One Knight in Product E84 - Rich Mironov

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SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, Rich Mironov

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 frank and open conversations with thought leaders and practitioners in and around product management, hoping to use our combined experience to inspire you to be a better product manager, product leader, or just make better products. If that sounds like the sort of thing that lights your fire, why not add some more fuel to the flames and head over to OneKnightInProduct.com, sign up to the mailing list or 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 talk to a smokejumper CPO who's leapt over the flames into 175 businesses and tried to spray the firehose of good product thinking all over the place so he can go home and watch the smoke out of his hair. We talk about some of the unique challenges to B2B product management, how to truly understand the motivations of your colleagues and how to build coalitions to make sure you've got a fighting chance of making a difference. We also reflect on the importance of product managers trying to appear like a positive force for change, and not just being seen as the place that good ideas go to die. For this and much more, please join us on One Knight in Product. So my guest tonight is Rich Mironov. Rich is a product consultant, writer and smokejumper CPO who wants us all to bring our heads and hearts to product management. He's also a published author having put out 2008's The Art of Product Management, which is making me think of relaxing scenery and fluffy little clouds, but your actual product management experience may differ. Rich has 40 years' experience in tech and product and also unrelatedly once wrote a thesis on dinosaur extinction theories. He's hoping to make bad product thinking similarly extinct with his regular insightful articles at Rich Mironov's Product Bytes. Now, I once went on record as saying Rich's articles on product management were more precious to me than my kids' birth certificates. That's of course a bit of an exaggeration, but I do keep them in the same leather folder. Hi, Rich, how are you tonight?

R **Rich Mironov** 01:57

Great. Thanks, Jason. Appreciate you letting me join in. It's good to have you here. I'm hoping we're gonna set a few wrongs, right. But first things first, what's a smoke jumper? So it's actually a phrase borrowed from, among others, the Canadian fire service. So I have a friend

actually a phrase borrowed from, among others, the Canadian fire service. So I have a friend who actually did this smoke jumper job. In the wild. If there's a huge wildfire, there's a big blaze, they parachute some folks behind the fire lines. And their job is to knock down all of the fuel and dig trenches and keep the fire from spreading. And most importantly, they don't actually get to go home until they fight their way back through the fire, or the fire's put out. So for me, the smokejumper job is when I drop into mostly a software company, although sometimes they're software adjacent, that's either forgotten to have a head of product, or misplaced the last couple, and I come in on a quarter or two, maybe two and a half quarters interim basis to get things straightened out and help them then hire in the full time permanent head of product that they need. So it's smokejumper in the sense that, you know, it's not really physical labour, but I don't get to go home until I'm smelly and smoky and exhausted.

Jason Knight 03:10

I was gonna say this sounds a lot like Rambo or something like that, where you're basically having to fight your way through the jungle to get out. Is it... Do you get put into some pretty hairy situations there where it's very reminiscent of that? I mean, obviously, in business terms, at least.

Rich Mironov 03:24

Yeah, in business terms. I think the thing I've noticed is, most of these are not about product management, per se. They're about executive level challenges. So if marketing hates sales, and sales, hates marketing, and neither of them is willing to talk to your VP engineering or CTO, then you've got some real, real problems. And some of those are product problems, but many of them are just broken executive teams or folks who can't get along or lack of business model. So it's really a, you know, it's a C-level problem, as opposed to just a product problem. And for me, some of those are fun. Some of those are brutal. I would say, maybe a little more than half of these I've succeeded in making some of the change they need. And that's a pretty good outcome.

Jason Knight 04:10

Yeah, I was gonna ask, I mean, you've consulted with, I think, 150 companies over the years

Rich Mironov 04:15

175 by now, but who's counting?

Jason Knight 04:18

It's gone up! You need to update your website. But that's... by any measure, that's a lot of companies right? Now, do you remember all of them like as clear as day? Or do a lot of them kind of blur into this miasma of just nonsense, like maybe the ones that didn't ... like those 75 or so that didn't work? Like? How do you kind of look back on those?

Rich Mironov 04:38

Some of them very fondly. Certainly. A few of them are very, very memorable, maybe for the other set of reasons. They do blur together. But I think the thing that's given me that's really useful is you know, it's a pretty large data set. So I'm now able to match... to pattern match some issues in a much more direct and quick way. I would have 145 clients ago, you know? I can see the patterns not necessarily because I'm smarter, but because I've had all the data laid out in front of me. And, you know, it's a bit of a parlour trick for me that sometimes I'll sit in an organisation and by hour six or the beginning of day two, I pretty much figured out what the big broken things are. And, again, they may have been staring at it for a year or five and just not seeing the same pattern I do.

Jason Knight 05:30

Yeah, there's a certain thinking and something I subscribe to myself that it doesn't matter how good the message is from someone maybe who's in the organisation already, that they actually need to hear it from an external arbiter rather than someone else who would say exactly the same thing. But just, they're just some guy that they know probably a guy, and that doesn't land a message, but someone else like yourself can go in, say exactly the same things, but because you are external, because you do have that experience that it lands better with people who may be a little bit more sceptical. Would you say it's a fair cliche?

