

# One Knight in Product - E156 - Saeed Khan

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## SPEAKERS

Saeed Khan, Jason Knight

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Jason Knight 00:00

Hello and welcome to the show and an episode where we offer some tough love to product managers around the world in an attempt to help them do product management just a little bit better. Speaking of doing product management better, this episode is sponsored by one night consulting and yes, yes, yes, that's me. But listen up. I started one night consulting because I've seen variations of the same problems plaguing product companies, and I've seen them again and again. So if you're looking to work out how you can set up your company or your team for success, hire product managers or product leaders or coach the ones you have, you can go to [one night consulting.com](https://www.onenightconsulting.com) To book a call with me and see if I can help you out. That's [one night consulting.com](https://www.onenightconsulting.com) You can check the show notes for more details. Anyway, touch it naturally wants to work remains the ultimate competitive advantage and sought to lap a framework around it to help teams identify their failings, address them and thrive. Tonight's guest is trying to do exactly that for product management teams. So if you want to find out what The Five Dysfunctions of product management teams are, stick with us on brand that's important.



Jason Knight 01:07

So my guest tonight is Saeed Khan. Saeed's a product consultant, coach, speaker and founder who says he once won the Great Canadian egg race age 12. So it started out working out in a photocopy shop but left after a week because he kept getting paper cuts. But it was undeterred from working in dangerous professions and threw himself headlong into product management and product leadership. Sides, a regular commentator on LinkedIn, Twitter, and now Mastodon, you'll often see him taking swipes at blanket statements and context free thinking. Original listeners may recognise side as one of my earliest guests back when I was still trying to work out this podcasting thing. But he's now back to check out my good microphone. We'll talk all about The Five Dysfunctions of product teams. Hi, Saeed, how are you tonight?



01:16



Saeed Khan 01:46

I'm great. Thanks. How are you? Jason?



Jason Knight 01:48

I am wonderful. And it's good to have you back. But it's been a while, as we said, so just for the benefit of any of my now much bigger number of listeners than back into first episode may not have caught you that time and maybe not have listened back or hopefully they will after this. But you're the founder of transformation labs. So without going too far into, in general, what are you working on these days?



Saeed Khan 02:10

So a few things. So I'm still doing the consulting work. I'm working with technology companies, and I guess my mission hasn't really changed, so to speak, I, I want to help them build better products and better product teams. And really, what that means is helping them understand how to do product better, right how to how to get the skills and the processes and things in place. And, and you know, in the context of today's talk, how to not have the five dysfunctions that we'll talk about. And the end result is product success and business success. Right. That's, that's what every committee wants? Yeah. And I think there's ways to achieve that. And I try and help them to get those outcomes better.



Jason Knight 02:49

But also accompanies you working for these days, or any specific types of challenges that you're fixing at the moment? Or is it just generically across the board, anything in that area that you can help people with?



Saeed Khan 03:01

The types of companies vary, I mean, startups and scale ups primarily, that I work with, and then, you know, the kind of work I do, I mean, a lot of it is very hands on consulting work, include workshops, mentoring, coaching, and then organisational impact and designed to help them you know, it's funny, you people want to do the right things, but if they don't have the right team in place, with the right skills, and so on, they're not going to succeed. So, you know, it's not just what they do, but who does it and how they do it, and how they're organised. And I try and really help them understand those things, because they all interrelate. So, you know, basic skills like discovery, roadmapping, and, you know, launch and things like that. And then other sort of higher level skills in terms of cross functional management and things like that.



Jason Knight 03:51

Neuro Sovann, the product Leaders Group in Toronto, which I accidentally snuck onto at some point remotely, but last time we spoke about that you were obviously still remote. We were in the one of the lockdowns. So, the group had obviously changed a little bit, but have you gone

back to doing in person events and building the leadership community in Toronto?

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Saeed Khan 04:11

No, we're not doing in person events yet. So everything is still remote. We just relaunched the meetings last month. And we have one of your former guests coming on this week. Jack's Oh, there you go. So talking about mental health and wellness and product, so I'm looking forward to that. And yeah, we will at some point get back to in person but you know, what's interesting is making it remote has actually made it more accessible. There used to be downtown Toronto for the meetups. And, you know, Toronto is not centralised, in terms of the tech community and people on the outskirts. I heard many times I'd love to make it in but I just, you know, I'm not going to drive downtown at the end of the day and then drive all the way back out to the suburbs. So I think what we'll probably And up is a mix of in person and in online events,



Jason Knight 05:06

the go to point just like this podcast interview, but you were one of my first podcast guests and we spoke, give or take two years ago, check the transcript, we're talking a lot about the challenges of product management, all the classic stuff that we talk about a lot these days around, put up not having a seat at the table, ambiguous roles, and some of that might touch on some of the dysfunctions that we're going to talk about. But, you know, time has moved on in those two years. So I do have to ask, I mean, I'm assuming it's not all fixed now. But has it gotten better from the last time that we spoke about it specifically? Or was it gotten worse? Or was it just kind of about the same?

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Saeed Khan 05:41

Yeah, well, I you know, it's really hard for me to speak about an entire industry, but you're



Jason Knight 05:46

gonna try anyway, they're gonna try anyway. Yes.

