

# One Knight in Product - E100 - Phyllis Njoroge

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

imposter syndrome, people, experiencing, book, product manager, doubt, write, product, cognitive biases, feel, called, talk, good, self doubt, individual contributor, product management role, phyllis, job, pm, prone

## SPEAKERS

Phyllis Njoroge, Jason Knight

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Jason Knight 00:00

Hello, and welcome to the show. I'm your host, Jason Knight. And on each episode of this podcast, I'll be having inspiring conversations with passionate product people. I'll be talking to thought leaders and practitioners in and around product management to help you build the right products and build them right. If that sounds like the sort of thing you want in your wallet, why not head over to [OneKnightInProduct.com](https://OneKnightInProduct.com), where you can sign up to the mailing list, subscribe on your favourite podcast app or follow the podcast on your favourite social media platform and guarantee you never miss another episode again. On tonight's episode, we talked about getting to grips with imposter syndrome, something that most product managers I speak to seem to suffer from, and how that can be exacerbated by the ambiguity of the product management role. We talk about what imposter syndrome is, where it comes from, and some of the techniques you can use if it's grinding you down, getting in the way of your job, or even making you think you shouldn't be in a job in the first place. We also ponder the process of writing a book.. something that can reduce even the most self confident wannabe author to a quivering wreck, and how ironic it is to write one on the subject of imposter syndrome. For all this and much more please join us on One Knight in Product. So my guest tonight is Phyllis Njoroge. Phyllis is a keen roller blader, enthusiastic piano player and member of a non standard book club, although I'm not sure if that's a standard club that reads non standard books or the other way around. Phyllis is passionate about diversity and inclusion and loves to try to understand people which she is well equipped to do as the holder of a bachelor's in cognitive and Brain Sciences. Now she's turned her understanding skills towards the often discussed, sometimes dismissed, topic of imposter syndrome as a coach and now an author of the upcoming book *From Fraud to Freedom*, where she wants to debunk the assumptions we have about what imposter syndrome looks like, and what works with managing it. Hi Phyllis, how are you tonight?



Phyllis Njoroge 01:44

I'm doing okay. Thank you for having me. How are you?



Jason Knight 01:47

No problem. I am fantastic. Thank you very much. So we'll talk about the book in a minute, because that's what we're here for. But first, I wanted to find out a little bit about you and what you do for a living. So first things first, your product manager at Redfin. So what problem does Redfin solve for me?



Phyllis Njoroge 02:04

So Redfin's mission is to redefine real estate in the consumer area. I'm not sure if we solve that problem for you, given the fact that you're across the Atlantic Ocean.



Jason Knight 02:15

But if I moved over what problem would it solve for me?



Phyllis Njoroge 02:17

Well, if you moved over, then we would definitely help you with that move. If you're in order to find a house and get a mortgage for it and all the other things that you need in terms of your real estate concerns, we would be a great place to start.



Jason Knight 02:33

So is that like a kind of a portal of a marketplace where people can list things? And then I can go and find things? And then you kind of get me together? And then set up lenders? Oh, do you offer any of those services yourself?



Phyllis Njoroge 02:45

We actually have our own agents. So even though we have like the website and the tech that list the homes, we have agents, both on the sell side and on the buy side that actually help you with that process as well.



Jason Knight 02:57

Fantastic. And you're a product manager, I think you've been there for a year, year and a half, something like that doing that role. So what is it that you're building or working on specifically for Redfin?



Phyllis Njoroge 03:08

So I had mentioned how we have our buy side and sell side, I'm on the buy side, I'm on the customer growth team. So trying to make sure that we turn our website traffic into people who are a part of our business, okay, customers, specifically with their buying journey in finding a home.



Jason Knight 03:26

And what was it about this industry that really got you interested? Was it like a passion of yours? Like, was that something that you've been interested in before? Or was it just Right Place Right Time, and you've come to love it? How did you get there?



Phyllis Njoroge 03:38

Yeah, I didn't have real estate experience before becoming a product manager at Redfin, I ended up working as a product manager at a company that does real estate, but not because I had like some long standing real estate background. And I've come to learn most of what I know about real estate by being a product manager.