Rich Mironov 06:03

I would and part of that is just the nature of being a consultant, and the old joke about defining a consultant as somebody who borrows your watch, tells you what time it is, and then gives you a big honkin' invoice for it. And I've discovered over the years that particularly a lot of CEOs seem to value advice in proportion to the size of the invoice. So I try to give as strategic a set of advice as I can, that justifies a lot of money. But often the folks internally have just... they've been saying the right things, but they're not listened to, or they're not senior enough. Or there's some mindset issue or, you know, as an outsider who has zero motivation to worry about vesting stock or staying longer or making friends. I mean, those are all good things to do. But, you know, as the outside consultant who's being paid for my opinion, people are willing to listen to me. Even if I've said nothing that's new that they haven't heard before.

Jason Knight 07:02

Just read your book out, right?

Rich Mironov 07:04

Well, there's that. I'm thinking... there was a company last year, I did a big organisational assessment for. They were having pretty high exit rate from their product management team, people walking out the door. And, you know, I spent a lot of my time and some of their money figuring out what was going on. But there wasn't anything in my assessment that they hadn't

heard from 15 or 35 of the outbound product managers in their exit interviews. It's just putting it together in a way that, you know, the leadership team can hear, or, you know, different wording or, you know, whatever. I don't have any other motives.

Jason Knight 07:42

Yeah, you're just in service, well aside from your invoice, you're just in service for the greater good for want of a better word.

R Rich Mironov 07:49

Exactly right.

Jason Knight 07:50

But, I mean, you've touched on the, kind, of success rate that you've had. And we're looking at about 50/50. But I'm curious, also, given that large data set, like, there's a lot of talk around dysfunctional product companies and companies that aren't doing product, quote, unquote, right, or via the classic product management literature type of right anyway. I mean, whether or not they're actually in that situation to start with, how many of these companies do you think actually have an appetite to actually do what we would call classic product management thinking, the sort of stuff that you'd find in your book, that sort of thing you'd find in Marty Cagan's books? Is there actually an appetite for that? Or do people not even really think there's a problem?

R Rich Mironov 08:28

I think there is in some quarters. For me, there's there's a bit of a segmentation here first, right, which is how all product folks start these discussions. For companies that are in the pure play software business. So they're in the business of building software in order to sell that software for money directly to people who have to want it. I think there's a real appetite for good products and best practices, and UX and good onboarding, and all the things that we think of that are really important to selling software. And I think that's easy to trace back to their core motivation, which is if you're in the software product business, and you build software products that folks don't want to buy, or don't enjoy using, you all lose your jobs, and you go home, and you have to start again and apologise to your funders and take a few months off to lick your wounds and cry yourself to sleep. If you're in some other business, you're an airline or a bank or a government agency or, you know, a company doing rail shipping of coal and raw materials. I think so many of those companies see the softer side of the house or the technology side of the house as a cost centre. So if you think of what those folks do as generic and cost based, and not a source of innovation, not a source of technical advantage, then what you really want is fewer those people, cheaper people. You want to stand over them with your whip and have them deliver things on time, because it's really about the calendar and the clock. And now... there are fewer and fewer of those organisations because it's turning out and, and Marc Andreessen said it a long time ago, that software is eating the world. And if you think you're in any of those businesses, and you're really not competing against folks, either they're tech

companies, or they're companies that have really brought tech, particularly software, in house as a strategic advantage, then, you know, let me know, I'd love to short your stock. Because at some point, the world creeps up on you, Walmart used to be the world's largest retailer, and they're no longer, right? Go down the list. Kodak...

Jason Knight   10:39

Good old Kodak!

Rich Mironov   10:40

...used to be the, you know, this synonymous name for photography, right? If you go back a little bit, what you see over and over again, is companies that don't appreciate that technology is actually the differentiator are the ones who don't want to spend money on it. And they'd rather have younger, cheaper inexperienced designers and developers and product managers, because they perceive it all as generic. And that just doesn't have a good outcome in most companies.

Jason Knight   11:09

But it's interesting, because I think that there are some companies, even more urgent tech type startups that maybe get founded by people that worked for companies that weren't like that. And they kind of bring a lot of their biases with them, even though you're actually anyone thinking that they're starting a tech company, you'd assume would want to start a tech company, kind of like other tech companies, right? But a lot of people bring that kind of manufacturing or big retail or whatever mindset to it. And then that, because it's some of the top pocos down through the entire organisation. Right?

