

I am NOT the CEO of my Product

By Ivan Chalif

I have read and heard in numerous places that being a Product Manager is like being the CEO of the product. I've even used it to explain what I do to folks who are unfamiliar with the job. It makes for a nice visual and makes Product Managers feel good about themselves and the role that they play in a company. But it's not really true.

Sure, the Product Manager is responsible for the overall success of the product, just like a CEO is responsible for the overall success of a company. And the Product Manager has to juggle priorities and manage expectations, just like a CEO. And Product Managers have to be able to effectively communicate outwardly to customers and pros-

pects and inwardly to Engineering, Sales, etc., just like a CEO. But we are not CEOs, not even of our product(s).

Here's why—

- **I don't control staffing**

Even if I control my own P&L, the staffing I need most is usually in someone else's P&L. Typically, I don't need to hire more Product Managers (although if you know any good platform PM's send me a note). What I need is more developers and QA folks and in a dream world, a UI prototyping team (or at least a UI person dedicated to prototyping and usability issues).

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February 2008 Event Review

The Politics of Agile

With Barbara Nelson, Pragmatic Marketing

By Susan Monroe

In the context of getting a new product to market, mention the word "agile" and you can get the same reaction as saying "sex," "hate," and "racism" in other circumstances. With this provocative opening statement, Barbara Nelson of *Pragmatic Marketing* acknowledged the concerns many product managers have about agile software development environments.

First, Nelson emphasized that agile encompasses a number of methodologies—among them Scrum, Rapid Application Design (RAD), and Extreme Programming. Despite their differences, however, each is characterized by an iterative, collaborative approach to development that produces code in smaller, "less risky bits." And relies on just enough documentation (JED) rather than tomes measured in feet.

Second, Nelson noted that agile has been plagued

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How to Play to Your Strengths

By Kristi Royse

Our strengths are expressed through the activities that we look forward to doing—the activities that leave us feeling fulfilled and empowered. Wouldn't it be great if we got to play to our strengths all of the time? Or even some of the time? If we develop our gifts and learn to leverage our natural skills, we will find ourselves playing to our strengths more often.

Many of my clients come to me in frustration after focusing their work improvement efforts on overcom-

ing weaknesses. This is an ineffective way for driving sustainable personal growth. Gallup Organization researchers, Marcus Buckingham and others have suggested that in order to foster excellence in a person, one must identify and harness an individual's unique strengths. Our strengths create the platform from which we can excel. Unfortunately, most of us have never learned to recognize our own strengths. Sometimes we discount them as unimportant because they are second-nature and come easily to us. Other times, our strengths are the sea in which we swim, and we don't even know they are something of great worth. How often do we really stop and assess our strengths? How often do we acknowledge and claim them? How often do we celebrate them?

Following are five steps to help you tap into the unrecognized and unexplored areas of your strength potential. Armed with a systematic process for gathering and analyzing data about your best self, you can improve your performance at work. After you have mastered these steps and are playing to your own strengths, you will be able to engage your team to do the same for themselves.

The purpose of this process is to assist you in developing a plan for more effective action. It requires commitment, diligence, and follow-through. It may be to your benefit to employ the help of a coach to keep you on track while discovering your strengths through these exercises.

Step One: Ask for Feedback

The first step in uncovering your strengths is to collect feedback from a variety of people inside and outside of work. By gathering input from different sources—family members, past and present colleagues, friends, mentors, coaches, and so on—you can develop a much broader and richer understanding of yourself. Email is an effective way of doing this, not only because it is comfortable and fast, but also because you can cut and paste the responses you receive into one document for easy analysis.

Step Two: Identify Your Own Strengths

Your strengths are the things you like to do consistently and do well. Your strengths show up in the ac-

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tivities that make you feel strong, therefore, the person best qualified to identify them is you. You know which activities draw you back to them time and time again. You know which activities you can't help volunteering for. You know which activities keep your interest and your concentration with little effort. To identify and name your strengths, pay close attention to your work. Include hobbies, volunteer work, and activities you do around the house in your list. As you sort through each activity, note how each one makes you feel. Reflect back to last week and answer the following questions:

- Which specific activities did I find myself looking forward to last week?
- Was there time last week when I was truly in my "zone"? When time flew by.
- What specific activities make me feel strong?
- When I am at my best, I _____.