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Saeed Khan 05:50

I like I like doing the hard things. Exactly. I don't think it's changed much. I'll be honest, I think, you know, we were in a, and we still are in a pandemic. But we are in a very challenging time. Last time we spoke, it was early in the pandemic, and there was lots of upheaval going on. And that disruption, I think, itself was something people were trying to adjust to, you know, how do we suddenly go from coming to the office to not coming to the office at all? How do we connect with people connect with customers do all those things we're doing in one mode, and do it in a complete different mode, and I think most people have adjusted to that people are going back to in person work and in person meetings. But I think underlying everything things have changed, right? Like, teams are more distributed, right? People are more, you know, they moved. I know people who moved to other cities and work remote 100% of time. So I think

there's still this period of adjustment going on. And then all of that upheaval didn't do much to solve the core underlying problems that were there anyway. So maybe after that very quick analysis, maybe things are worse. But they certainly aren't. They certainly are better in the sense that people understand the fundamental issues better people are addressing them in more sort of concrete ways. I think there's a lot of dynamics and pressures on product that I mean, they've been around for a while, but they haven't changed in two years, quite honestly.



Jason Knight 07:17

But a lot of people and a lot of people that weren't doing it, then they're talking about it a lot, all the different social networks at the moment, obviously, you call some of these people out from time to time in your own inimitable way where you, for example, see something that someone wrote that maybe doesn't apply in all situations, or is a bit kind of generic or doesn't take all things into consideration, or isn't well argued. So do you feel though that there's a much more concerted effort, no matter how well it may be being executed, but like a much more concerted effort to at least try to change it now? Or do you think that these people are just shouting into the void and not really changing it? Because they're not talking? Maybe to the right people about changing it?

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Saeed Khan 07:55

No, I think there's there's a lot of really good strong voices out there. And I think everyone who's trying to make things better, is contributing to forward movement. But I think there are also a lot of, and I don't know, I wouldn't say it's malicious anyway. But I think there's a lot of opposing opinions. And they're pulling things in other directions. So there isn't really, I would say, a cohesive voice moving product forward in a cohesive way, in the sense that, here's the direction to head into, and here's, here's how we can all kind of get to better places. I think here's the thing, right? I think every market has these kinds of challenges, you know, in sales, there's all these different sales methodologies. And marketing has its own sort of different viewpoints. But I think the challenge with product has been that traditionally people don't understand it, well, it hasn't been implemented well. And it's different in the sense that it's inherently cross functional. And people don't understand what that really means or how to think about it. So all these problems still exist. I think some companies are figuring it out. And that's great for them. But there's a lot of new companies coming in wanting to be product oriented. I was talking to a guy last week from a small bank, and they're wanting to move from project to product. And he's trying to get his executives to kind of understand that. And, you know, it's a challenge because the people who are making decisions are running businesses, they're not thinking about product management or product. They're thinking about, how do I how do I, you know, meet the challenges that we're facing? So it's, it's almost like the old it versus business, golf. But now it's product versus management golf.



Jason Knight 09:47

Yeah, well, let's start to talk a little bit about some of the ways that that manifests itself but before we talk about The Five Dysfunctions of product teams, which is the article that you put up back in July on medium let's Talk about what that draws inspiration from, obviously, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick Lencioni was a great book, business fable that I personally

recommend. I think it's a really good book. And I think it's got some really good insight for people about how the dynamics between teams work, and the original dysfunctions that he calls absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. So before we talk about your spin, do you think that your versions are just these things that are just spun out into very much more product management specific versions of themselves? But they're still talking to the same basic problems? Or do you feel that product teams suffer from these original dysfunctions as well as the new ones that you're talking about?

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Saeed Khan 10:46

So his fibre very horizontal? Right, they're not they're not tied to any specific type of organisation? You know, I think, as he said, you know, it could be a church group even or something, it could be anyone and so things like absence of trust? Absolutely. That's exists in product, right? Fear of conflict. Yeah. You know, there's product managers who don't want to kind of rock the boat, but they want to say no, yeah, like, that's right. They don't want to say no lack of commitment, and absolutely avoidance, accountability and industry. So all those things are there in companies. But what I've seen is, there are more specific ones that are and then again, there may be a bit of overlap, but they're really specific to product organisations. And, and I think, getting specific, like one thing, you know, you can talk about absence of trust, and how you you solve that, but you can have a group that trust each other. But if they're under skilled, you're not going to get too far. So So I think the way I've tried to approach is that, given the work that I do, and, you know, I get to see inside a lot of companies, the problems tend to be pretty similar within product teams. And, you know, every company thinks that they're unique, and they are obviously their situation is unique. But there's patterns that exist. And I see these patterns a lot. So that's where sort of the inspiration of this article came from.



Jason Knight 12:12

I think that uniqueness, though, is a very interesting point. Because of course, the specifics are very different for every single company in the sense that they all have different products. They all have different people and personalities when the teams but from what I've seen, when I've been out there talking to people, it does seem that there are lots of very common themes. And I guess, obviously, again, that speaks to some of the dysfunctions. But I think the most interesting thing, and this is something I've seen before is like you call out a particular behaviour or type of thing that happens in a company. And people get really defensive, because they think that you're talking about them, because they're the only company that has that kind of problem. And then obviously, the obvious rebuttal is, well, every type of company has that problem, or all types of company have a version of that problem. But everyone just thinks they're their own sort of special little flower, and not just almost like a representation of just something that happens across the entire industry.