Rich Mironov   11:40

Right. And, you know, I think we see that in a lot of places. If I'm going to create a company that's going to do analytics for retail firms, I'm very likely to be somebody who came out of a retail firm doing analytics. The challenge, though, is with those kinds of firms, they may not have seen anyone who actually does good product management or even good development. They have these, it's going to be easy, probably only 10 lines of code. You know, let's throw some machine learning and Bitcoin in there because our funders want to hear it. It's really hard after you've got the first six or 12 folks on board, to even recognise that you're missing all of the good stuff that product management bring, let alone recognising what a product manager does. And the tendency I see in those kinds of companies is... they know they need to hire a product manager. So what they do is they hire a subject expert who's never spelled product management, even if you give him all the consonants in the right order. Give them the badge, send them off for two days of training at any one of your favourite training organisations, and expect them to come back two days later, as a product manager and that for me is universally a fail. My good buddy Scott Selhorst used to work in Austin... used to live in Austin ... taught me that a weekend at the dude ranch doesn't make you a cowboy. Right. And my observation is it takes a year or two or four with lots of mentoring and support. And you know, good

backstopping and partners to grow into a product manager. But any good product manager can take three weeks or seven weeks or whatever it takes and go out on the field and meet a bunch of customers and really learn their market. So the idea that subject expertise, forgive my French, Trumps...

Jason Knight 13:33

Oh, that's the worst swear word in the world.

Rich Mironov 13:34

I know, I think is is just wrong. And so, over and over again, what I find is that I get pulled in after they've had six product managers and two heads of product fail entirely, because they keep repeating the same mistake, which is thinking that subject expertise is the winning answer. Folks who've never done product tend to believe that their own view of how to use the product is the answer. Right? So they are routinely experts, and they routinely ignore new users and people who didn't like the product and edge cases. And often we're in this discussion where they tell me, where they tell someone that they just need smarter users, because somehow we keep selling to the dumb folks who can't operate the software. Right? And that's a good function of lack of perspective, lack of understanding that you the expert are not actually the customer, you the expert need to help get good solutions to the customer. And that's, that's a very foreign concept if you've never seen a product team that knows what it's doing.

Jason Knight 14:45

Yeah, another thing that I've seen and heard from other people as well as this idea that that thing that you said around getting, say a subject matter expert in is obviously a thing that happens and you see it fairly often even up to CPO level. In fact, I'd argue especially at CPO level, because what you tend to get at that level is "Oh, yeah, this is the the strategy guy". Yes, it's normally a guy, is the strategy guy that's gonna know the market in air quotes. And then maybe they'll get like some other product managers that are actually product managers to work underneath. But they sometimes bounce between different types of heads of product, for example, like they'll get a subject matter expert to start with. That didn't work. Okay, well, why don't we try a really technical person? Okay, that didn't work. Okay, now we're going to get someone who came from CS or something,

Rich Mironov 15:28

Or Sales, someone who came from Sales because they understand how to bring in money, don't they?

Jason Knight 15:34

Yeah. And just conflating everything and never really fixing the actual problem.

Rich Mironov 15:39

That's right. And another variation I see there is, you know, you have a founding team of two or three or four folks, one of them doesn't really find a home in the organisation. And so we assign him or her, but usually him, you know, okay, well, why don't you be the CPO and we don't know what that is, but... can't be that hard. You'll figure it out. Here's a copy of somebody's book.

Jason Knight 16:01

Yep. There you go. Hopefully yours!

Rich Mironov 16:04

Well, yes.

Jason Knight 16:07

Speaking of books, you've obviously got your own book, as we discussed in the intro, The Art of Product Management, which I believe was more of an anthology of articles that you'd written up to that point.

Rich Mironov 16:17

Yeah, it was a staple, put into a couple or eight years worth of posts. And by the way, I started blogging in 2001. Because by the way, blogs didn't exist before 2001 in their current form, so it was some newsletter work before then. But I am celebrating 20 years of monthly blogging, so you can do the math.

Jason Knight 16:38

20 years. Congratulations. And you put one out today, which is...

Rich Mironov 16:42

I did, yes.

Jason Knight 16:43

Yeah, really interesting that you're kind of keeping up that kind of level of consistency as well, it must be quite tricky to continually innovate and come up with new things, right?

Rich Mironov 16:53

I§t's actually gotten easier lately. So let me tell you the backstory on this. And then we'll come back to books. So you may or may not know, one of the things I do is I coach heads of product. Not individual contributors, not "I want to be a product manager someday", not "how do I get promoted to director" but folks who actually run whole teams of product and often design and some other folks in there. And I'm guessing at this moment, I probably have eight or nine of those people on my roster, and we talk each of them, we get a one to one hour, every week, if we can. And you would not perhaps be surprised to find out that almost all the heads of product at all the software and self related firms are having very similar issues. And so I'm clever enough to listen for the pattern across the week, write down the subject line, capture some of the discussion in the thought and then most importantly, anonymize it so no one gets in trouble for having this issue. Some of these are, they're ripped right from the headlines, the Hollywood folks would say they almost write themselves. Yes, that's an interes... it's like the Ray Kroc of the blogging world, you know, you're just taking over people's products and putting your name on the front. Well, I'm hoping it's a little better than that. But you know, it's important to highlight that the head of product job, the VP product, the CPO job, it's really hard. Most people should be smart enough not to want to do that job. And there's a lot of people issues, there's a lot of conflict among the team, there's a lot of goal confusion. And often what I see, what I hear is that folks who've come up on the technical side of the house, they might have been developers and then turned product managers and then turned directors and head of product have a very narrow view of human behaviour. And they completely don't understand anyone on the go to market side. Right. How do salespeople really think? It's not that hard, right? But, but it starts by looking at the comp plan and doing only the things that your comp plan tells you, you're going to get quota for, right? And the fact that the product manager stands near your desk and lectures you for six hours about what to sell, and what not to sell is completely irrelevant if you get more quota points for selling the thing that product manager does not want you to sell.