Composing this takes time and focus, but at the end of this process, you will come away with a rejuvenated image of who you are.

Step Three: Use Performance Assessments

There are numerous personality and work assessment tools available. I use the DiSC assessments because it is an easy to use and inexpensive model for explaining behavior, motivation and communication styles. The assessment testing is done over the internet and is completed in less than 20 minutes. Each report is produced with astounding accuracy and insight. DiSC can help you and your employees:

- Understand your own behavior
- Learn how and when to adapt your behavior
- Improve communication
- Promote appreciation of differences
- Enhance individual and team performance
- Reduce conflict

This is a terrific complement to the first two steps explained above. If possible, work with someone certified in the DiSC assessments tools. She or he will explain the results of the report and help you gain deeper insights about your strengths.

Step Four: Recognize Patterns

Creating a table will help you make sense of all the feedback you have been collecting from the previous three steps. Cluster similar examples to compare responses and identify common themes. For naturally analytical people, this exercise serves both to integrate the feedback and allow for a larger picture of capabilities and strengths to develop. For others, this step sheds more light on the skills one takes for granted.

One of my clients, for example, was a lawyer who negotiated on behalf of non-profit organizations. Throughout her life she had been told she was a good listener, and from the feedback she collected in step one, she noted that the interactive, empathetic, and insightful manner in which she listened made her particularly effective. The feedback along with the strengths she identified in step two encouraged her to take the lead in future negotiations that required delicate and diplomatic communications.

Step Five: Put Your Strengths to Work

No more excuses or procrastination. Now that you know your strengths, it is up to you to put them into play. From this place of power, you can access your strengths and be more focused when the world twists

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and pulls at you. To be able to do this consistently and with ease, you will need to practice putting your strengths to use more and more throughout your daily work life.

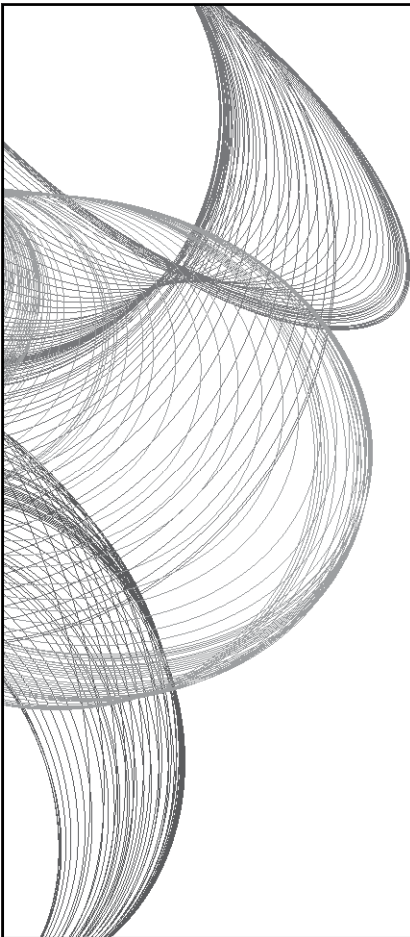
In order to do this, I propose a challenge: Identify two specific actions that you can take that require you to step into the use of your strengths. Devise a plan to add two new activities each week that allow your strengths to flourish. Each time you add two new strength-activities, delete two old activities that diminish your strengths and leave you feeling small. This process will help instill a life long discipline for putting your strengths to work for you. Do this each week, every week, and the changes you want to make in your life will be profound and lasting.

Once you know how to transform your own performance, you can help transform your team, your col-

leagues, your division, or your entire organization. However, as the airlines would say, you need to put on your own oxygen mask before you start trying to help those around you. So, before you hand off this article to your employees, become an expert at putting your own strengths to work. You will know how to take a stand for your strengths and leverage them as never before.☞

Kristi Royse is a nationally recognized speaker, facilitator, management consultant and trainer with over 20 years of experience. You can learn more at www.klrconsulting.com

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January 2008 Event Review

Fostering Grassroots Innovation within Adobe

With Rick Bess, Idea Mentor, New Business Initiatives, Corporate Development, Adobe Systems Inc.

