# One Knight in Product - E142 - John Cutler

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## SPEAKERS

John Cutler, Jason Knight

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**Jason Knight** 00:00

Hello and welcome to the show and an episode where we ask ourselves, are we overthinking this product management thing? We think in enough, whilst you're thinking about that, why not head over to one night in product.com, where you can find thinkers great and small, and hear what they think about building products, or the companies and teams that build them. You can also find a podcast on all your favourite podcast apps, so make sure you subscribe now, whilst it's top of mind. So yeah, if you want to hear about surviving the feature factory by applying product thinking to product thinking, another antidote to the constant stream of oversimplified bubble gum product advice, keep listening to one that's important.

**Jason Knight** 00:47

So my guest tonight is John Cutler. John's a former Nickelodeon producer, touring musician and Egyptian rave promoter who's now made it to the top of the pyramid of product management as one of the most distinguished product voices on social media, as well as the author of his own newsletter, that beautiful mess, something that he's been trying to clean up for at least 16 years. John's currently donning his rubber gloves and apron as a product evangelist and coach at amplitude. And Rumour has it that some have dubbed him the premium version of minder products, James Mays. Hi, John. How are you tonight?

**John Cutler** 01:16

I'm gobsmacked introduction. I'm doing well. I'm doing great. Hello from Santa Barbara.

**Jason Knight** 01:24

Hello, Santa Barbara. And just for the record, it's me that says that you're the premium version of James Mays.

**John Cutler** 01:30

One person saying that so that's good.

**Jason Knight** 01:34

Right. So we've got a lot to talk about tonight. But let's start with you. So just what does a product evangelist at amplitude do day to day?

**John Cutler** 01:42

I do a lot of product therapy sessions with product leaders. No, I don't I actually do. But that's not the bulk of the time I spend. I write news, like blasts I write are different playbooks. I do workshops for product teams all around the world. That's been very exciting. I write blog posts, and they do the product therapy sessions, which I just spoke about, which are a lot of fun. Generally, the idea with the product evangelist in many companies is that you have to find this fine line between talking about the product and then talking about the broader space and the broader landscape. Yep. And I think sometimes some developer evangelists, they're so tied to a particular technology. So they will spend most of the day talking about that technology, because most of the people want to know about that technology. Yeah, a product evangelist at some place, like amplitude, our products, amazing. And I kind of joke that salespeople don't like it, but I sort of say the product sells itself, I don't mean that there's more to sell. That allows me to spend a lot of my time talking about the broader landscape of product, prioritisation and strategy and how to use data in ethical ways, and how in effective ways. So yeah, that's kind of the mix of my role, day to day is workshops, all this type of content stuff, meeting with people coaching, and then sort of threading the needle between our product and the broader world of product.

**Jason Knight** 03:11

It's interesting, actually, because I was at product called the other day in London and amplitude. I think one of the sponsors, they were that they had a stand in the foyer a, there was a bunch of other product analytic tools. And I basically tried to put the cat amongst the pigeons with just about any product analytics person that spoke to me by basically saying that I could see no difference between any of their products. And that definitely got a few. I got a few reactions, but you know,

**John Cutler** 03:35

ouch. Well, realistically, yeah, not to go too deep into the product stuff. A lot of the products are kind of similar. Yeah. And I think that it's, this is what I remind people to when you're buying some kind of SaaS product, I think the company is the product. Yeah. So I see myself actually as part of our product. And that's why I'm actually okay being a product evangelist for a company like amplitude, because I can put my product chops to use for doing that. So all the implementation teams and the customer success teams and the product evangelists that work

there, and the product managers and everyone else, HR, the whole thing, or part of what you're buying into So yeah, that's what I think we're really good at it. But I think you're right to some degree.

**Jason Knight** 04:24

Oh, don't tell the salespeople there'll be they'll be sending you angry emails, but ya know, I think it's fair to say, I mean, we use amplitude at work, absolutely fine product. I've also used other products, and they will do a good job as well. So I'll just have to emphasise that I'm not being sponsored by anyone. So I'm going to be as neutral as neutral as Switzerland in this case. But what the amplitude get out of this, I mean, obviously you're a strong voice in the community, you do a lot of coaching and you do a lot of advocacy work, but do they get like sales out of you? Do they get any kind of upside out of this or are you ready there as a kind of community and awareness build For people that maybe want to use a platform like those, but don't have to if they don't want to.

**John Cutler** 05:05

Yeah, I say this with a lot of solidarity with all the community folks and people who do the content writers and other things. I absolutely think that there's a high return on investment for amplitude to be involved with John Cutler. That's why I'm a full time employee there. What I would say is a lot of these things are not as directly connectable in some ways. And community teams have this a lot to, you know, some of the best community teams in the world struggle to find those metrics that connect their work. But if you ask any brand person, if you ask anyone, what's the power of a community? They'll absolutely agree that there's a power in the community. So do I have problems connecting, you know, the ROI, my day to day activities? Sometimes, you know, when 3000 people show up at a webinar, it's pretty clear that those people have given their emails and you know, that's a lead. And so there's some kind of system for that. Yeah, I would say that, you know, some of this is a lot mushir in terms of the connection with value. Some people that knew I joined amplitude four years ago, now, four years later, I had an opportunity to buy a product at their company. And I just had happened to put it top of mind for them. So Oh, there you go. You know, it's kind of it's like to all the friends in the community things, we have this discussion about ROI all the time, I definitely think it's worth it. You just have to work a little bit more connecting the two.

**Jason Knight** 06:31

Yeah, it's interesting. It's something that I've reflected on a little bit as well, just the sometimes quite difficult nature of trying to connect ROI. I mean, I work in the mental health space at the moment. And obviously, there's a lot of benefits to doing that, and providing that kind of content and that kind of product to people. But at the same time, it's very difficult sometimes to try and frame that in a way that, for example, CFOs are really interested in because of course, it's a bit sort of fluffy, in financial terms, at least. So it's definitely an interesting one. Yeah, but your evangelism work, as you've touched on, obviously, extends to Twitter, LinkedIn, all the socials, you've got a bunch of free templates in Miro, which obviously, everyone should

go and have a look at. You've got your newsletter, but there are loads of newsletters out there these days. So if I allow you a brief moment of self promotion, why should people subscribe to your newsletter? Or at the very least follow you on Twitter?