Jason Knight 19:14

Yeah, I think there's... maybe we'll come back to that. But I think that is interesting, the whole concept of like differing motivations, right, and differing rewards and the fact that, again, that points to like an organisational sickness or at least dysfunction in a way, right? Because you can't expect alignment between teams, which everyone always asked for. Everyone always claims that they want to drive towards but if you're explicitly rewarding them in different ways, then that can't happen.

Rich Mironov 19:42

That's right. And it may or may not be possible to completely align those folks. But again, as a head of product, it's really really, really important that you understand the motivations of the different functions and you understand what they do. And you understand a little bit of how their day goes. BÂ§ecause otherwise, we're doing the thing that we scold product managers about, which is we're trying to sell something to people who don't want to buy it, don't understand it and don't see the problem.

Jason Knight 20:10

Yeah, but obviously your writing is aimed at trying to right some of those wrongs in a way, and try to help people understand how that could be better. And I guess the book is a natural extension of that, like you say, it's kind of a collection of those writings, which is that's fair enough. But 2008 is kind of a while ago now. Right?

Rich Mironov 20:32

Really?

Jason Knight 20:33

Yeah, so I've heard. So I guess the question is, is there anything in that book, or any of those old articles that you put out that actually looking back on, you're like, no, that's either out of date, or maybe even I shouldn't have recommended that in the first place? Or do you think that it all kind of stands up still?

Rich Mironov 20:49

I think most of it stands up. Now. Those first seven or eight or 10 years of blogging were really about individual contributor, Product Manager work, ground level work. How do we interview customers? How do we think about pricing? How do we end of life some old product that we've got to get rid of? Some of them are old, I had a few pieces in there about this up and coming thing that we now call SaaS, right? So, you know, some of the pieces there, I think, have aged out. We've just moved beyond the arguments. I don't think I've met an organisation in the last decade who didn't tell me they weren't agile. Most of them are not, but the should we consider moving to agile and leaving waterfall? Gosh, that train left a really long time ago. Now. Most people are on the wrong track. And they're not gonna catch it. But at least now we're arguing about whether somebody is really agile, or they're just doing the ceremonies and wasting their time.

Jason Knight 21:46

Well, we're not just arguing about that, though, because we're also arguing about whether things like SAFe and other scaling frameworks are also actually Agile or not. So it's like some people are painting SAFe as the revenge of waterfall and the revenge of project managers. Do you find that a lot of the companies that you're working with, or any of the companies that you're working with a kind of riding, literally the SAFe train? Or have you managed to kind of dodge that bullet?

Rich Mironov 22:13

I see a lot of them riding the SAFe train, I don't see it taking them anywhere. Right. So in the same way that I see probably a lot more organisations that they're adopting Agile by picking up the Scrum book, reading only the literals in the Scrum book. Doing only and exactly what it

says and they discover that it's of no help. Right? That what we're talking about here is the willingness to change organisations, not just processes. And what I see a lot of at the executive level is, we want to keep the right to change our minds about what we're going to ship every two days. And we want to keep the right to sell things to customers, we don't have. And we want to maintain the ability to lean into the development teams of the engineering teams, and ask them for a minute by minute accounting of what they did in the last week, right? And you'll have a CEO who looks at the brilliant design that came from the design team and instead of saying good work, or I don't understand says, "I think you need to make this button bigger and red and move it to the other side", right? And what's important about all those is that building software is a craft, it's complicated, it may be the most complicated thing we can do other than trying to put some more folks on other planets. And the idea that it's a, an assembly line, where we just sit down and we type, and the measure of productivity is how fast we type is, is so entirely wrong. But if that's your worldview, then what you do is you beat on these folks, and all the good ones quit. Or they get learned helplessness. And they just do what the executives tell them to do, even though everybody knows it's wrong and worthless. And it's.. so it doesn't matter if you write in a user story, the wrong thing, or you put it on a post it note, right?

Jason Knight 24:05

Well, as a product owner, that's always a classic.

