

THE

PRODUCT MANAGER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

Everything You Need
to Know to Succeed
as a Product Manager

STEVEN HAINES

*Author of *The Product Manager's Desk Reference**

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EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
TO SUCCEED AS A PRODUCT MANAGER

STEVEN HAINES



New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto



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INTRODUCTION

Imagine being shipwrecked on a tropical island. What's the first thing you'd do? Look for water? Search for shelter? Find food? Seek a mobile phone signal? Pose this situation to 50 people, and you'll likely get 50 different answers. Why? Because we all approach new situations from our individual personal perspectives, and these perspectives are based on our own subjective beliefs, knowledge, and experience. I am sure that you could conjure up dozens of images in your mind as you try to address this challenge.

Thousands of people embark on new Product Management roles every day of every year. Some change jobs in their own company; others are hired from outside the firm. Product managers come from all over. As I wrote in *The Product Manager's Desk Reference*, Product Management is considered the *accidental profession* because most product managers and product leaders come to Product Management from a variety of other areas. Usually these are rooted in the function people worked in previously, including Product Development, Marketing, Sales, Finance, and so on.

More than 88 percent of product managers I surveyed said that there isn't a carefully thought-out plan for them when they start their jobs. They get caught up in the whirlwind of seemingly urgent tasks that act like a rip-tide in an ocean. Therefore, in this book I give you the guidance you need to get your bearings and be as productive as you can, as fast as you can.

As I've told many newer product managers, in the early part of my Product Management career, I didn't have a guidebook or a list of things to do when I began my first job. To this day, *product managers are largely on their own when they start their new jobs*.

As further evidence of this situation, when I'm delivering my workshops, I constantly learn about what people are doing, what they're not doing, and what they're thinking about. This results in a host of interesting insights. As I've listened to these many voices, I realized that many people would have greatly benefited from a guidebook to help them get started.

In another survey, I asked Product Management leaders what advice they would give to people who wanted to enter the profession. Some said

that product managers should be product experts. Others said that they should learn the organization's politics and build relationships. Still others felt that product managers should work well with developers. Many of those who were deemed successful in their own product leadership roles seemed to have an innate and instinctive way to determine what they needed to do to get started so they could succeed. When I spoke to the employees of the product leaders, mainly the newer product managers, they lamented that they were just thrown into their jobs with little direction. Without a concrete path to follow and being left to figure things out on their own, they began their work by attending meetings and being assigned to "task work." On the other hand, about a third of the people I interviewed told me that they'd had a great boss or one who served as a coach and guide. Many of these indicated that there were great expectations placed on them to "hit the ground running," with minimal time to adapt.

In speaking with people who came into Product Management leadership roles, I uncovered some additional insights:

- Those who had held *leadership* roles in the past, particularly those who had more *generalist* types of roles, tended to have an uncanny knack for instantly grasping what was going on and thus managed to become engaged in the work quickly.
- People who had worked in *managerial* roles in functions other than Product Management tended to have more difficulty in adapting to their Product Management role because of their *functional mindset*.

To be successful in Product Management, you must have the ability to look "up and down" and "across" the organization to build a cross-functional mindset.

As I discuss later, the ways in which you approach your work and your work preferences shape how you embrace your job. For example:

- People who are more comfortable with task-oriented work and structure tend to shape their product manager's job in that image.
- People who are at home with an amorphous or unstructured world of broader and more unrelated dimensions tend to shape their job with greater flexibility, and they work well across organizational boundaries.

THE PURPOSE OF *THE PRODUCT MANAGER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE*

Simply stated, the purpose of this book is to help you to be as productive as possible, as quickly as possible—regardless of your starting point in Product Management—by providing a simple blueprint that you can follow.