John Cutler  07:24

They probably shouldn't know I'm, so here's my general. About six years ago, I was working at a company called Pendo. Oh, yeah. And I started to write. And since then, I've written maybe seven or 800, blog posts, it's nearing, it's gonna get up around 1000, you know, in the next year, or something? Oh, wow. And this is the advice I give to people about writing is that you sort of have two tracks in the beginning, either fully commit to wanting to be a much followed much, you know, you want to turn this into business, you have very specific goals around being a thought leader or whatever. And I didn't take that track, I took the track about writing about the mess that I like to think about. Yeah, so I like to think about organisational dynamics, I like to think about challenging status quo ideas. Like I like the idea of connecting with someone who's trying to do that internally in their company as well. Yeah. And frankly, I never liked the people who would give this sort of bubblegum advice. And everyone would agree. And I think there's an absolute spot for that, especially if you're trying to learn in your product career, and you're trying to build those things. So you can imagine even the newsletter I have right now is just a continuation of that journey in 2020, I decided to tone down my writing and only write once a week, which I mostly keep to accept some weeks, I write two or three posts, still. And so that is what the beautiful mess is about is these sort of oddball ideas about organisational design and strategy and sprinkled in with some actionable frameworks. But every actionable framework I have adds a layer of complexity that gets your mind going on it. I very rarely say, you know, just fill in these blanks, I'll always say well fill in these blanks than ask these six questions, for example. Yeah, so that's the general thought behind the newsletter, not something that I put together as this, you know, consolidated plan for world Product Domination or anything, it just sort of emerged over time to do this thing. So

Jason Knight  09:32

but you describe product management via the newsletter name as the beautiful mess as we just touched on as well. But on the other hand, there are plenty of Twitter thread bows out there at the moment where they're perfectly formatted to Anjanette your character posts laying down the truth bombs, almost looking like somehow they're just copying it from a template somehow, but you know, but let's trust that they're not on that they're writing is all by hand and that they're doing all from their own experience with quill. Quill. Yeah with a quill, but they make Product Management looks so simple. So when people like you and me just over complicating this stuff,

John Cutler  10:05

I think we are tuned to Grigory. And this is something I've realised in the last couple of months that you have to think about the audiences just think about it as a product and think about the audiences of people and what they're trying to get done at that particular point. And I think it's legitimately true that there's a bunch of people trying to get a job as a product manager, one. And there's also a bunch of people who have to walk into a meeting and put together a

roadmap. That's their goal. They want to write a roadmap. And there's also frankly, a lot of more senior people who primarily wants to get ahead in their career. They want to take it to that next level to do things. So I think things and this is why I have a lot of respect for folks like Lenny, or other people were doing these things that also by creating a community there, too, they've managed to tap into very strong needs that people want to achieve. Now, I would say he's incredibly good at this. I don't think that's who you're referring to when you talk about people throwing out these? No, no, no, no, I don't know. I don't want the Eye of Sauron descending upon. But what I would say is, I think that there is a need for a lot of this. And I think that there's a lot of gatekeeping in product. Yep. And so I think that any effort to kind of simplify it and make it more approachable is definitely good. I think that the reverse happens with some of these very, like sanguine bubblegum takes because it actually is a weird form of gatekeeping. So ironically, in an effort to try to make it approachable, it actually makes it feel not approachable, as do that. But I think there is a strong need to open up the covers around product management, take away the mystery of it, and make it seem more approachable for people who are doing it. I think different content, people do that, well, to varying degrees. But I think the intent is, is well there. But I think that for me personally, even recently, it's been about discovering the who I really want to connect with and who I want to help. And so maybe I want to help this internal change agent trying to tweak their org, or I'm trying to help like that thoughtful Systems Thinking leader who doesn't really want to take the bubble gum advice. So I think it's all about kind of its like product, it's about finding your niche. But I do think we need to demystify product for people.

### Jason Knight  12:16

Now I agree. But would you say you still have product market fit for your content? Or do you think that everyone's leaving you in droves for these thoughtful tweet, thread people?

### John Cutler  12:27

Oh, well, I mean, they are then they can they can try both? I mean, I'm not so sad about that particular thing. But that's an interesting question. I think I play this as a long game, too. I mean, people who follow I mean, I've remembered over these last five years, people who would be just crazy about producing content for a year or so and then just sort of dropped out. And they decided to do a cohort course and make millions of dollars and never touched Twitter. Second, and some people just like to write books, and like, let people worship them to so like, there's that kind of niche of people to do things. And so I think it's, we all go in and out of product market fit, frankly, and we go out of product market fit with ourselves. There's some times where I'm like, Oh, my God, am I just this weird talking head? parody of myself? I mean, it's ridiculous. I couldn't have said a more John thing ever. I mean, that's kind of like it's, it's like, I mean, Woody Allen, without all the bad stuff that Woody Allen did. It's like sometimes like a Woody Allen skit, you know, for me about thinking about it. And so sometimes we go out of fit with our own needs as people who share with the community. So that's kind of my thoughts on that.

### Jason Knight  13:36

But if you ever considered just starting smashing out listicles, or maybe even turning on your super Follow button,

**John Cutler** 13:41

I don't know what super follow is I, I'm of the belief, you can only fit so much in your head. And so someone will say, Well, have you done this like cohort course or I took this course about how to write the best thread on Twitter, you should take it to and I can't just, I can't fit it in my head. I've got a four year old. I have a pretty demanding job. That's the thing about being a full time person versus these people who are dedicating all their time to this, or they're in a really cushy job and pretty much put all their time into this. I can only fit so much in my head. I don't really know how super follow works. I do sometimes get tempted that there is a time in the morning Sunday in the United States. There's a Magic Hour between about 6am to 9am in the morning, which I call the like the X hour of the world, the angst hours of the world. And sometimes I am tempted between that timeframe to publish a certain type of list. Just to prove I've got it still I just want to make sure that I'm still like can I still drop the Sunday morning? Hanksville thing that gets people angsty because Sunday people have a drink in their hand in Europe or coffee in their hand in the United States. It's like you hit them at just the right spot before they're going back to work on a Monday. Monday there's going to be too bothered to pay any attention but Sunday's sometimes I do get tempted to just prove I still got it. We'd like a good thread to do it.