R Rich Mironov 24:07

That's right, as a product owner, I want to write more user stories because I get promoted by completing more user stories, right? That all of these sort of snake oil, large consulting business, top down, things seem to be framed around not actually doing any organisational change, not rethinking how we get work done or how we decide what's important or how priorities are seet or what good is, but it's trying to do bottom up process engineering. Sorry, process engineeringÂ§ if you're from Canada. In an effort to wring more output from a team that's demotivated and, you know, I won't name the really, really big famous consulting company whose deck I've come across now eight or 12 times that completely misunderstands everything about product management and everything about building software and everything about repeatable product. But I know that they collect millions of dollars to give that presentation to senior execs. And then what they sell them is some mystical, magical thing where if we rewrite job descriptions and change the org chart, that suddenly you're going to get all the innovation that you want the quotes, air quotes there, instead of the fact that when you treat your most expensive, highly skilled, brilliant, you know, doubly masters and PhDs, as children. You get crap all back and you deserve every bit of it.

Jason Knight 25:38

No, absolutely. And I think for me, one of the saddest things about reading through that SAFe guide or SAFe book, and to be honest, I had no reason to read it other than just, I wanted to know my enemy, I guess. But like, one of the saddest things was that it started off pretty strong and talking a lot about the same sorts of things that any book on Agile would talk about, you know, empowerment, cross functional, working, decentralised decision making, and loads of other good stuff that you'd expect to see in the Lean Startup or any book about product

management, then proceeded to put as many blockers in the way of that as possible. And seemed like a real bit of cognitive dissonance kind of baked into a book and I don't understand why companies think that that's gonna work.

R Rich Mironov 26:17

And not to pick on them so much. But if we go all the way back to the Agile Manifesto, which I'm a big fan of, right? Yeah, we might notice that none of those guys, and I think they're all guys who are up on that mountain topic.

Jason Knight 26:30

It's always all guys, Rich, come on.

R Rich Mironov 26:31

I know. But none of those guys were product guys. They were all engineering architect, CTO, VP, technology, folks. And as best I can tell, nobody in that room had a strong background in product management, or really knew what it looked like. And so we've had 20 years now of product owner, right? And just to close out the thought, I don't actually care what title we give anybody, it makes no difference to me. But here's the question I always ask, which is, you've got some product title, how many real end users have you talked to in the last three weeks? That were not on a sales call? Right? And if you open up the Scrum book, again, I'm a big fan of Scrum. But if you open up the Scrum book, and look for the words, "talk directly to a customer", you will not find them. Everything in the Scrum book is about proxies, and internal stakeholders, and folks who are five steps away from actually looking at what anybody does, or how they use the product. And so if you're a product owner, and you define it narrowly to be... someone else in the company decides what we build, and I write the user stories, I think you're leaving, you know, at least half of what's important about product management on the floor. So when I drop into a company, and I, you know, quickly get some time with everybody who's new on my team, well, I'm new on their team, right? That's one of the very first questions I ask them. And the folks who haven't talked to a customer in three or four weeks and aren't embarrassed about it... they get an instant promotion to some other department in the company where they might fit. Because, in my view, if you're not embarrassed that you haven't talked to customers, and you're not doing it, there's a better fit for you. Again, I don't care what the label says, what the badge says, You can be a product owner, you can be a product manager, you can be something else. But the idea that we can take third hand, fourth hand Salesforce notes from sales teams, and turn them into value, I think is so fundamentally wrong. Yet, when you open up the Agile descriptions, they all assume, right, without evidence that someone has already done the work of figuring out what value is and how people are going to use it and how we're going to make money and what users and buyers want. Now there's, you know, sort of fake language around that, you know, they talk about value, but the value that developers assign can't make much sense, until we're really sure why somebody is gonna give us money for it.

Jason Knight 29:08

Yeah, I think the interesting question off of that is, and it's something I know you've written about before, is, in fact, I think it was actually the article that you put out today, which doubled down on it, as well as this whole idea that, whilst this is a problem, and this is a problem that any product manager, or product leader should understand. And you'd imagine that probably most of them do, at least, even if they can't do anything about it. But one of the reasons I can't do anything about it is because they're unable to frame it in a way that the rest of the leadership team actually understands or in a way that the rest of the leadership team thinks is important. Because they're talking a different language.

R   Rich Mironov 29:44

I would state that slightly differently, which is, I think it's the head of product's job or the VP of product or the chief product officer's job to fight the organisational battles that let product managers and designers and developers actually listen to and talk with an interview customers, I don't usually see it as a lack of clarity at the individual product manager layer, I see it as a lack of buy in, or leverage or political power at the VP level at the C level, to fight for and demand what the rest of the organisation may not understand. And so I see an awful lot of product managers who know they should do this, and they don't have the clout, they don't have the access to the C suite. Blaming some product manager for not being able to talk to customers feels wrong to me. You got to look higher in the organisation.