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Saeed Khan 13:04

Well, so here's the thing, right? When you work inside a company, you work inside the company, you don't see what's going on inside other companies. For me, as a consultant I'm working with, you know, several companies a year right, many companies here. So I see this

across companies, and one of the things I often tell my clients is, especially we're talking about some kind of very troubling problem they have is, and I'm not just saying this to sort of make them feel better. It's true. It's like, Hey, you're not alone in this right. Like, don't think you're unique. I've seen this problem several times. Yeah. How it manifests itself might have been slightly different, or, you know, the exact situation wasn't exactly the same. But but the general pattern was the same. I mean, what company doesn't have problems at the executive level? Right? What company doesn't have lack of alignment problems? Right? What company doesn't have rogue salespeople or row, you know, engineers or something, right? Like, these are just this is this is how companies are, but then the impacts of that really, really vary.



Jason Knight 14:08

No, absolutely. But let's talk about those five dysfunctions of a product team then. But before we do that, I do have to ask, why are we picking on product teams? I mean, shouldn't we be all positive and hopeful and idealistic, like product teams have a hard enough for us telling them that they're doing stuff wrong? Right?



Saeed Khan 14:25

Yeah, well, you know, part of my job description is to error all our dirty laundry. You know, like, like, if you if you can't, if you can't talk about a problem, how are you going to solve it? Right? Yep. So and I think here's the thing too, right, quite honestly, is, is there is so much an exploited potential here and when exploited is not in a negative sense. Like, there's so much potential to do better to do better for the people and to do better for the companies. Right? And so why not like if you had a sales team that was underperforming? You wouldn't go hey, let's want to talk about that?



Jason Knight 15:02

Well, they get fired, and they get different salespeople in the room.



Saeed Khan 15:05

Yeah. But you know, you'd look to solve the problem, right. And, you know, the thing about sales, it's, it's easier to measure if they're performing well, same with marketing on a certain level, product is harder to measure their, their, their direct contribution and their direct impact. But the goal is still the same, let's, let's understand what's wrong and why it might be wrong. And then let's solve it. And, and let's solve it in a way that really impacts the company. But you have to really get honest about it, like you can't gloss over it, and just kind of, you know, put a layer of icing and let's, let's all make it look nice. Like, you really, you really want to get to the core problem. And, you know, I remember did a consulting project once and I did this organisational analysis. And I interviewed about 3035 people, you know, it's sort of like a 360 review of the product, or but the product org in touches all these other groups. So it's, it's, it's almost no, it's not really, but it's almost like a review of the of the company. Long story short, one of the big problems that lots of people cited was management, and in particular, the CIO. And the CIO was the guy who hired me to actually do this work. And so, and I told them upfront,

I said, Look, I'm going to tell you the truth, whether you want to accept it or not, that's up to you. And so, I mean, they have lots of issues, and that's fine. But I did highlight in the report that, you know, there was a lot of fingers pointing up at management and at the CIO. And what amazed me was the CIO, when we presented all the results back, he had pulled out every single quote from the report that referenced him, and he put it up on a slide. And he said, I'm going to own this, I'm going to fix this, this is what you're saying about me. And I am part of the problem. And I'm going to solve that. And I was, I was so impressed by that, because he was someone who really wanted to get at the heart of things. And I think that's the kind of leadership you need, right? You need leaders who are going to say, Yeah, I'm going to own up to my part, I'm going to help solve the problem. And I'm going to eliminate myself from being part of the problem. And so that, to me, was honesty, in that honesty is what you need to solve these problems.



Jason Knight 17:21

Yeah, I understand. I agree. I think the one dark side of some of this honesty, though, is in certain organisations, and I guess certain people that have worked in certain organisations days, almost this implicit blame, like one of the things I push back on is the concept of like, good product manager, bad product manager, like the old article, like, obviously, it is possible for product managers and product teams to work well or poorly, but I don't necessarily think it should be seen as like a character flaw of the person, like, let's not commit fundamental attribution error, let's go and fix the actual behaviours, rather than try and judge the motivations or that they're not good enough or not. So I 100% agree, as long as the companies in the teams are set up to actually accept that take that on the nose, like that CIO did and move on in a very productive way?

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Saeed Khan 18:07

Absolutely. So I'll say two things. So first of all, whenever I do this work, I make that explicit clear that none of this is a finger pointing or an indictment of any individual. Right? In the CIOs case, he was an explicitly identified individual. Yeah. But in general, I don't. You know, if people point fingers, I remove all that I don't include specific individuals, individual contributors, or things like that, right. But in his case, there was no way around it like you couldn't go generic executive is a problem. And on the flip side, though, I think that this kind of work really requires that level of detail like you, you can't solve specific problems with generic solutions, right? So if there's an organisational issue, here's an example. So in that same company, product management got hammered by people, there were a lot of things and in the head of product, I mean, he was he was very defensive, like I said, look, he was, in fact, not happy that they were doing his assessment, because, you know, there was seven product managers and you know, 40 other people, right, guess where the bulk of the commentary is gonna go? And I said, Look, I understand your your issue, but I can also understand if it's valid or not, like where is the valid criticism coming from? And we'll talk about that. Now, what was interesting was, a lot of it went against him, but we spent a year working with them. I spent a year working with them to address a lot of issues. And then we did a follow up assessment a year later. And guess what, literally not a single complaint about product management. And the problem wasn't that product management all of a sudden, had gotten their act together. Yeah, they had done some things, but the company itself was functioning way better. And so the issues that were looking like they were coming from product management had been addressed. And I pointed that out

as well. I said, like literally not a single complaint from essentially all the same people. So I think that's the thing that people have to understand. Right. It's, it's about the system, not about the individual or the specific team.