**Jason Knight** 15:03

I will keep my eyes open. But as an evangelist, you're speaking to a lot of teams. Yeah. Now there's a lot of talk about good PMS and bad PMS and good teams and bad teams and good companies and bad companies, often from these Affer mentioned thread people. But if I were to ask you to put your finger in the air, how many companies you talk to? Do you think of working in a, quote unquote, ideal way?

**John Cutler** 15:27

Hmm. Awesome question? Well, it depends, of course, it depends. guy couldn't say it any other way. I would add this, there are some companies that are highly effective, that are an absolute shit show to go and work at. And there are some companies that are not the best product organisations, but are really healthy, have a bunch of good people around people who mean well. And so I will give you an example. There's companies that are trying to digitally transform that, you know, ounce for ounce, or whatever kilo kilo or stone for stone or whatever. If you were to think about these people, are they really good leaders? The answer is yes. They're absolutely thoughtful, skilled leaders in the room. Yep. Is the company not trying to dig out from a couple decades of working in a different way? The company is absolutely trying to do that. Can they do all these fancy ways of working? No, right. But I'll tell you the most thoughtful change agents and the people, the most skilled leaders often work at those companies. They just don't happen to have this like super savviness to do that. So it's a really hard question to answer because it's about health, it's about psychological safety. And then there's this sort of like, are they doing the practices that you would expect to work and I'll give you another example. A lot of the manga or Fang or whatever they call those companies. Now, the the whatever's some of those people are the most narrow, focused life experience lacking mono culture embracing people in the world. And I say that with love, they've just been in these

certain environments. And you ask like, Well, how do you work? Well, you just, it's, they were just incompetent. We just fired them or like, do you look at the data, Wolf, of course, we look at the data because we need to get our OPR. Like, what's wrong with the company? Well, obviously, it's the leader that it's the problem, and then we're gonna fix it. So they have this certain view on the world. And so could we argue if we looked at the practices that they're doing all these advanced things? Yes. With those same practices, would those same leaders even be able to successfully go and turn around a multinational powerful brand, like a Lego or IKEA or someplace like that? No. You know why? Because they would walk in, they be impatient. They haven't really necessarily built all their leadership flexibility yet. Yep. Or whatever. This is a really hard question to answer, because it's about health and safety and the value we put on adopting certain practices.

**Jason Knight** 17:57

Yeah, that's funny. I remember putting up a Twitter poll a while back about like, just imagine that the pm for the Facebook Like button came and worked at your organisation, like, would they have any idea what to do? Would they just fall at the first would they be the instant VP of product? And I think there was a real variety of opinions. But I remember a story that I heard once from a friend who said that they were looking to hire a product leader, they interviewed someone from Amazon. And they basically have not been Amazon themselves were like, well, you know, well, what if we weren't doing things the way that Amazon did? And the product leader was like, Well, I'd make it like Amazon did it's like, Well, okay, well, you might have a little bit of work to do that to try and bring some of your undoubted skill set to a company that is a million miles away. Yep. And obviously, that person also wasn't at Amazon, when Amazon was the size of this company. So it does feel really, I think, I agree a lot with what you say about this idea of, of narrowness and just completely being closed in and in a bubble. Yep. But you describe yourself and you did earlier, as well as a systems thinker. Now, I'll say, I've read thinking in systems before, there's quite a tough book. But I know all about my stocks and flows. And I like to think I've got a good overview and try and zoom out as much as possible. But in the context of product management, how would you describe systems thinking in your context, and why is it helpful for product managers?

**John Cutler** 19:20

Yeah, this is super important, because too many people systems thinking, they actually reflected to just technical systems, you know, so if you mentioned systems thinking, and even among people who build or architect systems, they'll say, Well, I can, you know, I think about systems that way. The way that I view systems thinking, is about understanding that some of the root definitions I use are situations where there's no clear root cause or cause, you know, you can you can imagine that you're seeing cause and effect, but it's just the loosest interpretation of that. So you can see this reflected in a lot of the drawings that I have, it's a lot of loops. and it's a lot of self reinforcing loops. And it's a lot of things where just because you fixed one part or one little node in the diagram does not mean you're going to fix the other things. Yep. So with that broad definition in mind yet, obviously, there's books and stuff, you can read about systems thinking, I think that what it relates to product is a great example is the ability to at least take a stab, oh, good, you've got the book, that's awesome. It's to take a stab at thinking about a problem that you're trying to solve, as, instead of maybe like a linear flow, thinking about it as a number of self reinforcing loops. So you could think about, you

know, be easy to think of a flat funnel into your product. And you think, Well, of course, people just follow the funnel down the line. So one version of systems thinking would be like, well, there's actually a couple of interlocking loops. And there's the loop of where they're deciding whether your product is worthwhile, and then deciding whether they actually want it or their teammates want it. So I think that that's one sort of area, one type of definition for it. I think that the other some of the more sort of complex aspects of it when you get into complex adaptive systems and things are really this ability to understand that you are part of the system itself. So the idea that you're this sort of ability to step back and view these things. And I think that that's important, if you're a product manager, attempting to nudge your org in the right direction. There's a very mechanistic way to think of that, where it's like, Well, the problem is that leader sucks, and I know what to do. And therefore to 10x them, I'm going to do this thread, and then I'm going to manage them to them. And I'm going to make them like disappear, like Wizard of Oz, or something like that, like the wild Witch of the West. And so a systems thinking view that would be more like, well, I'm part of the system to, you know, I kind of I'm having an impact on this situation. Other people are having an impact a situation, what are sort of this multi layered thinking, what what is that leader trying to do? What needs are they trying to fill? What are they kind of optimising for? So without getting deep into systems thinking? Because it's such a big, messy word, I think it's, it's kind of like the ability, it's another way to unravel these complex things that you're looking at.