Jason Knight 30:38

Yeah, sorry, I did mean the product leader in this case. But like, basically, the product leader in this case, if they're like a, what you'd call classically trained, idealistic product leader, they're potentially going to be talking in terms that the rest of the business or the rest of the leadership team don't necessarily understand. They're going to be talking about outcomes over outputs. You know, that's fantastic and all but it's, it's a slogan, right? Although we're talking about hypothesis driven development, which, to many people sounds...

R   Rich Mironov 31:07

We want to be product led, not sales led, whatever that means

Jason Knight 31:11

Yeah exactly. And it's this whole idea that they're not able to frame it in a way that really resonates with the people that they have to persuade to get some of this stuff done.

R   Rich Mironov 31:20

I don't think this is a hard problem to solve, though, I think when we push that in the faces of our CPO friends, and I do it all the time, and identify it as an issue. You know, I think that's a week's worth of introspection, and writing out some notes. I don't think that's 10 years of

career time. But, you know, often we don't think about our audience, we don't think about our stakeholders and our partners, our C suite, folks, we don't understand what they care about, or how they listen, or how they learn. If we go back 100 years, Dale Carnegie had a book called How to Make Friends and Influence People. It's really cheesy, and it's really for sales folks. But I often send that off to new product managers. Because, gosh, the idea that remembering somebody's name is important and understanding what they care about. Basic, basic, basic. And it's not obvious if I came up on the engineering side, the way we win arguments on the engineering side, is by being smarter and marshalling evidence and wearing down our opponents and having a six hour argument about Scrum versus Kanban versus XP, right? That's not how things get done on the go to market side. And that's just.. as much as other things are not obvious to those folks, I think this isn't necessarily obvious to product managers.

Jason Knight 32:38

Yeah, it's a fair point. And obviously, one of the things, or one of the reasons why I think that this can be challenging for PMs and for product leaders, is that so much of the standard advice that you get online, other bloggers and books and thought pieces and conference talks and everything like that, they all seem to be focused around what feels to me to have a different world to the one that I live in, and the one that I know that you've worked in a lot, and that's the scary world of sales led B2B. Or B2B product management, which, like, there's this whole thing like, oh, yeah, you have to say no to everyone, and you have to go out and everything's a test and A/B test everything and it's like... but I've got 25 users or something like that, like, what? And so much of the thought leadership doesn't appear to be focused at these people at all.

Rich Mironov 33:23

I think that's right. I think that's very much a B2C view of the world. And and it's one I would love to have everybody live in, you know, if you're, if you've got 100,000 visitors to your site every 15 minutes, you can really run A/B tests or anything else in a way that gives you an answer by the end of the day. If you're in the enterprise space, and you're going to close eight deals this quarter for half a million apiece in whatever your favourite currency is, the answer is your CEOs not interested in your reasons why you're turning down two of those eight deals. Right?

Jason Knight 33:58
Because they ask for something special.

Rich Mironov 34:00

Well and they always ask for.... The idea is that customers are going to be trained to not ask for something special is magical thinking.

Jason Knight 34:08

Jason Knight

I think it's interesting, the idea that product managers are obviously supposed to be really empathetic, and able to get in to the heads of their users and understand deep user... y'know, have a deep understanding of user problems and all of that stuff, which is again, all from the books, but they don't necessarily turn that on the rest of the organisation. And I remember a memorable quote from yourself where you said that, to paraphrase, you shouldn't be surprised when the salespeople that are come into the company and are paid to be persuasive then turn that persuasive power on to the executive suite.

Rich Mironov 34:38

It's exactly that.. and again, very much an enterprise flavour but if I'm a Sales execs, you know, seasoned, I've made a lot of money. I've hit quota at six of these companies, and I only have one deal to close this quarter. And, you know, if we go back to Glengarry Glen Ross right, you know, coffee's for closers. First prize is a Cadillac, now a Tesla I guess, Second prize is a set of steak knives, third prize, you're fired, right? So the idea that some enterprise sales rep is going to sit back and let me as a product manager tell them that they can't have the feature, they think they need to close the deal. Now, that's the definition of not paying attention. That person is going to be in the CEO's office 10 minutes or 10 seconds from now, with a beautiful story about why we have to get engineering and product to agree to do the thing, which, by the way, won't be that hard. It's probably only 10 lines of code. We have it by Friday. And here are all the specs, right? That's how it works. And if you... if you're an enterprise product manager, and you haven't seen that pattern yet, time to wake up and smell the decaf.

Jason Knight 35:43

But are there any concrete moves that you recommend? Aside from learning a little bit of the language of the people and trying to understand the motivations, which obviously, is a good thing to do... you have to understand who you're working with. But are there any concrete steps that you either recommend or that you've taken in organisations where you've seen some of these patterns and actually managed to potentially change up and make some of these very enterprise sales type organisation, actually switch up?

