - Ask questions when you sense misunderstanding or disagreement
    - Speak up if you have not been participating
    - Make room for others if you have spoken to
    - Do not interrupt others
    - Stay present – do not engage in side conversations or answer messages on your electronic devices.
- There are four common decision rules that facilitate group decisions

- *Unanimity* – every one is required to make the decision – it creates a strong buy in and shared ownership. This is a decision rule that requires the highest level of engagement and collaboration.
- *Consent* – is the absence of objections, when a decision is made when nobody disapproves. Beneficial when you don't have the time for decide by unanimity or a good enough solution is sufficient.
- *Majority* – more than half the people are required to agree with the proposed solution. Recommended when the stakes are not high and when the proposal and its impact are clearly understood.
- *Product person decides after discussion* – Have an open discussion with the Development team, stakeholders and once a shared understanding of different ideas has been established, you make the decision. Useful when you want to make the development team feel valued or can benefit from their knowledge.
- *Product person decides without discussion* – can be used for low impact decisions and you have the necessary expertise to decide without taking into account the views of the development team or the stakeholders.
- *Delegation* – Delegate a decision if others are better qualified to decide or your input is not needed.
- It is important to collect different perspectives and create a shared understanding of people's ideas and needs.
- Sam Kaner's *Collaborative Decision-making process* involves the following steps
  - Gather Diverse perspectives
  - Build Shared Understanding
  - Develop an Inclusive Solution
- *Principled Negotiation Method* by William Ury and Roger Fisher recognizes four aspects for successful negotiation
  - People – separate the people from the problem
  - Interests – instead of arguing over positions, look for shared interests and needs
  - Options – Invent multiple options, looking for mutual gains before deciding what to do
  - Criteria – Use objective criteria or a fair standard to determine outcomes
- The *Behavioural Change Stairway Model* proposes five stages that intend to take the negotiation from listening to influencing the behaviour of the other person
  - Active listening
  - Empathy
  - Rapport
  - Influence
  - Behavioural change
- Four Conversation techniques that are helpful in negotiating are
  - Mirroring and positive reinforcement – repeat the exact same words in a warm and accepting voice
  - Labelling – listen for the other person's emotions and call them out
  - Open ended questions – ask open ended questions to uncover the other person's needs
  - Patience – being patient and take the time to attentively listen to the individual



## Self-Leadership

- Self-Leadership is about developing yourself about becoming a happier individual and a better leader.
- It requires the willingness of the individual to accept one's shortcomings and make the effort to let go of unskilful habits and strengthen the positive qualities.
- With a demanding job and diverse responsibilities and conflicting priorities, it is hard to stay calm and respond with empathy. This is where being mindful and leading with presence offers a different path
- Mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment – to what is happening right now. It helps you more aware of your feelings, thoughts and moods
- Being mindful helps in creating a sense of greater serenity, increased empathy, improved communication and better decision making
- Holding personal retrospectives, writing a journal and meditation are some of the ways mindfulness can be practiced
- Embracing a growth mindset – putting in additional efforts to learn and grow
- Look at failure as part of the learning journey and not something that is bad and should be avoided.
- To take full advantage of a growth mindset, cultivate an open mind, a receptive and curious attitude
- Another way to cultivate a growth mindset is to learn a new skill – draw, paint, sing, play an instrument, take up yoga etc.
- Cultivating self-compassion is important – it involves wanting health and well being for oneself.
- Managing time is key and can be done through the following practices
  - Adopting a sustainable pace
  - Doing one thing at a time
  - Not neglecting the important but less urgent work – Eisenhower Matrix
  - Taking regular breaks

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