Jason Knight 03:57

Yeah, that's interesting, actually, because I know we'll talk about imposter syndrome in a minute. But one of the things that comes up a lot in discussions around product management is kind of the need for industry expertise in whatever industry it is that you're working in. Now, I certainly felt that in my recent move, like this year moving to a FinTech and working with banks, which is something that I'd never done before. Obviously, you're working with real estate, which you've never done before. Until now. How did you feel that that really contributed to the difficulty or lack of onboarding into the company? And taking that product role on? Did you think that it made it hard? Or do you think that it's the sort of thing that you can pick up very easily as you go along?



Phyllis Njoroge 04:36

I saw it as a benefit personally when I first joined because at the end of the day, like we're helping consumers and consumers are not industry experts, either. So if every PM at our company was an industry expert, looking at our website and be like, "Yeah, this all totally makes sense", of course, which would be really far removed from the consumer experience and people being like, "I'm completely lost. I don't understand what these things terms are what am I supposed to be signing up for? Where do I go next?" So because I was also in that position, when I joined as a PM, it gave me fresh eyes looking at the product being like, none of this makes sense to me. And if it doesn't make sense to me, it probably doesn't make sense to some of our customers as well.



Jason Knight 05:15

Yeah, that's fair enough, I actually am a big proponent of that idea that fresh perspectives can come and help disrupt thinking as well. So definitely agree with that. But this is your first

come and help disruptive thinking as well. So definitely agree with that. But this is your first product management, specifically product management role. But I know you were working as a creative director for ProductBuds before, which is a product management training community. So what was it that kind of got you interested in product in the world of product management in the first place?

P

Phyllis Njoroge 05:40

So my journey into product was that I was always interested in the psychology of technology and, like, using that to grow businesses, I just didn't know what that person was called. So I ended up having this vision for a job that I think would be really interesting to me. And at first, I thought I had to, like, make up a title in order to get there. And then as I like, continued to talk to different people and investigate their work, I came to learn about product management. I was like, Oh, so this is the title for the field that I had been looking for this entire time.



Jason Knight 06:17

But how did you find that out? Specifically? Like, did you just apply for that job at ProductBuds? And then find that out? Or did you kind of do some research and then say, "Yeah, that's the thing. That's what I've got to do"?

P

Phyllis Njoroge 06:27

Yeah. So I was one of the early members of Product Buds. So Product Buds came into existence, as I was learning about product management. So how I found out about product management first was I literally asked people for knowledge around UX developers. And that was my way of articulating someone who's responsible for the user experience, but also understanding the technical side of things. And they're like "Phyllis, I don't know what that is. But it sounds like you're looking for a product manager". And then once I found out about that term, I investigated it more. And I found that it was something that I really liked. And then as I was starting to learn about product management, that's when Product Buds was created. And a few weeks later, I joined the early team. And that's how that took off from there.



Jason Knight 07:11

Excellent. Sounds like a great journey. And I'm sure you learned a lot along the way. But as part of that journey, you've obviously been inspired to write a book, which we were talking about earlier. Now I know it's not out yet. I think it's coming out in January. So obviously really looking forward to reading it. So it's a book about an important topic. It's called From Fraud to Freedom. And it's a book about imposter syndrome. And obviously, there's a lot to talk about in that general area. And we want to dig into what the book says about it as well. But before we do any of that, how would you classify imposter syndrome? Like how would you describe it? In your own words.

P

Phyllis Njoroge 07:44

I would describe imposter syndrome as self doubt that becomes attached to your identity. Like, I think we all experienced self doubt. And we... probably most of us experience imposter syndrome as well. And the differentiation for me is when your doubts around something become tied to your identity. So for example, like if I'm at work, and I'm a product manager, and I'm struggling with a specific assignment, I can doubt myself on that specific assignment. But then it becomes imposter syndrome, when I start to doubt whether I should even be a product manager in the first place, or whether I should be at this company, or whether I shouldn't be in this industry. So like it, I would call it like, self doubt that inflates into an identity crisis.