There are many helpful books that promise 90-day or 100-day action plans for anyone to be successful in a new job; prevalent thought seems to indicate any person in any new job, no matter what industry or profession, is *expected to be fully functional and contributory after three or four months*. There may be some legitimacy to this assumption, but my interpretation of this position is that it does not necessarily mean the *precise mastery* of the job. Realistically, it has more to do with how you assimilate and produce recognizable contributions—in about 100 days or less.

This is important because most people who work in Product Management are required to directly impact the results of the product's business. Certainly, all people in all functions have metrics that guide their work, but no one in any other function will be expected to care as deeply about, or be held accountable for, those results.

The Product Manager's Survival Guide and the blueprint it provides will optimally direct you so that you can assimilate more quickly and become visibly productive as quickly as possible.

Mind you, I don't promise you'll become the perfect product manager in three or four months. However, if you follow the blueprint in this book, you'll have a running start. Your success will be built on how fast you get up off the ground to achieve early, noticeable wins for you and the people with whom you work.

IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS

To ensure that everyone starts from the same place, there are some foundational definitions for you to know:

Product Management refers to the holistic management of products and portfolios, from the time they are conceived to the time they are discontinued and withdrawn from the market. In essence, Product Management is the business management of products. Product Management is also the

term that refers to the organization that serves to lead and integrate the work of people from other functions.

A *product manager* is a person appointed to be a proactive product or product line “mini-CEO” or general manager. The intent in the definition is that the role of the product manager most closely resembles that of a CEO or general manager because these people are best equipped to guide organizations and lead cross-functional product teams.

The two key expressions in the previous sentence are “lead” and “cross-functional product teams.” Take special note of these terms because eventually a product manager has to lead and influence others who work in different functions.

They will become even more important to you when I make the point that a product team’s responsibility is to optimize the product’s market position and financial returns in ways that are consistent with corporate, business unit, or division strategies.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

If you were going to build a house, you would need an architect to create a proper blueprint that can be followed by the building contractors. When you assume your new Product Management role (or seek to improve on performance if you are already in the job), you may not have an adequate or comfortable sense of where you are and where you want to go. It’s like being lost in a storm without a compass. It’s hard to imagine anything more frustrating.

In order to get you moving as quickly and intelligently as possible, I have written this book in four main parts and nine chapters. The chapters are concise and to the point and include many helpful suggestions. The following briefly introduces you to the chapters of the book.

PART I: GETTING YOUR BEARINGS

Ocean navigators must plot a course to a given destination. Product people must do the same in order to make their way through complex organizations. The two chapters in this part are designed to help you by offering you the map to set sail and start you on your path to success.

Chapter 1: Starting Out

As the old adage goes, “If you don’t know where you are, any road will take you there.” When you begin your job as a product manager, you carry with you the job description you were given, an empty briefcase, and a host of perspectives. Your job in the first few months is to *leave behind many of the paradigms you’ve operated by in the past*. It’s not likely your new job will resemble anything you’ve done before. Even if you’ve been in your job for a while, you may still feel you’re “at sea” in terms of understanding what the job entails. This chapter will help you evaluate your capabilities, understand your strengths, and reveal areas you need to focus on so you can improve your effectiveness. It will also provide the needed context for what I’ll discuss in later chapters.

Chapter 2: Navigating the Organization

There’s one thing you can count on when you join a new organization, whether in your present company or a new one, and that is that you will have to learn a lot quickly. First, it’s necessary to understand the structure of the organization. Then you have to learn about its culture. From there, you will need to start building both formal and informal networks with people throughout the company in order to “get around” the other functions with greater ease. In other words, product managers must become “scholars” of all facets of the organization. They must synchronize the gears of the organization and ensure that work gets done so that products can be created, developed, launched, and managed. General “onboarding” may tell you about the company’s policies and practices in a general way. You will have to master the politics and understand the traditions and other organizational mores that shape the overall *internal image* of the firm. How quickly you get onboard is up to you. This chapter aims to help you get onboard as quickly and efficiently as possible.