Jason Knight  22:10

Yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense. And one thing that resonates for me from that is this idea that it's not just about you and your needs. And it's not even that your needs are the best. It's that everyone has their own needs and their own goals that they're trying to achieve. And ultimately, they In theory, it should all led up to the success of the company, right? But they're going to interact with each other in really different and interesting ways, which I think is obviously fascinating and complicated. Although, actually, as you were talking about that, for some reason, my mind drifted slightly to this idea of, I think it was a YouTube video, what's the other day about how, if we're going to get all technical, that basically free will doesn't exist in a deterministic universe, which means that basically, all of our prioritisation decisions have been made for us, right? So we should just sort of strap in?

John Cutler  22:53

Oh, well, yeah. And I think one, just add one thing, I think it also brings up the idea of what boundary you're looking at the thing. So a lot of product managers are kind of looking at their particular part of the product and suitability to go up and down the stack of systems. And think about that. So a great example of this is most companies exist in an ecosystem of other companies. Yep. And some of those companies compete. But frankly, many of those companies are riding the same wave. And frankly, many of them are trying to tap into the same resource that exists for funding that particular industry. So it's very common as a product manager, you think, well, that company is my competitor. But if you take step back and look at the broader system, you'd say, well, there's a bunch of mental health type products that are riding this particular wave of wellness, and there's this source of money to be able to do. And we've all kind of got some timeframe to work in here. So I think it's, it's meaningful for product when you think about the resolution that you're looking at the problem and the ability to kind of go up and down the stack. And we typically think about those things is like, I really do like this idea of

the opportunity solution tree as a teaching tool that Theresa Torres has, I think it's great. But I think very rarely are things as linear and tree like as that most often things are much, much more like loop and network like so I don't know if that helps people give an impression of the system's thinking stuff.

**Jason Knight** 24:13

No, I mean, it helps me so hopefully, they'll help some people. But I guess back to that engagement and the ability to connect with people do I mean, you've just spoken basically about some fairly complicated topics or concepts, at least on a high level, like you've obviously not gone deep, but it's still, that's a weighty subject that we could probably do a very long podcast episode on. Do you worry that being thoughtful and somewhat esoteric like that makes it a little bit more or seem a little bit more theoretical or blue sky or impractical for some of the people like you touched on earlier, the people that just want a new way to prioritise the roadmap, for example?

**John Cutler** 24:51

Absolutely. And so something that I've come to grips with even in the last year is that if you're a deep thinker, type It's sort of on you to realise that you have the maths and the thinking you need to do and then just take a product perspective of it. Some people will have different want different views into what you know, to take your kind of database modelling thing, right, like, you've got the underlying data and you have views of that particular data. So one way to think about it is that just because you delve down in the depths of these ideas, you know, the person you're trying to influence might have zero seconds to think about it on that level. So you need to think about, so you have two options, you can either partner with people in your company who are willing to take what you have, and package it up, or you can get good at packaging. Yeah. And so I think that the one, what's the word of encouragement I would give to people who find themselves kind of mulling this stuff over in their companies is a, you can be perfectly functional. You know, you can go head to head with any of these people, if you want, like you have the skills necessary to be a great product manager. And you will also need to learn to either partner with people to package up your thinking, or you will need to be able to step back and say, Oh, what are they trying to achieve? What's the minimal amount of information that they're trying to achieve with that particular thing. And then what I would say this is encount, in contrast to I think the impression among a lot of people, they don't do the deep thinking, they just start with a really simple thing. They're just like, well, everyone's just, they just need a simple thing. So I'm just going to give them the simple thing to do it. And so I think that I just want to make if you are the similar to me the type to kind of overthink these things to give some encouragement that it is possible to exist in the product world without boiling everything down into three bullets.

**Jason Knight** 26:41

Nothing at all, it's a 280 characters at a time. But I think it is really interesting what you say about almost having a translation layer. And I think that's something that is also really helpful or has been helpful for me, like, I came up as a developer, obviously thrown myself into product over the years. And I'm not necessarily going to call myself anything as grand as a deep

thinker. But I do like to think about stuff. And I think one of the things that has really helped me in my career as I progress through it is really being able to adapt my message, the same content, the same point behind it, but just adapting it to whoever is in front of you. And not getting too stuck on specific terminology or specific ways of trying to explain things that maybe don't resonate with people. And I think actually, to some extent, that's something that I'd argue a lot of product, people seem to be quite bad at just in general, they just go straight back to inspired, they go straight back to talk about outcomes over outputs and things that obviously make a lot of sense. But there has to be a way to actually make these resonate with people that haven't read the book, and have no idea what you're talking about, and ultimately have their eye on a different hopefully, complementary goal.

## John Cutler  27:47

Even if they've read the book, you know, so what I've seen is that people will give empowered, or these types of books to their boss. And then the boss will come back and say, Well, this is great. We do this already. I mean, this is this sounds perfect. And the devil is in the details, right? They have not yet experienced this way of working themselves, it's still kind of abstract for what they're supposed to be doing. It's powerful, meaning it's inspiring. I think that's why people love those books, because it gets you jazzed up, it gets you excited, and you can give it to a leader and the leader will be curious. And they'll say, Well, this sounds right, that sounds like what you're doing. But the reality day to day for a lot of these change agents is literally about show don't tell focus on the why not the way no one cares about whether you're doing continuous discovery, anything or OKRs, anything like that, you know, you better be able to walk into a business person at your company and say, you know, I think we're okay for the next year or two but we're sitting on a little bit of a time bomb related to our cost of acquisition if that continues to go up, then we're going to be in trouble and I think we have to you know, start placing some bets here which are going to require understanding this new persona which might be a good fit for these particular techniques. So the interesting thing is it's about applying product thinking to product thinking right there you go. And I think that that's the that's the main thing that people in my work it's mostly about that is helping other change agents to kind of you know, because amplitude someone will come and they want amplitude and their company doesn't know yet that they want to work that way. And so I have to help coach them to do that and that's where I start with them the why over the way and you're gonna have to show not tell and you better have a business case for this no one cares about product practices, except you and except the people who seem to care about it. You know, some most people don't care about it.