Rich Mironov 36:08

Absolutely. And I think the first thing you have to do is you have to find the right level of the organisation to have this argument. So trying to convince individual sales teams to not do what we pay them and reward them to do is mostly a waste of time. But to the extent that that we as product leaders can show the CEO, the CFO, and the head of sales, that taking path X is actually going to bring more money into the company than taking path Y, which will require us to turn down deals, which will require us to walk away from enhancements, which may in fact suggest that we fire some of our customers, right? I think you have to find the right level, you have to find the language, you have to have the evidence. But for instance, and it was you know, what I just was writing down this morning, it may be that we can close 10 $100,000 deals quickly, in a lot less time and energy than we could close one million deal. And with less special work and with less friction. It's about the aggregating, it's about integrating under the curve... I observe over and over again, we both choose and train and select salespeople who don't generalise across quarters or across customers. We pay them to think about the one

customer they just got off the phone with. And so to expect a salesperson to walk away from something because the general trend is in the other operating direction. It's just never going to happen. But the sales VP or the chief revenue officer actually has the incentive to bring in the most money. So if I can show that we're going to make more money in higher margin, with less pain by following a different path. I have to go to the people who are going to make those calls.

Jason Knight 37:54

Yeah, I think that's a very valid point. But there are also some companies that are just so addicted to that short term revenue, potentially because of their background and the types of companies that the leaders have come from. I mean, are there some companies that are just so lost causes that you don't even try?

Rich Mironov 38:07

Yes, I think I would say the majority of companies that are really professional services or bespoke engineering companies, can never, will never be able to turn themselves into product companies. Almost everything they're doing is built and optimised around keeping a bunch of engineers busy, billing for their time, trolling for whatever the customers want next, and saying yes. I think you look through the executive suite and you probably have to replace almost everybody at the C level, everybody's at VP level, because they've trained themselves over years and years, the right answer to any customer request is yes, if you have a purchase order. And that's a good business, if you can make money at it. It's not a very good business, but it's okay. But the idea that we're simply going to put some new checklist in place or a business case, or, you know, we're going to have a workflow that has somebody look at this thing. No, because every time it comes back to the executive team, their reflex is to say, "Oh, great, a 260,000 Euro deal? Sure, say yes". And then give it to whoever has to figure out what we're gonna do.

Jason Knight 39:19

Yeah that's it, sell it and we'll work out how to do it later.

Rich Mironov 39:22

Yeah. How hard could it be?

Jason Knight 39:23

Just just 10 lines of code?

Rich Mironov 39:25

Right, exactly.

Jason Knight 39:27

So if there's one piece of advice you would give a product leader who was struggling under the yoke of such an organisation today, aside from some of the stuff you've said already, of course, like one piece of actionable advice that someone who's sitting there listening to this feeling a bit depressed because we've just described their lives. Like, what would you say to them is like the first step at trying to affect any kind of change to the organisation.

Rich Mironov 39:50

I think, after figuring out what's really broken, which usually doesn't take that long, I would... and let's assume I'm an executive and I get to sit in the executive suite right at the weekly C level / V level meeting, because otherwise go home, right? I'd be looking around that room for who my natural allies are. And in general, it's the VP of engineering or CTO or CIO. And it's the head of finance. And it's whoever has the post sale joy of customer success, customer support, upgrades and renewals, because those are all folks who are feeling the pain, post sale of the mistakes, we keep making presale, right. And for instance, if I can, and the CFO should know this, but if I can help convince the CFO that the valuation of the company will be six times higher if we sell exactly the same bits than if we're in the custom development business. And I'm pretty sure the CFO is really interested in this gig, because there's an exit in it, you know, a bigger house and a faster Tesla. Who around the table is feeling the pain but may not have the words for it or may not see the pattern? It's almost coalition building, which here in the US, we don't do but most countries, you know, we have more than two political parties you do? How do we get more voices around the executive table, instead of just having the one product person screaming into the wilderness, right, not being heard and being written off as a naysayer, or you know where good ideas go to die?

Jason Knight 41:32

Yeah, that's fair enough. And obviously makes a lot of sense. But I've found in the past, there's a certain short termism in, for example, the CS people you talk about, because of course, these are the same people that are getting hammered over the head all the time, because things that work or there's a bug or they're only responsible for certain accounts, and

Rich Mironov 41:52

I give them more credit than that. So what I find is that when we make a commitment, sort of surprisingly, without good work and homework, to some big customer, one of the very first things we stopped working on because we had to relocate all the people in the work and the time is fixing bugs that the support folks get calls on all day long. So I usually expect them to be sensible, and thoughtful. And they always have a good list of what the top five or eight most embarrassing things are. And they're almost always right about the order, we should fix them in. And it's our job on the product side to fight, fight, fight for the permission, or maybe not the permission, certainly the allocation to actually fix the bugs instead of just cry about them.

Jason Knight 42:37

Yeah, that's fair enough. And I think ultimately, the most important thing is the quality of the product, right? And as long as everyone's sitting there, and on the same page about that actually being an important thing, and not just trying to do specials all the time, or just trying to go off in random directions then it should all hold together. But it does feel like there's a hell of a lot of coordination and organisational design that has to go in from the product team there.