Jason Knight 08:26

Yeah, that's fair enough. And obviously, lots of people talk about this on.. certainly on social media, and you see a lot of commentary about this sort of thing. I mean, is that something that you think everyone has? Like, some people will kind of say like, "oh, yeah, everyone suffers from that from time to time". Or do you think that that's a different thing, like, as you say that it's okay to feel doubt sometimes, but it's a certain person or type of person that has that as a kind of a trait of their entire personality? Like, which one of those do you think is true?

P

Phyllis Njoroge 08:57

Yeah, I would say that a majority of people definitely experience some version of imposter syndrome. And I think some people experience it more frequently or are prone to experiencing it more deeply. But I think that it's a very common experience.



Jason Knight 09:12

And have you found, obviously, as you've started out your journey into product management over the last, sort of, basically couple of years, I guess, and, again, what with the breaking into an industry that you're... that you weren't aware of, or weren't experienced in before? Like you've... you're coming in as a individual contributor or product manager, surrounded by lots of people, and they probably did have experience in that industry. And I'm presuming working with product managers that already were experienced or product leaders that were already experienced. Did you find that you experienced, specifically with regards to your job, imposter syndrome as part of that journey? Is that something that affected you and did it affect you particularly badly?

P

Phyllis Njoroge 09:52

Yeah, so about a month into my role as a PM, I asked myself the exact question that I gave as an example, which is, "should I even be a product manager?" Because I was struggling with something and I was like, "okay, if I'm struggling with this, and maybe I just shouldn't be doing this job at all". Obviously, here I am a year later still doing it. So it's okay. But at the time, like, my self doubt had inflated into an identity crisis, where I didn't know if this was the job for me or the industry for me or the place for me. And all of those have since resolved. But I think the only way that I got to a point of not letting that self doubt inflate so much is by containing it,

right, like realising... I'm doubting myself on this very specific thing, if I come up with a plan to grow around this very specific area, then I'll get better. And me struggling with one part of my job doesn't deny all the parts of my job that I can do successfully. And I think that people who are experiencing imposter syndrome tend to deflect or ignore all the ways in which they are successful or doing things well. Because of the things that they feel like they're struggling with or not doing well enough.



Jason Knight 11:06

Yeah, I've certainly considered at certain points of my career, that there's almost this... almost like a negative death spiral of emotions or feelings of self worth, because you start to doubt yourself. And like you say, you ignore the positive signals. And then you start almost like doubting yourself for doubting yourself, and then it just kind of just reinforces and just gets worse and worse and worse, and you end up in a really negative place. Is that something that you feel is easy to interrupt if you have the right techniques in place? Or do you think that sometimes, like, that can become almost like a traumatic problem that people should go and get actual help with?



Phyllis Njoroge 11:07

Yeah, I think it's a combination of both, right, as I had said it earlier, there are things that are going to make you more prone to experiencing imposter syndrome. Like if you're already someone who has... who exhibits like cognitive biases, and experiences anxiety, for example, those things are going to make it much easier for your imposter syndrome to affect you. And also for to spiral very strongly. So in that case, like, it will be helpful to like, work on that as well and not just try to tackle the imposter syndrome in isolation. But even if that's not the case for you, I think that it can still be helpful, like you said, to have these things in place to interrupt the mental spiralling, so something that I've found to be really effective for myself personally, is just verbalising it to myself, whether that be journaling to others, whether that be friends, or like even to my manager about how I'm feeling about my work, or how I'm feeling about things that I'm struggling with. And then being able to create a plan around it has been really helpful to me, I think the thing that's going to be helpful depends on you, like if you don't feel like you have a manager who you can go to and be like, "Hey, I'm kind of spiralling with figuring out how to do better in this one area", then that's okay, I'm not going to enforce you talking to your manager, if you don't feel comfortable with doing that. But I think it is important to like, have these mental checks in place. So that when you realise that your thought process is going down this train of thought of like, not being good enough, or like not doing well enough, and that feeding into itself, having things to course correct both your beliefs, but also your actions, right? Like, I feel like part of the self reinforcing behaviour is that you don't doubt yourself, so then you don't take advantage of opportunities that would actually help you get better. And then because you're not getting better, you continue to doubt yourself. And so like intervention in that case would be okay, I'm doubting myself, but I'm going to take this opportunity to do something that might help me get better. And we'll see if it does or it doesn't, but I'm not going to like self select out of this opportunity. Because I'm doubting myself that could be like intervention stuff, for example.