## Jason Knight  29:40

Well, that's the thing. Yeah, it's very difficult to try and persuade people in the same way that you don't really like us as product people. We don't sit there normally. listening intently as people start to detail their med pick methodologies or we don't oh my

## John Cutler  29:56

god, you got med pick going there. Oh my god. Call me about How med pick works, I really want to know how you implement med pick. That's amazing. You know, right? They do not actually I do get kind of interested in that. So. But other than that, because I just like

frameworks and things like that, but yeah, I know what you're saying. Yeah, I

**Jason Knight** 30:14

mean, just to be clear, I'm fascinated by sales and other marketing books. And here's something I actually recommend, all product people do is to go and read the Challenger sale, they go and read, Crossing the Chasm, they go and read some other books about some other stuff, and just make sure that they've got an understanding about what might be important to these other people as well. Because all of these people, all these functions, they will have their own thought leaders, they all have their own Marty Kagan's or their John Cutler's or their own thread pros like they've all got people that they're listening to, probably not all saying the same thing. So it all goes back to that system. And that kind of network, I guess, I mean,

**John Cutler** 30:49

you if you have not sat there, and you're the one responsible for creating a go to market account list, and incentive structure for the whole sales team, and had to have a discussion about how the product strategy is going to match that particular strategy, and how literally, this is going to mean the livelihood of a huge sales team. Yep. These people are not like, inherently, they're really, really, really smart people who are trying to play this particular game that's been put out in front of them in the company. And so it's very easy to go in and say what but if you haven't been in that position, or know people who've been in that position, it's very, it's very easy to assume that it's just about a lack of trust, whereas I don't think it's it's as much about trust as it is about like language barrier in some ways. That's my thought.

**Jason Knight** 31:37

No, absolutely. Well, talking of language, you recently said on Twitter that no one gets fired for over delivering. And you famously coined the term feature factory to describe companies that all delivery all the time. So before we talk about that, I have to ask, have you ever personally worked in a feature factory? Yes, hasn't everyone? Well, I don't know. I just thought maybe you were one of these kind of ivory tower, looking down on everything you surveyed.

**John Cutler** 32:04

Yeah. And here's the funny Okay, backstory about that whole post, which will then make more sense to maybe what you're gonna ask is that, that was meant as a joke. That post is meant as a joke. So I was doing a research study for medium. And every day, they required me to go and get my phone out and record a video about what it's like to be a writer on medium. And I remember saying to them something like, you know, I'm really sad that when I mentioned one of these listicles, they're more popular. And so then the next day, I said, Well, you know, today I'm going to show you, I'm just going to write one of those. And so I went, I was like, Well, what, let me come up with this term. I mean, teacher factory's, like, what's not to hate about that? 12 signs or whatever. And then I think it was two days later got picked up on it was either like Reddit, or one of those things. And it was like, half a million views or more to do those things. But it was originally meant as a wait for me. I believed everything I put in it, trust me. Yep. But

it was almost like a parody of itself. I was trying to show medium. How much more powerful listicles. Could be. And then anyway, so that feature factor, then back to the topic at hand, apologies.

**Jason Knight**  33:15

That say this is the gold content that people come to this podcast, not Lenny's podcast. But did you manage to ever change one of your feature factories that you worked in? Or did you just leave and go and work in a better place?

**John Cutler**  33:27

I think I was able to nudge it in. And here's the funny thing. I actually don't think there's anything inherently wrong with shipping features. Right? And I tried to tell this to all the change agent, people that say they want to jump ahead to these outcome driven roadmaps and said, Well, look, have you can you just start with just assuming that someone, maybe you one day will think that it's okay to build exactly x? Your bet is to build X. And that's one thing I've realised since that feature factory post is that unless you create a system where it's safe enough for someone to have a build X type bet, one day, it will come back to haunt you, whether you like it or not. So it's actually less about it being my thinking has evolved since then. Right? So it's, it's much more about being clear about the bets you have. And so let's say the CEO says, I think we should build X, the right solution, the bridge solution is to say, interesting, I'm going to write up a one pager as if x is a potential option to pursue that. And then I'm going to show it to you and then I'm gonna walk you through writing a one pager. And let's see what you think. And so you write the one pager and you literally put solution x in the lower right hand corner, and like, well, I thought you're gonna write all about x. And it's like, well, I'm gonna get to x. I just need to write this one. It's for me, it's for me, not you, you know, you don't have to, like be a jerk about it. And they look at it. They said, well, actually, this was pretty helpful. I mean, it outlined the why I mean, this is really cool. You're still gonna build x, right? Yeah, yeah, sure. We're gonna build X sounds like that's your bet. That's your bet, right? Seo I guess it's my bet. I mean, I called it a project before, but now you're calling into bed? No, no, we just call it a bet, you know, because we never know whether it's going to work or not. Do you think we can set up a meeting in two months where we go back over that bet and see how it worked out? Like, based on this one pager? Yes. Sounds reasonable. Okay, cool. Let me get that on the calendar right now you put it on the calendar, and you do these things, you run the bet. So back to that thing, what I realised many years after the feature factory thing is that, of course, people respond to that post, no one wants to work in in like, shitty organisation that doesn't worry about impact. But most organisations worry about impact. They just don't know how the impact that they care about relates to the product impact and product practices and techniques that you want to use. Yeah. And that was the big leap that came on in my mind to do that. So I don't know if that helps people sort of unravel that older idea of those things. But you got to create an environment where you can have ship X type bets. And it's all about the learning cycle and the coherence, it's important, less about, you know, whether your features are at level 7.34, on the tree of knowledge. That's everything.