Jason Knight 20:17

Absolutely big fan of thinking about the system as well. But let's start talking about some of those five specific product dysfunctions. Yes. So the first dysfunction is poor job definitions. Yeah. Which speaks to some of what we've talked about before about the sort of the ambiguity of the role. how poorly understood product management is, but are you just talking about rubbish, ambiguous job specs that I've complained about before, like, you know, ones that look like they've been stuck together from two other job specs, or just asked for everything? Or I think one example you showed of like just a bullet point for just any other task that people wanted? Like? Is it that type of thing that you're talking about? Or is there something more fundamental when you're talking about poor job definitions?



Saeed Khan 20:59

So I use the phrase poor job definitions, specifically versus job description? So yeah, yes. I think poor job descriptions are a symptom of the problem, right? So if you're gonna put out a job that's all generic or a unicorn or whatever, you probably don't understand what the real need is. And what I've found with a number of companies is that being the case, there's, there's one company I was working with, and they had product managers, they had a director of product management, they had product owners, etc. And I said, Can you show me the, the job description for Product Manager? And they said, Oh, well, we don't have one like, okay, what are the response? Was it were you must you have an HR department, wherever you, wherever you laid that out, and they all they had was the job description that they'd put up on, you know, indeed, or wherever they put it up. And I said, Okay, well, where did you get this from? And they said, Oh, we copied it from another company. And so you had people in roles who were doing work, but there wasn't clarity of exactly what work they should be doing. And so they ended up being very engineering centric. Sure, working with a product owner working with UX, etc. But it really wasn't clear. And then what what are their objectives? Right? What are they really trying to achieve? So I think that whole situation is a big problem, essentially, you've got people working in jobs without clarity, and then you expect some great results from it. Like, imagine the same thing with sales? Well, you're gonna you're gonna get on the phone, and you're gonna go visit people, and you're going to ask them for money. And like, what? No, yeah, you're going to be pretty precise with a salesperson, you're probably going to be precise with, you know, other roles. Why isn't that the case here? So I think it's a symptom. But it's a it's a starting point, like when you look into a lot of companies, what the product managers do. And what I tell people is that the reason you've got this unicorn description is because you haven't really thought through what you want them to do, right? Like, well, we don't know what we want them to do. So we put everything you know. So it's just like, I didn't know how to say it. But to me, it's nonsensical, that you would hire someone with that amount of ambiguity about the job they're doing, especially given how important that job is.



Jason Knight 23:34

Yeah, well, I mean, obviously, a big part of that is that people don't really have a strong



understanding of what product managers should really be doing. But there's also this narrative, which I've seen from some parties, which is like, product managers are just glue. They're just there to fill in the gaps. Take messages between the development team and the sales team sit in a bunch of different calls, maybe and help do the QA help with you. 80. It's fair to say that some people are very much in favour of this being helpful just doing whatever needs to be done type of approach. And I guess there's a lot to be said for being helpful. But from your perspective, why aren't product managers glue? Or why is it not good for them to be glue?

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Saeed Khan 24:14

Well, we could get into a discussion of what is glue, if you really want to think about it, right? Like, you know, when you glue two things together, what are you really doing, right? Like, are you making something better? Or are you fixing a problem? Like what is it Are you hiring people just to be problem fixers, are hiring people just to connect one group with another, like, think about what that means? Right? I've heard people use phrases like gap filler, glue, connective tissue. And I think what people are trying to express, at least I hope, is the cross functional nature of the role. And in that sense, you can think of it as something that helps bind groups together and align them and so on and I think that's absolutely part of the responsibility of Product Management. But that's not the primary focus in the sense that you do it without a context, while you're just glue, you're going to fill the gap over here and you know, like, do what's needed. Like, it's, you can hire people who whose job that is. But that's not product management. Right? So I think really, it is a lack of understanding of Product Management. You know, we talked about this last time, we talked about the actual word product management, and what is the management, right? Like, maybe people should ask themselves that question, I'm hiring a manager, I'm hiring a manager of product, what is the management I want from them? And really think about that? Is it just delivery management? Is that what you're hiring them for? Is it business management? Is it organisational management, like, there's lots of different types of management that you could be doing. And good product managers do multiple types of management. But I think people need to think about that explicitly. And really understand that, because I don't know what glue is in terms of management. But it's not, it doesn't sound like a really, you know, meaningful or valuable type of management.