Jason Knight 13:52

Yeah, absolutely. And that makes a lot of sense. But I remember reading recently in *Empowered* by Marty Cagan, the great Marty Cagan, where he has actually a chapter on imposter syndrome in the book. I dunno if you've read that book yet, but it basically ... he kind of doubts imposter syndrome is really a problem, apart from in cases where there's actually like, an underlying pathology or something like that, which, you know, to be fair, he calls out and says, look, if you have actual mental disorders or something like that, then that's definitely something to get help with. But he thinks that, or he states that imposter syndrome is really a positive thing, because it can really drive you to be a better version of yourself. And that actually, doubting yourself is healthy, because it means that you're not going to take things for granted. And it makes you prepare, and all of that stuff. Is that something that you buy into at all? Or is that basically a complete misreading of the situation as far as you're concerned?

P

Phyllis Njoroge 14:49

Yeah, I definitely don't think it's like black or white, which is ironically one of the cognitive biases that makes you prone to imposter syndrome, which is black and white thinking. For me, it's not that either imposter syndrome is the worst thing you could possibly experience, is ruining your life or imposter syndrome is making you a better person, because you're not full of yourself. I think it's both like, I think having some level of scepticism over your work can encourage you to, like, do better and to be more thorough. I think having some level of scepticism over your work can also make you self select out of really important opportunities or not work as well as you could have, because you don't believe in taking the risk or shots that you would otherwise like to take. So I definitely see the benefit in that, like, yes, it will make you work harder. The flip side of that it can also make you burn out like in the direction of working harder, or it can make you feel like "okay, I'm doubting myself, let me see what I need to do to get better". And then the flip side of that is you feel like there's so much that you need to do to get better that you just give up on trying at all. So I don't feel like those are mutually exclusive. I think they all inter play with each other. And people are affected by different degrees of each side. And there are benefits, and there's also a cost. And for that reason, if you can figure out how to mitigate the costs while enhancing the benefits. I think that's probably the best course of action.



Jason Knight 16:15

Yeah, I think, from my perspective, like having any kind of momentum to try and improve yourself is... feels like kind of a good thing. Like, obviously, with the caveat of all the negative aspects that you've just called out as well. But one thing I've also read online, and that I was very curious about, because it never really occurred to me before, was that the the concept of imposter syndrome is something that we all you know, that everyone talks about, and everyone claims to have, or not everyone but a lot of people claim to have. But that it's something that affects people from marginalised communities in a disproportionate way. So for example, people of colour or women or transgender people, or just anyone that doesn't really get a fair shake in the workplace, even at the best of times, because to your point, it's all about that self limiting thing and feeling you can't go for these opportunities. Because not only is you've got your maybe natural imposter syndrome, but you've also been kind of ground down by society over the last X amount of years. Is that something that you think is a fair representation of that kind of situation?

P

**Phyllis Njoroge 17:17**

Yeah, absolutely. I have very specific chapters on being a woman and experiencing imposter syndrome, being a person of colour and experiencing imposter syndrome. And being first generation and experiencing imposter syndrome. Because I mentioned this in my book, it's one thing to experience imposter syndrome in your own head, because for some reason, you feel like you don't belong. And it's another thing to be experiencing imposter syndrome, because you're literally in spaces where you've been told you don't belong and you have to prove that you do. Yeah, so that dynamic absolutely plays a lot into it can make people of colour, women, first gen, as you mentioned, a lot of people of marginalised communities more prone to experiencing imposter syndrome because they're being treated as imposters. So I talk about how it's important to like, not think that you alone can solve all of your imposter syndrome, right? Like, we all contribute to you, and have a responsibility for like, creating a better environment for everyone else, right? Like, it's not just my imposter syndrome, but the person next to me, like what can I do for all of us to be in a more supportive environment where we're treated as people who can grow and get better and not like, outcast, basically, for any small errors? So I think you bring up a good point in saying that there are a lot of dynamics at play in experiencing imposter syndrome. And it's important to acknowledge what is a personal problem versus what is a people problem and people around you problem?