**Jason Knight**  36:07

Yeah, I think it's really funny actually, because I remember listening to a podcast a little while

back, the other podcasts out there, despite what I might try and normally tell you, but I was listening to a podcast about Amazon. And obviously, Amazon being one of the fangs or the mangoes or whatever, talking about, like how Jeff Bezos basically just invented prime and said that you got to do it and just go and work it out. And of course, these are one of the companies that people use as exemplars for the kind of big tech product thinking. And I'm sure that in many cases there are. But I think it's also fair to say that there's a lot of variation within the companies as well, because they're so big,

**John Cutler** 36:41

big tech, that some of the biggest feature factories that exist. There's also a lot of promotion driven development in big tech, which is primarily advocating to build acts as the project that's going to get you a promotion. Right. And so even, you know, even Google recently realised that that had to kind of stress that it's about going through the motions versus what the output that you have. So the idea that big tech is super optimised for what big tech does. And people have to remember that, and there's many more, there's many different models. In fact, some of the, for example, some of the best b2b software as a service companies I've experienced, we're not in the valley by any means. And they have much more sort of holistic practices, much more connection with their customers than any of those. So you know, it's those are hyper optimised for a certain thing. People have to remember that.

**Jason Knight** 37:31

No, absolutely. I think it's very interesting what you say about measurement as well. So one of the things I think you tweeted about recently was how teams don't really spend any time measuring the impact of the work, they just do the work and then they move on. Right? I guess you're gonna say that that's not a good way to work, because you tweeted about it. Is it even possible to be a truly effective product team, whatever, quote, unquote, product team means? But like, is it possible to be an effective product team, if you're not doing that if you're not measuring the impact, and you're just continually shipping, shipping shipping.

**John Cutler** 38:04

So I think the cases where that has been effective for teams is where the bet has largely been played. So what I mean by that, as you'll find, for example, a great example is, let's say that you're in a pretty technical domain, and you have one or two technology, advancements, but largely, the game has not changed. And you hire a bunch of people in your company that's played that game. And I would use like snowflake, for example, or something like that. Yeah, where, you know, they've reinvented in some ways, the ways data warehousing works. Well, at the people who founded snowflake, were actually pretty knowledgeable about data warehousing, and was pretty clear about the direction that the data warehouse would change. And there are massive competitors out there, like Oracle and other people, they're competing against this sort of unknown thing. I think there are environments like that where the bets been largely played, the roadmap is not even all that. It might be like, we're going to add this twist to everything. Yep. Another example would be here in Santa Barbara, there's a company that did property management software that I worked at. Now, the fundamental accounting of property management software is not going to change. Their angle was a much more like consumer

forward UX, and then was related to other things that the company did. So when it came to the accounting thing, you think they're going to sit there and do a bunch of discovery and measure every little thing about the accounting software? No. But they're probably going to look critically at that data model and say, we might try to, we might try to lose a lot of this. So I think there are environments where you can build, build, build, build, build, and that's just fine. You do that, but it's about that kind of core thesis of the company. And it's about the core idea and really understanding like, what does what is the risk here? And what is the rescue do a great example of someone like zoom? I don't know zoom very well. But I would imagine that zoom in the ramp up the pandemic didn't need to worry that much about measuring anything they needed to know if the call polls were working or not. Right? You know, did they want to spend a lot of time growth hacking zoom? No, like the motion of zoom was there like that ball was rolling. But I would imagine, for example, if things get more competitive for zoom, and they need to think about things in a more holistic way, that then they will need some measurement and they won't be able to be like a feature factory to do it. So I think this is we don't talk a lot about this. But I think that's the, the truth for a lot of things. And so being a good product leader is actually realising what game you're playing. And a lot of people are good at this. And a lot of people are not good at this. They the game we're playing is like, we're the first ever meet up app for you know, knitters or something. It's like, No, you are not the first meetup app. And no, not for knitters. You know, like, that's the thing. The Knitting meetups are hot here in Santa Barbara's. So I go there and hang out a lot. Sorry,

### Jason Knight  40:54

oh, there you go. Try to think of a wall or a needle based Joker. And we'll have to add that back in in post. But I think it's really interesting what you're saying there around basically playing the right game for the right time. And then you start to get into this kind of wartime peacetime type mentality as well, like, it's all very well sitting there doing loads of discovery. But if you're, I mean, I remember I worked at one company. And literally day one, I turned up and was told the money was running out, and that we had almost no time left and runway was super short. And I just sort of sat there and thought, well, you know, I can do a couple of things. I mean, one of the things is, I could just be super dogmatic and try and be as hyper Kagan as possible, or I can just be as pragmatic as possible, and just try and do whatever needs to be done to help that company survive until it can get more funding or whatever needs to happen to it. And I think that being, I guess, flexible and pragmatic when you need to be but still having principles and ideals feels like the right place to be. But obviously, when we go back to these people that are raised on a diet of Twitter bros, talking about how this stuff is all easy, and you should do this and only bad PMS do that. That's actually one thing that really gets me bad PMS, the concept of a bad PM. So I'm sure that there are PMS that aren't doing so well at the moment because of whatever reason. But the whole concept of a bad PMS seems to make it almost personal or like a fixed personality trait, which I just I have no trouble at all.