Jason Knight 26:18

What is kind of almost like a job type mentality, they're like a, someone that's just gonna come in and fix a few little bits, and then just go off to the next thing, and always be firefighting, and just kind of almost making up for other people's inability to talk to each other as well, which, again, obviously, there is some of that in product management, you know, you do have to talk to a bunch of people bring people together. But like, at the same time, I think it's fair to say that in most organisations, people could just deal with talking between the teams a little bit more as well, rather than relying on someone else to carry the messages around.

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Saeed Khan 26:49

Absolutely, absolutely. I think there's far less expensive and far more scalable ways of solving the communication problem than to hire an intermediary.



Jason Knight 26:59

Yeah. 100%. Okay, so the next dysfunction you talk about, and you mentioned earlier, as well, under skilled product managers. Now, we could probably assume that's in part because their jobs are ambiguous as per what we just said, like it's difficult to be skilled in something if there's not actually a something to be skilled in, in certain companies. But what are some of the obvious signs of an under skilled product manager? Day to day?

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Saeed Khan 27:20

Okay, so in terms of signs, and this is part of, you know, that when I, when I do my work, I try and spend a lot of time listening, and observing and trying to see what's really going on, you know, it's, it's hard, you know, it's sort of like the Heisenberg principle, like, when you measure something, you you impact what you're measuring, right, that's like, at the quantum level, but so you know, having the observer there does impact behaviour. But when I hear people talking in very generic terms, they're not specific in what they're saying. They're not clear in what they're doing, like, you know, if they exist at the 100,000 foot level, those are all signs to me of people who are out of context, who don't have the skills to get into whatever problem they're in. So, you know, when I come on under skilled product managers, what I really mean is, yes, there's an impact from the poor job definition to who you've hired. But part of it is that first of all, none of us were trained in school. There's no undergraduate programme for product management or anything like that. No, yeah, not yet. Yeah, there's some Master's programmes. But it's also a job that you learn from doing because it is so diverse, right? Like, if you just think about discovery work, like discovery work is a lot of qualitative research, most of us weren't taught how to do qualitative research analysis in school. And so you can go through the motions of interviewing people, and so on. But if you don't understand the details of the kinds of questions, etc, how to do the analysis, how to get insights, how to draw conclusions, you're not going to be successful, right? The same thing with roadmapping. Like, the biggest part of roadmapping is the part that's ignored most in my opinion, which is a cross functional aspect of it, right. roadmapping as a process is what you really want to focus on not publishing a roadmap, right? And that road mapping process is about strategy, about alignment, and about really understanding the nature of the business you're in and how you're going to succeed. And yet, you know, the focus is on what's on the roadmap, what, what are we going to deliver when which which is a whole other issue? Yep. And so these skills are not like hard skills, that you can just say, oh, here, take a seminar, or take a one day workshop or, you know, listen to this podcast or whatever, you know, like they are skills that come through doing in from repeatedly doing and then being coached. So, those are the things that people don't understand. I've sat in enough roadmap presentations and seeing the frowns on executive faces when the roadmap is presented. And, and really isn't, because what's been presented doesn't align with what they're expecting or what they need to see. And that is coming from other issues. So like, these are this one kind of I want to say under skill, it's not that you don't have smart people like they, they know SQL, they can do things in excel in their sleep, and they can, you know, use whatever tools are out there. But it sees other more sort of intangible skills, and bringing all that together. And I've seen people with five years seven years product management experience, who really struggle in a new context, as an example, let's say you're working on a brand new product. So you've been a Product Manager of existing products. But now you've got to define a new product. That's a whole different set of skills. Yep. And how you manage that is very different. So again, these are things that are learned over time, and you learn by doing and you learn through kind of good mentorship, etc.



Jason Knight 31:06

But is it then just a case of that school of hard knocks, learn by doing type of posts that you just mentioned, obviously, you touched on coaching and mentorship as well. But in some of these companies, it's going to be quite hard to get good coaches or mentors from within the company to help them out. Because maybe the people that are even leading the teams, somewhat under skilled themselves. So is it just a case of these people trying to do their best to persuade management to get them external training, external coaching? Or are there other things that these PMS can do to kind of self start their own upskilling journey?

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Saeed Khan 31:40

Well, they should listen to your podcast. And that should be like level one. So no, I think I think absolutely, they should be looking for guidance. And if it's not available internally, then they should look for it externally. There's enough people now who are doing coaching and mentoring and can provide that assistance. And you know, the ROI of that is enormous in the sense that, like, quite honestly, what's the cost of screwing up a release, like if you really added up, right? It's probably if you did it, even in a small company, it's probably in the millions of dollars, if you add up all the loss potential, right? Like, it's the rework, and then the loss potential, the market momentum, all that stuff. So why not invest in your people, if you truly believe that your people are valuable, and invest a few \$1,000, or whatever the cost is, and get them some mentorship and some coaching, and help them along, and it's not going to solve the problem. You know, if it was the magic bullet, great, but it's gonna it's gonna really help you avoid any big, you know, really big errors. And it also says something about the mindset of the management who understand that, yeah, we don't have all the answers internally, we can get help externally. And our goal is to move the people and the company forward in a in a positive way. Right. So I think I think that coaching in anything, I mean, look, even coaches have coaches, and I'm talking about financial people. But, you know, seriously, if you look in the business world, this is not something new. And so I just think it's one of the probably easiest, and lowest risk ways to you know, bring your people forward.