**Jason Knight 18:44**

Yeah, it was just really interesting to me to consider the idea of having imposter syndrome forced upon you which... to the points that you just raised as well. And it was definitely a thought provoking one for me. So something that I think I want to make sure that I bear in mind when I'm dealing with people going forward. Because I guess, you know, for me, not being part of a marginalised community and basically having every single advantage in Western society that you're going to have, you know, being as a white man cisgendered straight, no one can force that upon me. I've obviously still got my own challenges internally, but no one can force it on me externally. It was just a really interesting perspective to get from the outside. So definitely, as I say, very thought provoking. But some people would sit there and say, "Hey, Phyllis, you've got a Bachelor's in Cognitive and Brain Sciences. You've got a 3.6 GPA", I think it says on your website. I looked that up. I think it's pretty good. People are going to say, "you know, you're smart as anything. You've got a good job. You've succeeded to this point in your life, and you've kind of got it... not necessarily made, but you're certainly doing all right for yourself. How on earth could you have imposter syndrome?" Is that something that you think is a fair shout from people that just sit there and think "they look successful? Therefore they should just be fine"?

P

**Phyllis Njoroge 20:00**

Yeah, absolutely, I think that that is a super fair thing to think because I think we all look at someone who has more experience or more privileges or more opportunities, more achievements, more success, more of anything. And we assume because they have more of that thing that we think is the thing we need, then they're fine. Like, they don't have imposter syndrome, I have imposter syndrome, because I don't have that thing. And I mentioned in this in the book, but it's really not about getting more of anything. And because it's not about getting more of anything, that means the people that have more of whatever it is you're

looking for, whether that means experience, or background or whatever, are also experiencing imposter syndrome, because it's not about like, an accumulation of like, all these external traits. It's an internal experience. So yes, I'm experiencing imposter syndrome, Michelle Obama's experiencing imposter syndrome. The new intern at your office is also experiencing imposter syndrome. So it's, it's across the board, right? Like, all of us are experiencing it, not because it takes having more of something, but because it's like a lot of internal work we have to do to validate our own success, because part of it is doubting your success, right? So like, if anything, having even more success, makes you doubt that even further, and ...



Jason Knight 21:17

You think you're gonna get found out, right?



Phyllis Njoroge 21:19

Right. Because if if you let's say, let's take like the intern, new intern at the company and the CEO, right, like if the intern comes in, it's like, "Why have imposter syndrome? I got this internship on a whim, I just got lucky. I don't know why I'm here". And then the CEO's like "Well, the only reason I'm here is because that one investor took a chance on me, I don't actually really know how to run the company. And we got lucky because the market's on our side", like both of those people are still experiencing imposter syndrome regardless. So I can understand why people would subject themselves to thinking, "Oh, well, someone who's more successful or more famous or more anything, can't possibly be experiencing imposter syndrome", because it's so obvious to me that they're doing great. But that's not the point. The point is, you may be doing great, but you're doubting the validation of how you got there, and whether you can continue to keep up that success.



Jason Knight 22:12

Yeah, absolutely, it's like, maybe earlier in my career, I'd sit there doubting myself and thinking that, like you say, all your managers or your business leaders are just sitting there, got it made, you know, just sitting in their executive boardrooms, and you know, just throwing money at each other or whatever. But, you know, as you kind of rise up the ranks yourself, you start to see that actually, all levels of the organisation, there's always, not always, but most of the time, there's some level of doubt or stress or strain, people just try to work it out as they go. So I think whilst it's very tricky to get people lower down in the kind of corporate food chain to sympathise with the big bucks CEO, I think it is still on a personal and an emotional level, I think it's still there. And I think it's something that people should just be really empathetic for the different levels of layers of the cake. But you did your university studies in Cognitive and Brain Sciences, which means that you've spent a lot of time, I assume, examining how people think, how brains work and a lot of that kind of deep science stuff, which I definitely wouldn't understand. Is that something that has kind of helped to inform your studies and thinking around how imposter syndrome works? Like, is that something that you've gone in now and tried to do some research on the physiological or the mental models that cause that situation?



