

Are Product Management Activities Strategic?

Posted on Mar 01, 2012, Posted by [Val Workman](#) Category [Product Management](#)

This posting is a continuation of the discussion about whether Product Management is strategic-based on the [blog post](#) by Scott Sehlhorst and others. I had made the point that Product Management was a team sport, and no member is more important than the other. This was in response to some of the comments on his posting more than the blog itself. Scott played me well, and came back in agreement to the team positioning, but asked "Are the Activities of Product Management Strategic or Execution". His blog post does a good job setting the stage for this question, and I agree with what he's saying. I may feel it's a bit of false dichotomy. Can't it be both? I believe it is.

The objective of Product Management is to increase an organization's competitive advantage through product initiatives. Because of this, we say that Product Management is one strategy for obtaining the objective of competitive advantage. Other strategies include mergers & acquisition, segmentation, substitution, and alliances to name a few. Clearly, Product Management is a corporate strategy because it impacts the entire corporation and it is used to satisfy the goal of increased profits. Well, "clearly" only if you believe in the GOSPEL: Goals, Objectives, Strategy, Plans, Execution, & Lessons Learned.

What about those unholy people who haven't been trained in strategic planning? Life falls apart in that case, we're stuck in a quagmire of definitions. Check this out. Wikipedia states that a **strategy**

is a plan of action designed to achieve a vision. It derives from the Greek "στρατηγία" (*strategia*), "office of general, command, generalship". Speaking of generals, I couldn't help but include Sun Tzu, from the Art of War, "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." Not very workable, but I like it.

Still not clear on whether Product Management is strategic or execution? Is obtaining a competitive advantage a goal, objective, strategy, or plan? In truth, I find it depends more on who says it, and how it's stated, rather than any fundamental underlying truth. It even becomes more complicated when today's CEOs go gallivanting around with the customers and bring back insight they want products to reflect. Is the CEO a member of the Product Management team?

It's all about authority and responsibility as a source of power. I liked Scott's analogy of the horse and rider. I should mention that in Texas, water is important. Now, most domesticated horses will sure enough die without a rider leading them to water. The horse has become dependent on the rider. In this case, the rider wouldn't be very smart taking the horse out in west Texas and rely on the horse to find water for both of them. A CEO would be just as smart relying on a domesticated product management team to find an increase in competitive advantage. That team could sure give the CEO a ride, but they'd all sure enough die.

Now Scott, let's get that rider off your back and talk about the wild horse. I'll tell you, they can find water. Now here lies the trick, how do you use a wild horse to find water? You've got to delegate some authority and give it some power. This is typically accomplished through a product charter. The PDMA refers to this as the Product Innovation Charter (PIC). Whatever you call it, it's in the charter that the CEO passes authority and responsibility to the Product Management team. In this way, yes, the CEO is a "Proxy" member of the Product Management team. The horse is let loose and everyone follows it to water. If you don't have a charter, and the CEO isn't actively engaged in the Product Management team, then you're a domesticated horse, and must be lead to competitive advantage.

You'll hear Sales folks yapping about how they can't to get to C-Level executives to sell your enterprise software. They'll be all frustrated that when they ask for the interview it's rejected. Don't they realize they're telling on themselves? When folks ask me for this, I simply ask why they want to talk to the CEO. Very few know enough to tell me a good reason. They don't get the appointment.

If the product management team can't articulate why they need the authority, no one will charter them. This is something you must prepare for. Know exactly why you need the authority delegated, be able to explain
what
you intend to do with it, and
how
you intend to turn it into competitive advantage. In this situation, most requests are successful. Yes, it's stressful to ask, but you know what it's like being a domesticated house with everyone on your back.

As to Scott's question, the strategic authority belongs with those with enough sense to use it properly. If you're a CEO and don't have a Product Management team that can find water, you'll

have to ride them or get a different team. If you're a Product Management team member who knows how to find water, then get a charter. If you're a member of the Product Management team and don't know how to find water, then folks like [Scott Sehlhorst](#) , [Tom Evans](#) and the [280_group](#)

,
[AIPPM](#)

,
[PDMA](#)

,
[brainmates](#)

, and
[Product Arts](#)

can help you get some training and get those riders off your back.

Product Management is all about competitive advantage, and that is one of the principle strategies of all organizations, for-profit and non-profit, software and hardware, product and services.

Tags: Tagged in: [consulting](#) [consulting](#) [execution](#) [strategy](#)