Jason Knight 33:27

Super high leverage. But the next dysfunction then is all about poor processes or processes, I'm sure you'd call them. Now, for many people in the product, an Agile community, and I can think of a few specific names in particular, the very word process or process is a dirty word. And obviously, many companies try and cover up bad product practices, poor culture, bad communication, all of that stuff with layers and layers of checklists and procedures and processes. So I understand where you're going with this conceptually, like the idea that you need to be able to do something you need some kind of repeatability, but how much process should we really be gunning for in a well functioning product company? As much

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Saeed Khan 34:07

as makes sense? So there you go. It depends. So well. So here's the thing, right, this word process, and we say process, not process. Anyway. It's a loaded term, and people immediately

jumped to the heavy weight. regimented, you know, overly structured mindset. But, you know, there's a quote in the article, but I think it's absolutely true. It's by Deming, actually has two quotes, and I'll read them out. One is if you can't describe what you're doing as a process, you don't know what you're doing. And then the other one is, a bad system will be a good person every time. Yep. And so the thing is that when we think about it, like sales, and I'll go back to the same sales methodology, up sales, for goodness sake, I'm actually not beating up sales. I'm actually talking about sales in the way I'll say this. If sales departments were run in the way product organisations are run in most companies, those companies would go bankrupt. In short order. There is a lot more process and a lot more diligence in sales organisations than there is in many product organisations. And just being honest about that, like, like, you sit in on a sales funnel call, right? And I've sat in on them. And, you know, people are held accountable, hey, you know, side, what's going on your funnel. Okay, what did you have continues? What's going on here? What about this what you know, and every week I work in a company where every week the sales VP would publish the funnel and what the projections were for that quarter. And we would know, like, it didn't go out to the whole company, but product mentioned was one that people who got it. And you know, what, like, that was more than the engineering team was doing that was more than the product management team was doing. So what I'm saying is, these kinds of things like whether you call what sales was doing a process or not, that's up to you. But that kind of diligence and rigour is what's needed for repeatable success. And that's what sales is after repeatable success. It's not we hit our number this quarter, and everything goes to hell next quarter, right? You want that same mindset in product. When we do discovery, we do it in a repeatable way. And we get good outputs, and we know that things might be going wrong, and we can address them, right. If you don't know what you're doing, then you don't know when things are going wrong. If you're just gonna, hey, let's go interview people. Like I worked with a company once and, and they really were enthusiastic about discovery. And they went out and did all these interviews, and I was really trying to get them to, like, do some analysis along the way, like after every call, have a little huddle. What did we learn? You know, what should we change etc. You know, after you do about half, you should kind of really go in and dig into the data and understand it and see what else is going on? What conclusions can you draw, and they did none of it. And so, at the end, like they did, they did all their analysis. But of course, they'd forgotten some of this stuff from the early interviews, and some of the notes weren't great. And then some of the questions that were asking towards the end, were probably not as good as they could have been. And their results weren't as good as they could have been right. And there was a lot of ambiguity in certain parts. And, you know, they did get some insights. But boy for that effort, the results weren't great. And if you make a parallel to sales, they would have missed their number, even though they did all of that work. So the point is, that rigour, that diligence, that process, here's ways to do things, here's better ways to do things, follows better ways. And you're not dependent on heroes, you know, the individuals who will get it done for you. We talked about that last time as well.



Jason Knight 37:48

Oh, yes, we did. Perseus Yes. First, yes.



Saeed Khan 37:51

And you're building a team, right? And that's really what you want. You want people who will build a team. So going back to sports analogies, you know, the plays are the process, right? The plays, the football plays, or the hockey plays, or whatever, that's part of the process. What are

your plays in product management? Right? Do you have plays for discovery? Do you have plays for roadmap? Yep, plays for, you know, launch, get plays for other things. Like, all that stuff should be clear to people. And if it's not, then it's all ad hoc, in that, what can you expect from ad hoc work, you'll get ad hoc results.



Jason Knight 38:25

That sounds fair enough, I'm convinced, and we'll start to implement safe as soon as I get off this call. But next up, we have a dysfunction that will no doubt resonate with many, many listeners. And that's the dysfunction of unclear objectives. Now, again, that's not an uncommon refrain from lots of people. But are you talking about purely a product team objective perspective? Or are you talking about literally the entire company from leadership down? Or you're talking about both?