PART II: LEARNING THE PRODUCT’S BUSINESS

Product managers and product leaders have to know their product’s business. The product’s business is much more than just features and functions. There are complex influences that must be understood in order to become a product expert, customer advocate, and domain expert. These two chapters will show you how.

Chapter 3: Embracing Your Product

Product managers must know everything about their products. A product is not merely a set of features or attributes, it's actually a business within a business. As you learn about it, you'll find you're in charge of your product's business. If you've inherited a product, you need to know how it works, its attributes, and how it solves a customer's problem or meets a market need. You need to know when it was "born," as a concept, how it was developed, and how it evolved. In addition, you will need to know how the product is built or produced and every operating system that supports the product, across the business. If you are hired to create a new product or to bring a brand new product to market, you'll need to grasp the initial Business Case, validate the forecast, and successfully launch the product. You'll also need to make sure you know how the product is sold, marketed, and supported. Finally, you'll need to know how the product fits within the portfolio of other products offered to the market by your company. Learning all this may seem daunting or even formidable, but this chapter will guide you through all the steps you need to follow to become the product expert and advocate.

Chapter 4: Conquering the Product's Environmental Domain

Domain knowledge and experience is required on the job. Yet this can be easily overlooked by newly hired product managers. Your company competes with other firms on an industrywide playing field. That industry playing field is influenced by politics, regulations, economics, social trends, and the state of technology. The players (competitors) come and go as they compete for the hearts and minds of customers. Furthermore, many industry areas and domains are in a constant state of flux that creates rifts that echo across the markets. New technologies replace older technologies. Customer preferences may change with the wind. In a heartbeat, your product can be obsolete unless you keep your fingers on the pulse of the multifaceted marketplace. This chapter will offer some great tips to help you master your domain.

PART III: GETTING WORK DONE

Product managers serve to synchronize and orchestrate the work of others across the organization as they focus on the achievement of important company goals. With a high degree of accountability and a challenge to

authority, this can be very perplexing. However, if you can understand how to build the proper relationships, utilize important processes to guide that work, and then monitor work using evidence and data, you'll be an infinitely more productive product manager. The three chapters in this part will set the stage for you to achieve greater levels of professional performance and proficiency.

Chapter 5: Influencing People and Building Teams

As you learn to navigate the organization (Chapter 2) and as you cultivate relationships and work on or lead cross-functional teams, you will become a master networker. It may seem easy to establish and build a relationship with a person or a group of people who have similar interests and preferences; however, most people in the organization will not be just like you. Therefore, it may take a little extra effort to understand those individuals, build trust, and earn credibility. Ultimately, they will look to you for leadership and guidance. Gaining credibility is as important as cultivating the ability to influence others. This involves getting to know those you'll be working with most closely and the people you may work with in an ancillary manner in various supporting roles. This chapter will be pivotal to your success and will offer relevant tips and tools to help you build relationships and teams.

Chapter 6: Mastering the Processes and Templates

I've heard people refer to the "Product Management Process" as if Product Management is one giant work flow. In other instances, people refer to their product *development* process as the only process to be followed by product managers. Nothing could be farther from the truth. For work to be effectively carried out, there are many major processes and subprocesses that must be understood and mastered. Many of these processes can be applied with the use of published templates and guides. However, as you'll learn, the role of the product manager is not a "fill-in-the-blanks" job with finite parameters. This chapter will provide you with an examination of the key processes used and the templates that can guide your work. It will also help you efficiently utilize and adapt those processes and templates so that you can optimize your work and improve efficiencies that are vital to the product's underlying success.

Chapter 7: Harnessing and Managing Product Data

Successful businesses use myriad data from a number of sources in order to obtain the intelligence and insights required to plan for and evaluate business performance. Accurate and timely data and information are also required for making solid business decisions to keep the product's business on track or to take corrective action. Data can be collected and produced by key systems. Among them are financial systems, supply chain systems, and customer management systems. Product people must know the systems that are used, the people who manage those systems, and the inputs (data) and outputs (revised data, information, and reports) produced by those systems. This chapter will review what you need to use and how to ensure that you get the data and information you need to manage your product's business.