By Susan Monroe

2008 got off to a great start as SVPMA members joined Rick Bess of Adobe Systems at Techmart to learn how this technology powerhouse fosters innovation.

Mr. Bess started his talk by remarking that innovation is either intrinsic to a corporate culture—or it's not. Innovation starts at the top, and wise upper management teams provide employees with the opportunities, permissions, and tools they need to move ahead. At Adobe, the guiding principle is that "everyone can innovate," and the environment is designed to be supportive. Elaborating further, Mr. Bess noted that "intrapreneurs" have natural enemies in most organizations. For example, a company may regard new ideas as endangering its established rhythm of success. Or a proposed product may address a market that's simply too small to meet its needs for revenue growth. And then there are "antibodies," the self-appointed hit men who kill ideas before they ever acquire a base of support.

Adobe ignites the fires of creativity through roles, guidance, and tools that enable innovators to surface and nurture their concepts in a way that increases possibilities for success, or at least for a fair hearing.

Roles

Three key innovation-related roles have emerged at Adobe. The first is Idea Champion. An idea champion can be any full-time employee, regardless of position or title, and there are typically more than one at any given time. An idea champion develops a concept, refines it, and is its "number one biggest believer." Successful idea champions aren't in it for the money. Rather, they're motivated to create solutions to problems. Next, there's the Idea Mentor, the role held by Mr. Bess. Champions bring him their ideas. He offers feedback, direction, and essential resources such as market research and all-important access to senior management. Finally, there are Entrepreneurs in Residence (EIR) who lead approved Seed Projects.

Guidance

After idea champions have learned that it's more important to fall in love with the refinement process than the original idea, they learn how to evangelize. According to Mr. Bess, this is where the really hard work begins. He encourages champions to put on their bulletproof vests and seek out advocates, contrarians, skeptics, and decision makers. In particular, contrari-

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ans add value to the process because they flout conventional wisdom. Skeptics can help idea champions address points they haven't considered. And decision makers select the winning idea. Idea champions need to reach out to decision makers early on.

Tools

Idea champions are not necessarily known for articulateness, and the *Idea Sharing Workshop* helps them evangelize more effectively. At one of these workshops, idea champions "socialize" ideas one-on-one and develop an elevator pitch. The *Core of the Idea* tool enables them to identify and quantify a problem, pinpoint potential customers, clearly describe their idea, and show how it will "fit" at Adobe. From there, idea champions attend Innovation Boot Camp, where they work with innovation veterans to further refine their ideas and acquire the skills training and resources they need. Finally, idea champions present their ideas to a panel of EIRs, a process Mr. Bess likens to "American Idol" crossed with the Eukanuba Dog Show. Winners of this event fast track to an SVP briefing.

Mr. Bess wrapped up his presentation with several important take-aways: Companies with innovative cultures must encourage idea champions by providing the right tools, resources, and initiatives. Winning ideas should always be customer focused, even when they are involved in enabling technology rather than a new product. And companies should celebrate the process of innovation, even when an idea "goes down in flames." ☞

Susan Monroe is principal of Written Right, a writing boutique that specializes in creating content for technology companies. A resident of the "upper" Silicon Valley, AKA San Mateo, she has written about everything from analytic data warehouse solutions to social network databases.



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by poor implementations. It's not uncommon for product managers to feel that their projects have been hijacked by either the flakes in marketing or the geeks in development. Clearly, as in any endeavor where people are attempting to change a process, politics is no stranger.

One key to success is to start with the problem that a product is trying to solve. As Nelson puts it in her article "The Politics of Agile," "To be an effective product manager in an agile environment, become the messenger of the market and keep the team focused on solving problems for markets of customers, problems they are willing to pay to solve." Another important technique is to establish distinct roles and responsibilities. This can be particularly difficult in a small company where each player wears many hats, but, at a minimum, people need to be clear about when they're crossing lines.

Drawing on more than 21 years as a market-driven product evangelist, in the software industry, Nelson provided the SVPMA audience with agile-friendly rules drawn primarily from the left hand, or strategy, side of the Pragmatic Marketing Framework.