### John Cutler  42:20

Yeah, I'm similar in that. It's also I always joke about the following is that I think that in Silicon Valley, especially, it's fundamental attribution everywhere. So in Silicon Valley, people underestimate all the tailwinds and privilege that they've experienced being those things. And a great example is a friend who recently was at Google and went to a startup and said, I can't believe like, it never dawned on me how all these developer tools and platforms actually came

to exist that I was using. And they describe, for example, that it Google being a junior junior person, they found themselves way more effective than they weren't finally, where as a senior senior person joining a particular startup, and they basically said, you know, I underestimated all the tailwinds and all the structure that existed in that company and all the incentives that existed in those companies. Yep. Similarly, I also think that people in big companies tend to maybe underestimate, or they overestimate the sort of like badness of everyone. And they also underestimate maybe their ability to shift their immediate surroundings. So so they, they, they're not going to change their company that but they probably could do a fair amount to make their little bubble of it a lot better. So I think that both sides of that particular thing carry a certain amount of fundamental attribution bias to do it. But it doesn't help I think, when these things are taken out of context, and, you know, these sort of hard rules with good and bad and things, because it um, I mean, recently, someone told me a great story of like a very well known Silicon Valley leader who is loved by all, who attempted to go to a major mega brand, that's actually the best in what they do. And they were completely ineffective. And then someone came that was raised up through that company, and was much more effective. Working on that. I would add one more thing about startups, you know, everyone talks about these big companies and these slow older companies. But imagine if you're a company of 30,000 people, and you're in the middle of a six to eight year transformation. Yep. And you think, Oh, my God, these slow companies, I, oh, this is so terrible. I guarantee you there are 500 person startups that are in the middle of a four to seven year transformation to so if you think about it as just a function of size, a lot of these big companies that are easy to make fun of are actually proportionately doing a better job of improving their cultures than all like the startups that people talk about in love. So that's another bit of context for people.

Jason Knight  44:51

Oh, that's definitely a thought. provoker but when it comes to changing the team's like you just said like changing within a certain realm within the company and obviously it's smaller company, maybe that becomes quite a large part of the company, maybe in a bigger company, much smaller part. But I think you're right, that it's possible to change bits of team or certain working practices. But do you feel that in many cases, those changes, those kind of local changes are not necessarily really gonna help? Because the company as a whole is just pulling in a completely different direction? Like in that sort of situation? Is there any winning? Or is it just about making it as comfortable as you can like a nerf a cancer patient or something?

John Cutler  45:31

The winning could be for your career, the winning could be for the career, the people around you. I mean, the idea that we owe anything to these companies, I'm sorry, but it's like, it really forces you to think about. Let's just go back to the people dispensing advice. One thing a lot of those people have right, is that they are attempting to help people get ahead in their careers. And so one thing that I've had to work a lot about with messaging and myself, it can be kind of messy about what am I talking about? Am I talking about the order the CEO or what you're trying to improve? Or, you know, organisational health and organisational psychology and stuff is a pretty nebulous type of thing. Right. But I think that for a lot of people, you know, your ability to control your surroundings could help you learn in your career could help you improve your resume to improve things. And, you know, if you're not going to save your whole

company, most people will not be the ones that will save their whole company. But you can definitely make your surroundings a more functional place to work with, which I think is important.

**Jason Knight** 46:32

Yeah, 100%. And certainly in my past, when I've worked in less than ideal situations, I've always tried to learn something from it. Yeah, kind of strong growth mindset. We should all have John, right. You know, we can't all be fixed mindset people, like some we've seen.

**John Cutler** 46:46

Well, I think that's the funny thing about it. Some of the people tweeting about these growth mindsets are taking a very fixed mindset approach to a growth mindset. So I don't know there's again, I'm always going to make it more complicated. I understand that I'm this trend of my answers. But I always joke that I'm on. I'm the on second thought leader.

**Jason Knight** 47:05

Sorry, everyone needs a niche, right, you've got your niche, you're gonna cross that chasm one day,

**John Cutler** 47:10

ask follower.

**Jason Knight** 47:12

Not you're not a thought leader like me, that's the most important thing. And I'm not leader like me. Now, with the caveat that all situations are different, and I can already tell where this answer is gonna go based on what we just said. But let's try anyway, we obviously can't distil everything that you've done all the service that you've given into one short piece of advice. But I'm gonna ask you to anyway, to give one piece of advice. For a product manager working in a situation like we've just described, here, the company is not very good, or it's a challenging market, or the runway is really short, and they can't do all the stuff they want to do. Whatever it is, let's just assume they're in a generically less than ideal situation. They've tried some other people's Twitter advice that didn't work, what are you going to tell them to do?

**John Cutler** 47:53

So I do have a very prescriptive sequence for this, and I'll talk people through it, there you go, I'm gonna get I'm gonna thread thread bro you up, right now, it's gonna, there's gonna be flames arriving from what I'm doing. No, I'm gonna, I do have a particular bit of advice this, the first thing is, you have to come to peace with yourself. So there's a great book called Getting to