PART IV: MOVING FORWARD

All product managers must gain and sustain sufficient forward momentum in their careers. Interestingly, there may not be a comprehensive list of things to do in order for you to round out your experience and to take the next steps in your career. The two chapters in this part will offer you valuable suggestions that will help you round out your experience and position yourself for promotion.

Chapter 8: Developing Other Professional Attributes

Product managers have to master a host of softer skills. These include your ability to effectively listen, speak, and write. In addition to the tools of basic communication, you must also be able to present thoughts and ideas persuasively to others. On another level, you'll need to consider some of the other aspects of the organization's society. Major among these would be a healthy appreciation for the needs of others. This might extend to how you serve as a go-to resource, or even the manner in which you relate to others from different cultures or countries. In addition, you'll certainly be dealing with people from your customers' firms, so you will also need to understand how to best build those vital relationships. Overall, you have to earn credibility with other people, no matter where they are. This means you will need to master the subtleties that allow you to develop relationships with, negotiate with, and influence others who do not work for you. This chapter will explore many of the areas that form the vital foundations to help you build a model for your success.

Chapter 9: Planning Your Next Steps

One of the things that separates well-run firms from others is their ability to successfully evaluate their product portfolios. This helps them to eliminate products that perform poorly and to guide investments toward areas that have the most potential. To extend this concept to you, in time, you will possess a valuable portfolio of knowledge, skills, and experience. However, some people who have worked only in Product Management might find that their portfolio of experience is incomplete. Those who have worked in various other business functions, or in other companies, may have harnessed sufficient corporate experience and are ready for a role in Product Management. In either case, you need a way to figure out what kinds of experiential projects you can work on to “round out” your experience. Once you have a broad base of experiences, you will have mastered many of the Product Management practices as outlined in this book, you will be ready to pursue your next role.

SUMMARY

I started this introduction by asking a question: What’s the first thing you would do if you found yourself shipwrecked on a tropical island? The unlikely scenario was presented to portray an image of being lost in a big ocean. In the *milieu* of the business world, you will encounter many people who sometimes seem “lost” in their jobs because what seems easy enough to comprehend in a job description may not reflect the reality within that world. In the cosmos of Product Management, you are responsible for you. You will find that there are few people who will willingly take you under their wing regardless of how much is expected of you.

One of the reasons I write books about Product Management (this being the third) is that I want to take you under my wing and help you succeed in a profession that is more satisfying, more gratifying, than any profession in the modern organization.

Welcome aboard. We are going to soar!

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PART

GETTING YOUR BEARINGS

You would never take a trip without an itinerary or a map. Yet some people who begin new roles in Product Management often start their job without a clear idea of what they need to do in order to assimilate into their role and adapt to the environment of their firm. On the other hand, there are many people who take on new Product Management roles with some wind at their back because of the knowledge and experience they've gained over time, either in Product Management jobs or in other business roles. However, the one thing that all product people share, both new and seasoned, is that they all gained their knowledge and experience through both past opportunities and serendipity. In other words, they did it despite not having a unified plan or blueprint to guide them.

Having recognized many hazards along the road I've traveled, I've made it my life's work to pave the way, light the darkness, and draw the maps so that the roads you travel are smoother and brighter—and this applies to all those who wish to succeed in Product Management. However, when you start your job, you don't have a lot of time to get your bearings. You don't have six months to learn your way around. Therefore, in the two chapters in this part, you'll acquire the information you'll need to get your bearings and find your way around an organization in very short order:

- Chapter 1 is titled Starting Out. Its purpose is to help you understand the major facets of the role and the professional attributes required to succeed. In this chapter, I also provide

you with some solid definitions of each attribute. Some aspects of these definitions will be familiar, and some will not. Then, I'll present you with a short assessment survey so that you can get your bearings and utilize each chapter's content to develop purposeful action plans for your own professional development.