Phyllis Njoroge 23:33

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the way that I structured the book is that it's actually mostly research based because I hate self help books that make you feel good about yourself, based in anything that actually works. So I tried to avoid that myself. And the things that I talked about, the solutions that I talked about in the book, or books are plans that actually have science behind them. So for example, if you're talking about affirmations, I talked about the, like neurology of affirmations, right, like affirming things to yourself. For example, I assume you're familiar with confirmation bias, but like, if we believe a certain thing, we just walk around looking for evidence of that thing. Right. Like that's a that's a way in which our brain is structured to think and to look for information and learning how to use that for your benefit in believing like, "oh, I can grow and get better" and confirming that belief versus "I'm an idiot who doesn't deserve to be here". And confirming that belief and like how you can basically, like, use the the ways in which your brain is already wired to your benefit instead of to your detriment.



Jason Knight 24:39

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And it calls to mind things like Thinking Fast and Slow and some of those books which kind of examine all the different cognitive biases and I think if we can use our cognitive biases and turn them against themselves, that sounds like a very good thing to do, because some of these cognitive biases are very, very frustrating.



Phyllis Njoroge 24:56

Exactly.



Jason Knight 24:58

But how is the process of writing a book? I mean, writing a book sounds really hard. I've not done it yet. Maybe I'll try to do it one day, I'm not sure be very good at it. But.... there you go, there's my imposter syndrome. But at the same time, you've taken the leap, and you've done it, and you've got it ready, and it's ready to go. But writing a book does seem to me as with myself, something that could kind of trigger imposter syndrome in and of itself, right? Because you're sitting there for I don't know how long it took you to write the book. But throughout that entire period, were there are points where you just sat there and said, "I'm no good at this stuff. This isn't for me"?



Phyllis Njoroge 25:33

Yeah, so first of all, writing a book is really hard. I can't even deny that. And the reason why that's important is because when things are hard, imposter syndrome is much more likely to kick in, right? When things are easy, you're like, "okay, like, I got this". And then when things are hard, you like, "Oh, God, like, I don't have this, I shouldn't be doing this at all". So that's the first thing. The second thing is, I think that the programme that I wrote the book through is, was structured really well, because from day one, they told us to write a mediocre first draft. And the reason why they told us to do that is because they knew that a lot of people's perfectionism would get in their way, when they'll be trying too hard to like, write this grand and glorious first copy. And they told us literally aim to write a mediocre first draft. And I think

that that was super important, because by aiming to write a mediocre first draft, naturally, you're not going to let yourself write a mediocre first draft. The thing that it stops you from doing is not not writing the book, because it's not good enough. So I just used "not" way too many times. But the point of aiming for a mediocre draft is that you're like, "Okay, I'd rather write something that I consider mediocre, then write nothing at all, or write something perfect". So like, kept you away from that binary, which I thought was really well structured. So I wrote my mediocre first draft, it was actually like, pretty solid. But even with it being like a decent first draft, that's the whole point. It's a first draft, like good books are not written, all in one go. They're written and then edited. And I think that once I realised that it helped me a lot more because I put a lot less pressure on getting my writing right the first time and I put more focus on writing, and then improving it over iterations, which is super helpful. And Marty Cagan, who you brought up talks about this, he has a blog post called, "So you want to write a book". And in it, he talks about treating a book like a product and how you have to like iterate on it. And you can't just expect the first thing you put out in the world to be this perfect product with no issues at all, because that's not how anything works. So I experienced a lot of benefit from having those mental framings around the work that I was doing. But nonetheless, I still experienced imposter syndrome while writing it, not because of the writing itself, which I managed to do, but because of the publicising of it right. Like, it's very uncomfortable for me to go out there and be like, "Hey, I'm writing this book, or I've written this book on imposter syndrome". And then what actually really bothers me, and it shouldn't but it does is when people are like, "Yeah, I feel this is this imposter syndrome expert. She wrote a whole book on it". And then like, I catch myself wanting to be like, "Oh, no, no, I'm not. I'm not an expert. All I did was write a book, like, it's okay. Like, I'm not who you think I am", which is my imposter syndrome kicking in. So I have to get more comfortable with like letting people call me an expert on it. Because at the end of the day, like I have done research, I have done interviews, I have compiled all this information. And it took a long while to like accept the fact that I did that work. So I'm allowed to receive that credit. But before I was willing to do that I definitely did not put myself out there as much because I didn't want to be questioned on my level of expertise. And then once I got over that, I was like, "You know what, there's varying levels of experts in this world. And if I happen to be one of them, that's okay. I don't have to be the world's best expert on everything, to be able to provide valid information that helps other people"