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Saeed Khan 38:53

Well, okay, now I do what everything is clear to everybody. But when we think of product, what are the objectives of product organisations or product teams or product management teams, right? So often those objectives are delivery? Yep, we got X, Y, and Zed out out to market. And that's fine as an objective. It's not great as a product management objective, because that product management is not strictly a delivery team. And that's not the objective of product management, the objective of product managers product success, success depends on the context, right? It depends on the maturity of the product, the market, etcetera. But there should be clear success metrics that people are working towards, and they can measure against right. Revenue is a success metric, but it's a very lagging metric. In B. It's so far out of the direct influence of product management, that it's very hard to correlate the work you're doing with that so I think that absolutely product managers should understand revenue objectives. And part of their work should contribute to it because that's, that's sort of the now part of their work. But really the biggest thing that product management can do as an organisation and company is set up the company for success next year or the year after, for future repeatable success. So in the same way that you want a sales team that you don't have to worry, every quarter is going to deliver your numbers, you want to have a product management team that you don't have to worry is going to deliver what they need to deliver quarter after quarter, year after year. We know that we're building generally the right things, right. There's risk, obviously. But we're we know that we're targeting the right people, we're expanding into the right markets, we're doing the things that are driving the overall product success that drives business success. And it's a hard thing often for companies to understand that those business goals need to be decomposed into smaller product goals. I once worked with a company, and they'd been around for a while and I asked them, I just wanted to see I said, Look, you don't have to show me if it's confidential. But you know, what's the history of that whole bunch of little, little products? And they said, Can you show me just even the the numbers that you've sold of each of these, you know, if you don't want to show me revenue, that's fine. And it would have taken them a month to pull all that together? Because they looked at everything in aggregate. It wasn't a question of which specific products are selling? Well, it was just hey, we met a number for the quarter for the year, whatever. And so what you know, how is a product manager going to have an objective in a company like that, where the details aren't even easily accessible? Right? Is my product doing? Well? Who knows? Right? They were delivering? Yeah. So this idea of objectives, I think, has to be broken out to be in

business objectives in product objectives, and they should be clearer, and they should be measurable. And then you should be able to tie not, you can't do it 100%. But you should be able to tie major initiatives to contribution to those goals. And essentially, what you want to be able to be confident about is that you're directionally correct, right, so that you're doing the things that are contributing to that success. In some cases, you may know exactly, hey, we did x and we got y, then that's great. But a lot of cases, the actual impact comes quite a bit downstream. But you can you can kind of connect some dots and say, yeah, we can see how we influenced what happened. But having clear objectives and honing them over time, I think is a discipline that product organisations need to really work on?



Jason Knight 42:54

No, absolutely. Well, there's one more thing that they need to work on as well, which is the final dysfunction, which is weak product leadership, feeling very attacked at this point. But obviously, there are a few ways that product leadership can be weak. But on the other hand, personally, I'm a massive advocate for product managers, good product managers who want to get into leadership to have a chance to get into product leadership and get coached in and become effective leaders themselves. But what's worse, in your mind? Is it the Peter Principle, PMS that have been promoted up past their capability gone from being a strong IC to a floundering leader? Or is it the kind of top down parachuted in business strategy folks that kind of get brought in, because they don't think that the product teams got enough adults in it to actually lead it.



Saeed Khan 43:39

So the ladder 99.9999% of the time, I would say that the first one can be coached and helped to succeed,



Jason Knight 43:52

if we can find them a coach, if you can find a coach, ya know,



Saeed Khan 43:55

if you're not working, if you're not willing to find them a coach, then there's a bigger problem to solve. So here's the thing, right? And we talked about this a bit last time as well. But what does it mean to be a product leader? What it's not just a job title, right? You can't just say, Oh, George, hey, you know, here's, here's the job title, go do the job. It really is a discipline and an understanding, and a real appreciation for the details of the work to be done. And if you don't know what those are, if you haven't done that work, and you haven't faced those challenges yourself, then how are you going to lead a team and coach them to do the things they need to do? You don't have the pattern recognition that you need to have and again, you know, would you hire sales guy to how to sales team who's never done sales or marketing person who's never done marketing lead a marketing team yet? I want to see one example like just one example of a company that hired a CFO who had no for work in finance in any shape, or form, show me one, right? Because you'd never do it. It's like the stupidest thing you could do. And

yet, well, you know, maybe Musk is doing it at Twitter, I don't know. But but you have to understand that the discipline of the product, which touches all the other parts of that company, requires a skill set that can work across the company that appreciates marketing for what they do sales for, what they do services for what they do, etc. And then bring that to the table. So without question, I would take someone who's come up through the ranks, and is a weak, weaker leader, and work with them, to help them become a better leader than to parachute someone in who doesn't understand the domain at all. I think though, this idea of weak product leadership is probably an you know, I'll be honest, I put it last. But I wanted to put it first. Because it's really the biggest problem that I see. And when I see weak product leadership, it's not an attack on the people themselves. I mean, I've seen many people very earnestly trying to do the right things. I once worked at a company and there was a VP of Operations, who owned product management product manager was a very small team, but probably a really great VP of Operations, but didn't understand the basics of how to work with engineering, how to create a roadmap, how to do the things that need to be done. And so you're not going to be successful, you're not gonna be successful as a leader, you're not gonna be successful as an organisation. And I think that's something countries need to realise that there's a cost and a price they're paying by doing this kind of thing. And so if you were to fix one thing, and I think this is a question, you're probably going to ask me, this is where I would start, start with a really good leader, someone who's experienced who can coming up, that doesn't guarantee success. It's not the magic bullet here. But it is the starting point, because then if you go back up through all the other issues, right processes, right objectives, hiring, organising your teams, all that stuff, someone who can bring that context together, and put these things in place, are going to help solve your other problems. But there are plenty of companies where you have product leaders, and maybe they're not weak, maybe they're not super strong, but they're competent. But there's organisational issues that cause these other problems, right, we don't always get the perfect candidate to hire, we don't always have the liberty of doing the processes the way we want, you know, time pressures are things like that. So these are all things that have to be they're all interconnected. But definitely, without a strong leader, it's like any, you know, again, going back to sports analogies, whether it's Tron Captain restaurant coach on the team, you're not going to get the results you want.



