

Good Group Product Manager / Dead Group Product Manager

By Ben Horowitz and David Weiden

"Gentlemen, we're going to have a sales contest. First prize is a new car. Second prize is a knife set. Third prize is you're fired." - *From the movie Glengary Glenross*

"There are no bad group product managers, just group product managers that make bad decisions and then get fired." - *Ben Horowitz*

Group Product Manager is the most important non-executive position in a software company. In fact, it is more important and has higher impact on the company than many executive posts. A failed product can sink the company. A successful product can literally redefine the course of the business. Nobody is more responsible or more accountable for a product than the Group Product Manager. As a result, the job is characterized by massive success, massive failure, and little in between. Most GPMs are either promoted or end up leaving the company or being assigned to less hazardous duty within a short period of time.

Everyone wants to be a Good Group Product Manager, but relatively few succeed. What are the keys to success? What are the keys to failure? Read on...

Good PM / Bad PM Review

Being a good PM is hard. Most PMs don't do it and this hurts their effectiveness dramatically. A good GPM is constantly measuring herself and her group against the basic principles of being a successful PM. They are constantly acting to improve behavior to be better in line with these principles. These principles are described in the document *Good Product Manager / Bad Product Manager*.

- Review of Good PM / Bad PM principles:
 - Good: Takes full responsibility for the product. Bad: Excuses.
 - Good: Manage the product team. Bad: Run around chasing loose ends.
 - Good: Prioritized, comprehensive, up to date PRDs. Bad: Informal, inconsistent or outdated communication
 - Good: Have clear product advantages articulated in excellent written collateral. Bad: Unclear advantages.
 - Good: Focus on revenue and customers. Bad: Focus on features and competitors.
 - Good: Value discipline (status reports on time). Bad: Excuses.
- Takeaways:

- Good GPM: Knows the Good PM / Bad PM principles cold and constantly strives to execute them
- Dead GPM: Forgets about the basics

GPM vs. Sr. PM role

You've just been promoted to Group Product Manager, what are you going to do now? Most people think: "I got promoted, because I did a good job as a product manager. Therefore, I should keep doing what I'm doing, but maybe work a little harder." That's a bad, bad, thought. *You got promoted because you were a good Product Manager, but Group Product Manager is a different job.* A Product Manager follows the general product strategy and implements the optimal marketing and product plan within the context of that strategy. The Group Product Manager is responsible for the product strategy. Failed product strategy = fired GPM.

When people get promoted to Group Product Manager, they often think: "I'm a Group Product Manager. Oh goodie, goodie, I get to learn how to manage people. I'm going to read lots of management books that teach me how to delegate tasks and let my people do the work and I'm going to focus exclusively on making them successful." While this is a good strategy for many management positions, it can get the Group Product Manager fired. Yes your people should do the interesting work. Yes you should focus on enabling them. No you shouldn't write datasheets yourself. However, you cannot delegate the success of the product. Because the timing of a product cycle is rigid and will not wait for your people to develop, you must step in when necessary and guarantee that your product plans and execution will win. You must be current on the market, the customers, the technology, and the projects, because without that knowledge you cannot guarantee a winning product strategy. Even though you will delegate much of the work, your hands will remain dirty. You are a manager, but you are also a full-fledged product person.

Another mistake GPMs make is to think that there's a difference between incomplete and failure. When engineering managers or product managers fail to do complete tasks fully or on time, they often get an incomplete grade. When Group Product Managers fail to deliver a return on the investment in the relevant time frame, they get fired. There is no difference between incomplete and failure. That does not mean that GPMs should work 100 hours a week; that does mean that Group Product Managers must be absolutely ruthless about prioritizing. They must also be very accurate when prioritizing. "We didn't have enough resources" is a sorry excuse. The GPM must ensure that the product will succeed regardless of the constraints. Incomplete and \$.50 will get you a cup of coffee.

- *Takeaways:*
 - Good GPM: Owns the overall product strategy and success
 - Dead GPM: Overdelegates, doesn't think broadly enough, or fails to deliver

Appropriate Level of Paranoia

"The quality of your life is determined by the quality of the questions you ask." - *Tony Robbins*

"I don't believe in all that self-help stuff, but Tony has a good point with that question thing." - *Felicia Horowitz*

"There are no stupid questions, only stupid people." - *Marc Andreessen*

"Checking small things achieves two purposes. It reveals to the commander the real state of readiness in contrast to a surface appearance of readiness. And a general's attention to detail lets the soldier far down the chain know that his link is as vital as the one that precedes or follows." - *Colin Powell*

Good GPMs are paranoid. Good GPMs are aware of and pay a lot attention to the greatest risks and areas that are weakest, changing or uncertain. Good GPMs are especially paranoid about areas they don't understand. Dead GPMs pay more attention to areas they like or are familiar with. Consequently, to a large extent, being a good Group Product Manager means asking and relentlessly answering high quality questions. Below are some examples of good Group Product Manager questions:

- Am I deploying resources optimally?
- Will this product succeed against the competition? Not today's competition, but the competition that will be in market when we ship?
- Do I know customers who will buy? Not what I think I'm going to build, but what I'm really going to build?
- Am I truly differentiated? Can I explain the differentiation to John Paul in 2 minutes? Can I explain it to Jeff Liedel (smart customer) in 60 seconds? Can I explain it to Nathan Golan (smart salesperson) in 20 seconds?
- Will it really work? Does Leif (smart IS person) think it will work?
- Are the products strengths consistent with what's important to customers? Are we marketing these strengths aggressively as humanly possible?
- Is the new product worth money? How much money? Why? Can customers get it cheaper elsewhere? Is it worth upgrading and paying money? How expensive will it be to upgrade?
- What stuff do my customers already have? Will the stuff I'm selling work well with the stuff they have? Have I invested enough in making it work in the target customer's environment?
- Do I understand what my engineering team thinks is good about the product? Is it consistent with my own view? If not, are they right or wrong? If they're wrong, what's my plan to refocus them?
- Are my people happy? Are they learning new things? If I ask them if they are learning new things, what will they say? When was the last time I asked them?
- Takeaways:
 - Good GPM: Asks questions, listens and learns -- about everything -- necessary to meet their responsibilities
 - Dead GPM: Ignores important areas, assumes the best, fails to ask tough questions

Setting clear objectives and giving clear feedback

"The worst thing is for subordinates to labor in ignorance in order to conceal their confusion and wind up doing the wrong thing." - *Colin Powell*

Clarity is a large component of success for the GPM as a manager of other PMs. Most PMs are smart and motivated but regularly do the wrong things. In many cases, the obstacle to improving the PMs behavior that what they are supposed to do or achieve is not clear. Good GPMs make sure their PMs understand what they need to do to excel. Dead GPMs don't communicate this clearly, either because they haven't really thought it through themselves, or because they fail to make it clear and explicit to the PM.

Clarity is especially important for complex tasks or for development areas that are very counterintuitive for the PM. The old management axiom of "catching people doing things right" or, in some cases, doing things wrong, can be valuable. Giving quick, specific feedback is very helpful. Again, much of the management challenge with a smart, motivated employee is making it *clear* what they are supposed to do.

- *Takeaways:*
 - Good GPM: PMs and the GPMs have a CLEAR understanding of what they need to do to excel
 - Dead GPM: Subordinates and GPMs have murky or different understandings of what is needed to excel

Defining a good PM job

Managing products is extremely complex and detailed work. Therefore product managers must be highly motivated and extremely focused. Clear opportunities for success and failure are essential. A good measure for a PM job is if the GPM would be excited to do it themselves.

An easy mistake for Group Product Manager's to make is that they can divvy up jobs anyway they wish because ultimately as owners of the strategy they will tie it all together. For example, a Group Product Manager might define the following jobs for her direct reports:

Job #1: Product manager in charge of widget Q , competitive stuff, and external dependencies

Job #2: Product manager in charge manageability and user friendliness

Job #3: Product Manager in charge of connectivity goo and some apis

Job definitions like those above can change on the whim of the manager and completely lack cohesion. All product management jobs must be cohesive, highly visible, and create great opportunity. In general, you should not define product management jobs that don't have corresponding engineering teams (including an engineering manager) or that have no need to talk to the press.

The product managers must be the stars. If the GPM is the star, the product managers have lame jobs, won't be motivated, and the star GPM will eventually be fired.

- *Takeaways*
 - Good PM: Creates exciting jobs with clear opportunities for visible success and failure
 - Dead PM: Creates mushy jobs that aren't visible

Working with executives

Interactions with executives are very important for the Group Product Manager. The executive would like to have confidence in the GPM, but they start out uncertain or presuming the worst. A good GPM will think through an executives concerns and address most of them proactively. A Good GPM knows when to defend his position and when to accept feedback and move on.

Dead GPMs don't think through issues in advance and then find the executives managing the product instead of themselves. Executives tend to be smart, experienced, and articulate -- that's why they are executives. As result, it's easy to assume that they have superior judgment and should set the strategic direction for every product in the line. This is a bad assumption. Executives are excellent at verifying that a strategy is sound or suggesting interesting ideas, but terrible at setting strategy for a particular product. Executives lack the deep knowledge of the team, technology, competition, market, and customer base that is necessary to chart a successful product course.

So while it may seem like the strategy is owned by the executives, in a successful project the strategy is owned by the Group Product Manager. Executives also lack the time and patience to follow through on any of their ideas. For example, a Group Product Manager of a failed project lamented: "at executive review, we were told by the Sr. VP to drop ___ as a feature and focus on other aspects. We executed on that plan. ___ later became and issue, but he never told us to change our strategy. I don't understand why we're considered failures." The fact is the project failed, because the executive didn't really have any idea what the right direction should be; he just knew that the direction which was presented did not make sense to him at the time.

Beware, because executives often accidentally give product teams specific strategy instructions when they only mean suggest alternatives to be investigated. Therefore, good Group Product Managers follow the axiom: *Executives can verify that a plan is good, but cannot dictate a good plan.* And the corollary: *Group Product Managers that follow executive instruction blindly get fired.*

- *Takeaways:*
 - Good GPM: You set and maintain the strategy, executives provide input and leverage
 - Dead GPM: Rely on direction from executives

Fitting in with the organization

For a product to be successful, different parts of the company will need to understand and help drive the product strategy and marketing plans. PMs are not expected to accomplish all of that on their own. Good GPMs know when greater organizational buy-in is needed and either do achieve it themselves or get help. Dead GPMs end up with their product launch ruined because they didn't run it by the PR department or executives in advance.

- *Takeaways:*
 - Good GPM: Knows when and how to get organizational buyoff on product strategy and marketing plans
 - Dead GPM: Inadequate knowledge and skill navigating the organization

You are now ready to be a Group Product Manager. May the force be with you.