Jason Knight 29:05

No absolutely. Well, again, hopefully, when I read the book, I'll be able to shower you with some praise as well. But do you think that product managers are more prone to imposter syndrome, because of the somewhat vague nature of their job? Certainly, in many companies, like, in good companies, there's kind of a set of things that you'd expect a good product manager to do. But in many companies, it's kind of this vaguely defined, amorphous thing that sort of sits between engineering and the rest of the business. And there's not really any individual contributor outputs or anything like that, necessarily, you know, you're not writing the code, you're not selling the software. Like do you think that there's kind of more of it in our trade? Or do you think that it's more just across the board?



Phyllis Njoroge 29:49

So fun fact, the original book was supposed to be product manager-specific imposter syndrome. So the book actually is started as a book for product managers, because I do believe that product managers experience imposter syndrome to a higher degree and for several reasons.

And then I ended up expanding it out to a more general audience because I realised that the things that... the solutions that are providing... I was providing are applicable to more people than just product managers. But the problem, I think, is very specific to product managers. And the reason why I think that is, like you said, like the ambiguity and the literal definition of the role itself, is hard, because when there's a lack of clarity, that's a breeding ground for self doubt. Because if things aren't clearly defined, then there's all these opportunities for your mind to spiral into places of defining it for yourself and defining it in a way in which is unachievable, and then getting upset with yourself about the things you haven't achieved. So for example, being a PM, you have to know so many different things, right? Like research, design, sales, marketing, leadership, communication, negotiation, like all of these things. And if you take needing to know all of those things alone, that will make you feel like an imposter. Because you're like, "I don't know these things. I don't know enough of these things". And then let alone the fact that how you define like, what does it even mean to be like, good communicator? It can be ambiguous in and of itself means okay, well, I'm going to default to assuming that I'm not a good one, because I don't have this thing. But I have this other thing. So being a product manager is an incredibly imposter syndrome prone situation. And I admire people who are willing to move past that and still be a great PM. But I definitely think the ambiguity of the role, the 150 pieces that are involved in being a good PM, and also the fact that it varies so much from place to place, and can be unclear. All of those things, to me equal, a setup for imposter syndrome.



Jason Knight 31:57

Yeah, well, I can definitely agree with that for obvious reasons. But hopefully, as we say, the book will help a little bit, but on the subject of help, and since the book isn't out yet, I want you to imagine maybe a product manager or just another individual contributor in a company that's maybe cracking under the strain of their own imposter syndrome, and really doubting whether they're the one to do the job that they're in, or whether they should be doing that type of job at all. What's one piece of advice you'd give like one first thing that that person could try to maybe try and ease their mental load a little bit and start to see some of the positive sides of what they're doing?