- Chapter 2 is titled Navigating the Organization. Sailors, pilots, and explorers are adept at the art and science of navigation. They use a variety of techniques to pinpoint their current position and plot their course. In this chapter, you have to become an organizational explorer as you construct the most useful organizational chart to find your way around your company. Then there are some very helpful suggestions to help you align yourself with the right people, become visible, and be sure that the actions you ultimately take will produce optimal outcomes.

1 CHAPTER

STARTING OUT

- All product managers and product leaders begin their journey from different points in their career continuum.
- To be successful in Product Management, you need to formulate a personal strategy that will work best for *you*.
- When you can paint an accurate portrait of yourself at the outset, you then have the wherewithal to proactively make changes and improve your capability as a product manager or product leader.

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Landing a job in Product Management can be compared to making a parachute jump into an unknown field: each person lands in a different spot within the confines of the terrain. As with any unfamiliar landing place, you need to quickly orient yourself to where you are in this new environment. As you try to navigate by yourself, you may feel frustrated and lost in this unknown territory. If you don't find a way to accomplish all that is expected of you, you will be driven by the urgent demands of others and lacking in the proper context for what is being asked of you; and if you don't possess enough knowledge of the proper context, others will create that context for you.

This can happen so quickly that your good feelings about your new role will rapidly dissipate, and you'll experience *déjà vu*—back to running on the same old treadmill as you did in your former job. You accepted this new

job in the first place because you envisioned yourself as a businessperson who will manage and guide your product[s] to succeed in the most desirable markets. If you cannot achieve that success, you will feel unfulfilled.

You are not alone. In a survey I conducted, over 72 percent of product managers indicated that they were disappointed and disillusioned in the first six months after they start their new assignment. The top three reasons cited include:

1. Organizational obstacles they did not know how to overcome
2. An underestimation of their prior experience in a given area
3. A lack of guidance from their manager

What adds to the burden is their knowledge that their bosses have high expectations of them. At times they feel unable to meet these expectations no matter how many long hours they put in and how hard they work to achieve their goals.

On the other side of the coin, many bosses lament that product managers are too tactical (task-oriented). I am told by managers that they feel their product people just react to the needs of the moment and don't have any time to be "strategic."

What these managers of product managers don't realize is that *they should be able to coach and guide the product people who report to them.* Unfortunately, those managers of product managers are often *inexperienced in various aspects of Product Management themselves*—especially if they were promoted from another function or worked on a product that was at a different phase of its life (e.g., they managed a mature product, and now they are leading a group of product managers who manage newer, faster-moving products).

STARTING POINTS

Considering the perspective just discussed, I want this chapter to help you with strategies and tools that can accelerate your socialization into your organizational environment. You have to move up the curve as fast as you can in order to get down to the business of your product—which is really what Product Management is all about.

Your starting point depends on several factors. It is most important that you identify and assess who you are and where you are so that you can calibrate your own perspective as well as the perspectives of others with whom you will work. With this in mind, I've divided "you" into three categories, as follows:

1. You are a brand new product manager coming in to a new organization, either as a new employee or from another function (for example, a marketing analyst, an engineer, or another position) and you transferred from there into Product Management.
2. You are a current product manager who wants to move up, but you are not gaining any traction in your current environment. You're not entirely overjoyed with your situation, but you have what you have. For you, it's time for a reboot.
3. You are an individual contributor product manager, and you want to get promoted to a higher level individual contributor job (for example, a senior product manager).

No matter how you came to your role as a product manager, the important point is that you have to be able to figure out the path you've already taken so that you can more easily map the path ahead of you.

PRODUCT MANAGERS ARE BUSINESS MANAGERS

Product people are business people, first and foremost. They work across functions and serve to integrate or synchronize the work of others so that products and portfolios can be planned, developed, launched, and managed.