Yes with yourself by William Ury. Or there's some other books about this. But the number one thing that you notice it first is that there might be some imbalance with your own needs that are being met in that particular environment. And you have to get super clear with what the hell's going on inside. And to give you a very personal example, a lot of times, I think my self esteem was low. And so it was really important to me to be right about a particular practice or something. And in retrospect, that was much more about my need to be right versus changing the order, I also would come to grips of the fact that I was just freaking bored. Some people don't want to admit they're bored, I'd be in a company, I'd be like, I just need more novelty. So you have to come to grips with yourself to do those particular things. I think that the second thing about that is you need to connect with the people around you without any agenda. So you need to connect with those other people in the company that you're trying to influence without, like, oh, I want you to read this book, or I'm trying to get, you know, move forward or do whatever those things. But a lot of people who are change agents are actually not being very thoughtful or empathetic to the people about them. And so I think that's the second thing. The third thing you almost need to be like the the archaeologist or the ethnographer of your company. So before you go charging in for these particular change efforts and what you're doing, you need to really understand what the hell is going on in your company. What's the sort of system of your particular company? And I think a lot of people miss this step too. So what they do is they go in, they're like, Well, I think I have a diagnosis. I'm just gonna go ahead and march in. And then you get to some realities, like, guess what? We've got a six month runway, just to the realisation you came in you none of these things are always apparent. Or guess what there's one member of the board who no matter what happens goes in and tells the CEO what to do at every board meeting. And none of the good plans that ever get dreamed up ever happened because that board member has a there's a lot of power play FATHER, Son figure going on with the CEO. Learn that too. And so you've got to be the archaeologist and determine really what the hell's going on your company, the next that you have to do is perfect your pitch. So by this, what I mean is back to the why versus the way, it is not when we've got to do customer discovery, everyone, it is more like, hey, there's a new persona that we're trying to work with. We don't know a lot about them. I think that our goal and what success would look like is we're a lot more confident with our product decisions. So I propose that we try some customer discovery experiments for the next week, or two or three. And then like, reflect on whether they worked very tight pitch, just be a product pitch the way you do it, right. And then finally, not to take everyone's time to roll off the plan is basically I'll send you this list later. And so you put in the notes or whatever. The final thing is, start with safe to fail hacks, things that are just show versus tell that don't rock the boat too much. You get a foothold with those, then you can start more involved hacks that involve more people that kind of more commitment, and then scale the things that work, you never know what will work I joke with someone, probably 20% of any of the change hacks that I've ever tried to cold. But the ones that took hold, I would have never predicted example, there's a stupid Confluence page I just made with a co worker of mine and amplitude that is a grid of different personas and amplitude. I've never had luck talking about it in this way. But funnily enough, there's something about this grid that I look at the analytics and people are looking at it now you never You can't predict some of the things that are going to have the impact. And now there's like traction with that particular thing that you're doing. Then finally, no one Delete. No know when to get the hell out and have and basically, there's a certain point where you will beat yourself up and you'll blame yourself for everything. If you've done everything I've talked about before, you should be able to proceed in confidence to the idea of leaving, you did the best you could the worst experience I've had was going into companies and getting those steps mixed up and really doing a half assed job of change. Yep, and then leaving and being like I coulda, woulda, shoulda I could have, I could

have been nicer, I could have been more thoughtful about the people around you. So if you do the steps in that order you get and things aren't working, give yourself six to 12 months, start interviewing and then get the hell out of there.

**Jason Knight** 52:29

Now, absolutely. And I think one thing that I take from that is, from my own career, as well as like, it's important not to doubt yourself. I mean, obviously, you're going to doubt yourself in the sense that if things aren't going well, you'll always be sitting there thinking, how am I doing everything? Okay? Right. And I've talked sometimes about this kind of negative career death spiral that you get where, like, you have this kind of going back to sort of systems thinking you've got this kind of self reinforcing loop of negative behaviour and negativity and defensiveness that just gets makes you worse and worse and worse, and then you end up leaving kind of under a cloud. But I think yeah, you're absolutely right. Like, knowing how far to take it and how and when to leave, I think is really important. Because some people back to the the Twitter, people might sit there and say, Oh, well, if you do that you've failed, like a good leader would have, they would have done something about that they would have taken control. Right. But I do think that it's fair to say that in some cases, there's only so far you can go like you say,

**John Cutler** 53:26

yeah, the lead I would call it someone jokes. It calls it manager ism, I would call it leader ism to in the United States, there's definitely, there's definitely a mental model, which always basically rationalises that a better leader could have pulled the thing out, you know, the better leader could have done that. Yeah. In other countries, frankly, this is a cultural thing, because in other companies, they don't have maybe a little bit more collectivist cultures, they don't necessarily go to that kind of hero's journey, leader hero's journey that we do in the United States to do these things. And the one, the one antidote to that, that I mentioned is that, you know, there there is, I do think there is someone as a trained leader who can maybe handle a dysfunctional situation to a point. But think back on your career, the number of really like, any of those amazing leaders, where were they before? What didn't work out for them before, you know, so I think that it's, you have to be gentle with yourself and accountability partner can help to, to basically walk you through the steps that I said, and to remind you, like, Hey, you said that if those things weren't working in the next six months, that you would start looking for a job because we tend to like slip into a bit of drudgery, you know, we slip into to the bad place when we don't have an accountability partner.

**Jason Knight** 54:43

Yes, we do. Well, I think in the last few minutes, we've basically made every product manager, a better product manager. And I'm going to see if I can turn this into a 280 character.

**John Cutler** 54:55

Oh, you should. We should invent an AI Twitter product person. Huh, yeah, anyway, I have all the nobody there. They'll just pick it up that'll be good. And a licence these for other people to

the nobody there. They'll just pick it up that it be good. And a licence these for other people to tweet about them things. Hey, I want to be able to mimic this whole conversation and just a little while. So I want to get I want to see the AI before we go too deep into this stuff. Give me a product. Give me John Cutler advice on the product problem. Dolly.

### Jason Knight  55:26

There you go. John Cutler that AI come into a an app store near you soon. It depends when. So where can people find you off the display? And if they want to find out more about any of the stuff we've spoken about tonight? Find out about your evangelism. Check out your memo templates, talk about systems thinking or see if they can get tickets when Egyptians leave.

### John Cutler  55:47

Oh, yeah, the Egyptian raise. You didn't talk about that. It was all for a girl. I'll tell you that. The best way is Twitter. I don't. I mean, you could. LinkedIn and Twitter are pretty much what can fit into the, into my head to do those things. So you could reach out on Twitter, I do try to get back to all the DMS on Twitter, do that. And then you could sign up for the newsletter and you get these good things like it doesn't cost anything. And I'll send out a link to people like check out this, you know, board with a bunch of things and templates. And I think that the newsletter is turning out to be like the main way I communicate anything beyond 280 characters

### Jason Knight  56:22

through the things. No tick tock yet.

### John Cutler  56:25

If I was an experimental thought leader, I would have already been embracing tick tock, but I haven't gone there yet.

### Jason Knight  56:30

One day One day. All right. Anyway, I'll link that all in and hopefully people will form an orderly queue in your direction and come pray at the evangelist altar. There. Yeah. Well, that's been a fantastic chat. So obviously really glad we could find some time in your busy schedule to provide the antidote to cliche product thinking. Obviously, we'll stay in touch but as for now, thanks taking the time. Yeah, thank you. As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to white knight in product.com. Check out some of my other fantastic guests. Sign up for the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app and make sure you share your friends so you and they can never miss another episode again. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest but as for now, thanks and good night.