Jason Knight 47:59

Without interesting point there is, and I agree, obviously, with with all of that, but I've been thinking about this a little bit myself recently, this idea that there are certain companies out there that need strong product leadership, because they're in a bit of a bind, they've maybe not got the best processes, or people or objectives, all of the stuff that you've talked about, and they need probably substantial surgery to get them up to what we might consider a better functioning standard, like, make the engine run a little bit more efficiently, or start delivering better outcomes, all of the stuff that maybe a really good product leader could come in and do. But is that the sort of place that a really good product leader actually wants to go? Or do they want to go somewhere that's already got a kind of baseline of functionality that they can then improve? And I mean, I guess the question is, like, how many of the very best product leaders actually want to go and be like fundamental transformers versus almost optimizers?

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Saeed Khan 48:53

I don't know. I can't speak for all of them, or you can try. I think it really depends on the nature of the person and what really invigorates them. I love this work. I'll be honest with you, I love

problem solving. I think this notion of building great product organisations is an unmet challenge right now. I think there's a lot of potential for it. And so you know, if you're an optimizer, great be an optimizer there's nothing wrong with that, right? That's, that's where you find satisfaction. I know a lot of product people who have said to me and not not in this context, but in a pure work context. They love solving hard problems, you know, product problems, for example, working in difficult markets and really, you know, finding ways to succeed. Intellectually, it's very satisfying to do that and and find that success. So, I would say that it really depends. I would look at it personally and I would look at both the problems in the company and the opportunity For a company, so if I'm going to go into a company, and I'm just going to put myself in the role of, you know, a CPA or VP of product, or something like that going into one of these companies, and I'm going to dedicate my time to solving these tough organisational problems, and they are tough, right? There's a lot of history and culture and a lot of friction to fight against, I would want to look at it from that perspective and say, Okay, what's the upside, right, I'm going to put in this effort. And I'm going to, if I can turn this company around, you know, and it's not a Mimimi thing, but, you know, working with the rest of the executives, is there a lot of upside, if you're, if you're going to a company that probably is in a very low growth market, it might not be all that satisfying to do. But if you're gonna go into a company that really has a lot of new potential, and can grow a lot, I think, I think the reward is worth the effort. So I don't know I, I found over the years that my personal biases are towards people, the technical problems are there. And, you know, I can still wrap my head around them. But I think the people problems are where the real sort of pleasure comes from. And I love seeing people succeed where they weren't succeeding. And so you know, and quite honestly, the biggest barrier to success for every company, or the people in the culture is in those companies. It's not your competitor outside. biggest barriers are internal. And I think people need to realise that and then understand that, yeah, they can succeed, but they have to overcome those internal challenges. Because guess what, your competitors are overcoming them as well. Right? It's not like your competitors are getting a free ride. Not they have similar challenges.



Jason Knight 51:39

Yeah, everyone always looks good from the outside, right.



Saeed Khan 51:42

It's funny, but we always do that. I'll look at how great they're doing, right? Because we only see one side of them. You know, it's like that whole Spotify model thing like, oh, Spotify model squads. Let's do that. And then you find out, well, Spotify didn't really do that themselves. That was just, that was just a blog post somebody but you know, about one team or something?



Jason Knight 52:01

Yeah. Well, food for thought. But where can people find you after this? If they want to find out more about combating these dysfunctions, maybe find out a little bit more about your coaching or maybe even challenges for another egg race to see if you still got what it takes?







Saeed Khan 52:15

We should have talked about the egg race. You know, you mentioned in the intro, that's bonus



Jason Knight 52:18

content, we can put that behind a paywall.



Saeed Khan 52:21

Okay, absolutely. That was my that's my one claim to fame is that. So you can find me on LinkedIn, LinkedIn slash in slash CW con, I guess, transformation. labs.io is the site of my company, website. And then you know, as long as Twitter still exists, what you which might be another week with the way things are going, it's Aw, Khan and Twitter and then I'm on Mastodon as well, which I will say, I only joined a couple of weeks ago. And after the initial Hey, this isn't like Twitter. Actually, I really liking it. There's a growing product community. And it's just nice. It's simple. It's an you know, you can you can edit posts, you can you can write 500 characters at a time. And the bots and trolls haven't showed up yet. So



Jason Knight 53:13

give them time,



Saeed Khan 53:14

I think Macedon I hope I hope Macedon continues and, you know, improves and grows because I kind of I kind of like what's happening over there?



Jason Knight 53:24

Well, fair enough. I'll make sure to link all those different places into the show notes. And hopefully I get some people racing in your direction for some excellent advice. I'm sorry about that, to the gods of comedy. I'm so sorry. Well, it's been a fantastic chat. So again, thanks a lot for coming back for round two. Maybe there'll be a round three, one day in a couple of years time if I'm still doing this thing. Obviously, we'll stay in touch and all of those different places. But as for now, thanks for taking the time.



Saeed Khan 53:51

Thanks, Jason. Thank you.



Jason Knight 53:55

Always thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did

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