P

Phyllis Njoroge 32:34

Yeah, so as I just mentioned, where there's a lack of clarity, there's a breeding ground for self doubt, I think the first thing is to get very clear with yourself about what exactly do you think you're missing? And what does it look like for you to be good at that thing? Because if it's, if you're pursuing a never, like an always changing goalpost, then yes, you will never be good enough if the goalpost itself always changes. But if you clearly define for yourself, like, for example, we're talking about communication, which is a relatively ambiguous thing. What am I saying when I say I don't think I'm a good communicator and that means I shouldn't be a product manager? What am I specifically tackling? Is that written communication? Verbal communication? If it's written communication, what is that specifically as well, right? Like there's Slack, there's email, there's documents, there's a book, like there's a lot of ways to write, and what does it look like for me to finally have said, "I am good at this thing"? And then once you define what it is a very clear goalpost, that's not going to keep moving on what you're going to do to get better, the next step would be to actually make a plan around it, right? Like I think part of imposter syndrome is that you decide preemptively that you're not good enough

for something before you've exhausted all options to become good at it. So let's say you're, you feel like you're not a good communicator, that means you shouldn't be a good PM, now you've defined specifically what it looks like for you to be a good communicator. And then the next step is to research and implement all the ways in which you could possibly become better. Like, the quote I really like is "if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, you'll think that it's stupid". And I think a lot of us end up thinking that we're stupid, because we try to do something in a way that works for someone else, and it doesn't work for us. But that doesn't mean that we're not good at things or capable of becoming really great at them. So exhausting all options at getting better and proving to yourself that you actually can get better in these things. Is the thing that I'm doing personally, that has been super helpful. So that's helped me because like, instead of deciding "oh my god, I'm terrible at this thing". I'll never understand it. I'll never get good at it. I first... I'm like, "Okay, what does it mean to get good at it?" And the second "have I tried all the ways I could possibly think of to get good at it to prove to myself that I actually can't?" and I think that's like an interesting shift in perspective where it's like, I'm... this is my LinkedIn profile banner, like my cover photo on LinkedIn is "if you're going to doubt anything, doubt your limits". And I feel like by lamenting this system where you're doubting your own doubt, and you're like, "Yeah, I don't know, I don't know if I'm really that bad at this, let's see how bad I really am and how good I can really get" has been proven really beneficial for me personally.



Jason Knight 35:13

Absolutely. So the book's out in January. What date is that coming out? Do you know?



Phyllis Njoroge 35:19

January 1st!



Jason Knight 35:22

There you go. So for January 1st, New Year's sale, we can go straight to Amazon and all the other places. So what are the promotional activities have you got coming up? Have you got like a full schedule? Or are you just taking it as it comes?



Phyllis Njoroge 35:34

Yeah, I should probably set aside time to figure out a promotional plan. I just have been honestly focused on work recently, because I was just so grateful to have been done writing the book. But at the end of the day, like good books don't sell themselves, right. Like it's not, if we want to keep talking about product, like it's not you build it and they will come like... you have to figure out how to get them to come. So I'm going to set some time aside to figure out promotional plan. But currently, it's just going with the flow.



Jason Knight 36:07

Well, we'll see what we can do to help you from this side as well. And on that note, where can

well, we'll see what we can do to help you from this side as well. And on that note, where can people come and find you after this if they want to talk more about imposter syndrome or find out more about the book or just about product management in general.

P

Phyllis Njoroge 36:18

I'm extremely responsive on LinkedIn, I never check email. If I'm being honest... I don't know how you'd get my email. But if you got it, they'll bother. Just find me on LinkedIn and message me there.



Jason Knight 36:31

I will make sure to link that onto the show notes and hopefully you'll get a few people coming over. That's been a really fantastic chat. So obviously really grateful to have some of your time to talk about some of these important topics around imposter syndrome and ways that we might get better. Hopefully, we can stay in touch. But as for now, thanks for taking the time.

P

Phyllis Njoroge 36:49

Well, thank you so much for having me. I think this was a really great conversation. You asked really excellent questions that made me think deeper about the things that I'm putting out into the world. So I appreciate you having me on.



Jason Knight 37:03

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you do again, I can only encourage you to pop over to [OneKnightInProduct.com](https://OneKnightInProduct.com), check out some of my other fantastic guests, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app. Make sure you share with 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.