- **Schedule "product management day."** – This is when product managers turn off their cell phones, catch up on e-mail, and do the strategic work involved in creating a product. A dedicated product management day can have a tremendous positive impact on ultimate market acceptance.
- **Earn credibility by becoming the market expert.** – Realize that you're addressing "markets" of customers, so reach out to the quiet ones you may never hear from, as well as the squeaky wheels. Get out of the office and visit them.
- **Find the truly compelling problems.** – Stay out of the weeds of the esoterica and zero in on those problems your markets want to see addressed.
- **Articulate the product vision.** – Listen to sales, marketing, customers, and company execs. Create a single, aligned view of the product. Without a coherent vision, the development team won't get there.
- **Stay ahead.** – Keep your backlog up to date, which enables you to stay ahead of the team. Maintain a prioritized list of market problems and focus on them.
- **Protect the team.** – You're a buffer between the developers and sales, who can't resist dropping "Junior Mints" into the works. (Remember that classic Seinfeld episode?) Everyone will be protected by an orderly, iterative process.
- **Listen more than you talk.** – You learn a lot by listening to customers and developers. Ask questions and echo back what you hear.
- **Be the voice of reason.** – Continue to emphasize what the team is building and for whom. Don't dive into the sea of emotion. Earn the right to set the priorities, based on your expert knowledge.

Wrapping up her presentation, Nelson commented that, regardless of the development methodology a company adopts, products are built by friends who are intent on creating what people will buy. To read Barbara's recent article on the politics of agile, please see <http://www.pragmaticmarketing.com/publications/topics/08/the-politics-of-agile>. ☘

Susan Monroe is principal of Written Right, a writing boutique that specializes in creating content for technology companies. A resident of the "upper" Silicon Valley, AKA San Mateo and a veteran of marcom and PR agencies, she knows the value of agility.

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- **I don't control strategy**

I control strategy at a micro level, which is to say that I can prioritize features and set the release calendar, but I don't set the strategy for the company at the macro level and that affects what resources are afforded to me and my product(s). No matter how beautiful (from a content perspective) my MRDs are, without the necessary focus and resources at the corporate level, I am not likely to be able to launch or manage a successful product.

- **I am not invincible**

What I mean is that my role within the company is much more transient than that of a CEO. That's not to say that a CEO couldn't lose their job, (look at companies like Home Depot, Dell, HP, Merrill Lynch, and Citi-Group for some high profile examples) but in the big picture, any number of people above me in the organizational food chain could send me on my merry way for a variety of reasons: corporate downsizing, personality conflict, change in company strategy, discontinued product, and/or performance.

What we Product Managers are really like is the Chief Operating Officer or COO. If you take a look at the difference between functional responsibilities of the CEO and COO, you can see what I mean.

CEO (paraphrased from Wikipedia)

The CEO is the highest-ranking corporate officer, administrator, corporate administrator, executive, or executive officer in charge of total management of a corporation, company, organization, or agency.

COO (paraphrased from Wikipedia)

The focus of the COO is on strategic, tactical, and short-term Operational Management, which means he or she is responsible for the development, design, operation, and improvement of the systems that create and deliver the firm's products/services.

The CEO role is much more administrative in nature, focusing on the process of running the business while the COO is more involved in the day-to-day. The COO is a roll-your-sleeves-up and get-your-hands-dirty function, which is more aligned with the type of activities that a Product Manager is tasked with handling.

I'm OK with that. I have always fancied myself as someone who could easily transition between process and execution (a recent episode where I was called by my CEO into the exec team meeting to tackle some product release "challenges" confirms that, at least in my own mind). I know that I am more adept at the execution side than the process, but it's important to recognize that there are times when a Product Manager has to do both.

There, I've said it. I am NOT the CEO of my product. Although truth be told, I'll probably still describe being a Product Manager as being "like the CEO of my product" because people who don't know what a Product Manager is are just as likely to not know what a COO is either. ☘

Ivan Chalif is a Senior Product Manager at Strong-Mail Systems. He has over 10 years experience in Product Management and Marketing at companies like ValueClick, the Gale Group and Axiom Digital. He publishes articles about Product Management issues on his blog, The Productologist and fancies himself quite the soccer player. He can be reached at ivan@theproductologist.com.



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