Rich Mironov 42:57

That's right. I think of what we do as... it's really important that we're students of human behaviour. We look at our organisation, we see how things work, not how we would like them to work, not how the book says they should work. And we try to figure out a way to improve the the real working relationship of the folks in the company and the processes we follow. And the products we ship. We do it incrementally. We do it Agile-ly, we do it a step at a time. We try not to scare people. But endlessly I have people say to me, "Well, I wrote out this 67 Step Process Map, right? For how to request a feature. And I gave it to everybody and nobody wants to follow it". Yep. Good guess, you know, processes don't fix people issues.

Jason Knight 43:45

Yeah, no, I think it's a very, I mean, this is where things like SAFe come in as well, right? Like the whole idea around trying to use or compensate for your lack of ability to trust people by putting stuff on top of them to try and force them into certain ways of working, which, again, yeah, I can completely understand ... I've never seen that work.

Rich Mironov 44:03

I haven't either. Now, there may be examples out there, you know, I've only done a tiny little sampling. You know, maybe those 175 were just the wrong ones.

Jason Knight 44:13

176 is going to be the one. Now I stopped asking this question for a bit but I'm going to ask you because you've been around the block a few times, and I'm sure you've been to a few barbecues, which is where this question is going to be set. So I want you to imagine that COVID willing, you're at a barbecue and some person, maybe a friend of a friend comes up to you and says to you, "Hey, Rich, nice to meet you. What do you do for a living?" And you say, "well, I coach product managers for a living... I'm, I'm a smoke jumper CPO" and they're like, "What the heck is a product manager"? What do you say to, let's call him Buck, at the barbecue?

Rich Mironov 44:50

I see... what I tell Buck? I would say in the shortest form. It's probably that the product manager, the management folks are the ones with one foot on the business and customer side,

and one foot on the technology and development side. Again, I'm thinking about tech products here, right? So one foot with customers and the channel and the company to really understand what those folks need and how we make money. And then one foot on the what's possible, what makes sense? Is this a good idea side of the house so we can figure out whether to build things or to buy them, and what they might look like. You don't have to be the best salesperson, you certainly don't have to be the best engineer or designer, because those folks exist in the company. So this is the bridging of what does the world want? And can we build it? Should we build it?

Jason Knight 45:48

Makes a lot of sense. I'm hoping that Buck is going to be really impressed by that.

Rich Mironov 45:51

Well, I'm just waiting for the next order of ribs to come off the grill, so...

Jason Knight 45:56

Sounds like a good problem to solve. And is there going to be another issue or another pressing? Or whatever you do with books of The Art of Product Management? Do you feel there's a version two to come out or some other book that you could put together?

Rich Mironov 46:09

Well, dirty secret is I have three or four books on my hard drive that are each about 9% done.

Jason Knight 46:15

Sounds like George RR Martin.

Rich Mironov 46:16

That's exactly right. But what I find is that the 1000, or 2000 words I put out every month in the blog really drains me of my sort of writing effort. And so I really do need to take a month or three off and pull together some of these in some coherent way. But I'm lazy, and like a lot of service firms, because I'm in the service business, not the product business, when a client or customer calls me up, and they need help they get it first. And so I've been cheating myself a little bit in the same way that professional services firms, by the way, never ever finished package products. Because as soon as somebody comes in the door and says they need help, we pull everybody off of the packaged product effort. And we put them back where we're making money. And so I've been falling into that a little myself. But who knows, you know, maybe if COVID runs another two or three years, we'll see some books out.

Jason Knight 47:10

Geez, I felt even worse now.

Rich Mironov 47:13

That's a hint that you don't really need that book. You can read the posts individually.

Jason Knight 47:17

There you go. Yeah, well, we can always print them out if we need to make a PDF. And where can people find you after this, if they want to find out more about any of the stuff we talked about, or just generally catch up on product or product leadership issues?

Rich Mironov 47:30

I cleverly have my last name as my domain name and my email address and my Twitter handle and my LinkedIn profile and whatever else is out there. Because I got in the game, I bought my domain name in the early 90s when nobody else was doing that yet. So I've cleverly grabbed the email address rich@mironov.com. So if you can spell my last name, which isn't trivial, you can find me.

Jason Knight 47:54

Well, it'll be even less trivial when I write it down and put it in the show notes, I guess.

Rich Mironov 47:58

Perfect. Thanks.

Jason Knight 47:59

Thank you. Well, that's been a fantastic chat and obviously really interesting to go through some of the themes from Product Bytes and some of your thoughts on the wonderful world of product leadership. Hopefully, we can stay in touch but as for now, thanks for taking the time

Rich Mironov 48:13

It's my pleasure. Thank you so much for letting me join in and play.

Jason Knight 48:19

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you do again, I can only encourage you to hop over to OneKnightInProduct.com, check out some other fantastic guests, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app. And 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.