

The Product Manager vs. The Artist

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I find that sometimes the artist and craftsman in me tries to manifest itself in my product management activities. It comes out in the form of various attitudes. One attitude that seems to surface regularly is a deeply instilled obligation to do new work. I feel obligated to create stuff that people have never seen before.

For one thing, in execution, this standard requires constant exploration and reinvention, but also a certain amount of ignorance for what's considered right and proper. There's a bit of irrationality in believing that if I follow my own intuition and, at some level, don't pay attention to what other people think, I'll create unique works that will surprise and delight the customer. Artists have a stubborn faith in their ability to create something new from next to nothing. This faith shapes their work, enables them to establish themselves as individuals, fingerprinting their way through their medium.

Product managers also find a certain pleasure in being able to maintain planning decisions. They know that anything the team decides on today is based on today's perspective of market needs, competence, and stakeholder values. The future always brings a certain amount of uncertainty. Decision maintenance implies that they can quickly determine if a change to their work has to be made. They can determine what impact the change will have on other planning decisions, and identify where and how to make the change if they determine to do so.

Many product managers have learned to depend on the aroma of hot coffee in the morning. It provides a warm hug to an otherwise heartless day. Something that provides a sense of that same feeling is knowing that your processes are repeatable. By repeatable, I mean that it doesn't matter who does the task. Anyone being required to produce the same deliverable will come up with the same thing. There is a sense of security from this in that you know that you won't be blamed, in the case of an issue in quality, but rather the process used to produce the deliverable.

Both of these two pleasures (maintainable decisions and repeatable processes) seem to be in opposition with the artist in me that wants recognition from unique work that was independent of

what others thought and that no other person could have done.

Defendable decisions are a must for critics in both product management and the art world. This has to do with the fact that both roles typically require funding from stakeholders other than yourself. I often wondered how many art critics pretending to know the mind of the artist intended could prove their explanations. I can't tell you how many times I've seen product management teams dancing around trying to defend decisions they've made.

So do artists make good product managers or not? I would have to say the latter. Except when the corporate strategy or your team isn't customer-driven. Maybe you're a member of a SWAT team that contributes innovative ideas to another product management team that is customer-driven. At this point your creativity might be worth more than the formal processes that normally constrain creativity. If this is a question about weighted selection criteria, and depending on what you value most, maybe you'll want the artist over the product manager.

But this is at the crux of the question, couldn't people be both an artist and a good team player with repeatable processes and defendable decisions. History has shown not, but maybe with the right problem statement someone could find the right combination.

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