Here is an example of the complexity involved. If you wanted to build a house on a piece of land, what's the first thing you'd do? Hire an architect? Engage a building contractor? Employ a surveyor to determine the "lay of the land" and how to situate the house? Who would be the best person to *synchronize* the work of various people who must be involved in achieving the most desirable outcome? That would be the general contractor or GC.

The GC coordinates the *timing and flow of work activities* because the GC knows how to build the whole house. *The GC has the ability to anticipate*

problems and the finesse needed to coordinate proper scheduling and setting priorities. Product managers, like GCs, must be able to:

1. Communicate clearly to people in all functions.
2. Garner respect from people in those functions.
3. Appreciate the timing and coordination of work produced by people in those functions and anticipate that there will be problems to be solved along the way.
4. Create a shared vision with all those concerned.
5. Know enough to recognize the quality of the work performed in the fulfillment of the vision.

Here's the point: *No matter where you start out as a product person, you have to be able to assess where you've been and where you are now.* By doing so, you can figure out where to go next. That path forward is your strategic plan.

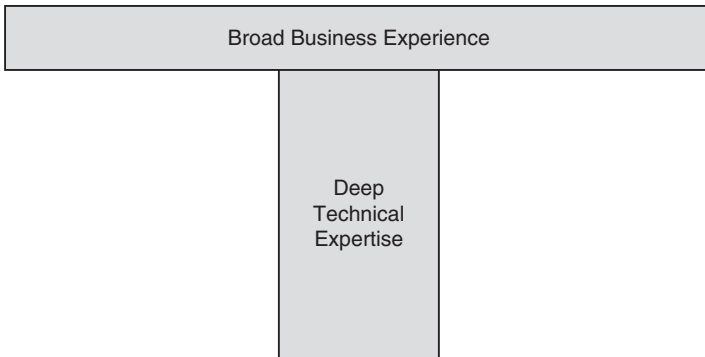
Let us begin.

PROFESSIONAL ATTRIBUTES

Senior leaders tell me that they want product people to be *business* people and *domain* experts. By being “business people,” they mean that they want product managers to completely grasp every aspect of the product’s business. This includes markets, people, systems, finances, performance measures, and processes. Business savvy is an expression many use to describe the attributes of curious problem solvers who “get things done” in a complex organization.

In terms of domain knowledge, leaders want product managers to comprehend the characteristics of the industry and technologies. While leaders admit that there are some industries in which the domain can easily be learned, there are other areas in which the level of effort required to understand the domain may be great and require extra time to cultivate.

To prove this point, during a benchmarking interview, one senior executive at an advanced technology company described the ideal Product Management leader as a “T-type” person. He held his hands in a perpendicular “T” to illustrate his points. He said, “I want my product

Figure 1.1 The T-type Product Manager

leaders to have broad business experience and deep technical expertise.” The T type is shown in Figure 1.1.

Several times during my corporate leadership career, of necessity, I recruited domain experts over business experts into my product organization. On one of those occasions, I knew I needed a technically oriented employee. Unfortunately, there was an external hiring freeze. I decided to take a chance and recruit a software engineer as a product manager because he understood the technology of a complex product. Over time, I learned that I should be very careful in the evaluation of any candidate’s key professional attributes. In this case, the reason became apparent after the individual started the job. He had a narrow focus which he applied to product requirements, and he had the same narrow focus when dealing with customer problems.

These experiences have taught me that in most instances it is unwise to empower a person as a *product leader* unless that person has broad business experience and deep domain experience. I want to help you avoid some of these slippery slopes. In the end, your ability to prepare yourself for your role will help you to quickly achieve positive results.

This first chapter is devoted to *you* because assessment is so vital to your ability to move forward. I want you to create as accurate a portrait of your professional attributes as is possible, regardless of your starting point. This assessment can be undertaken based on the eight attribute clusters I detail in this chapter.

These professional attributes listed are aspects of *you* and relate to the traits or behaviors that are expected of you by others. They relate to your actions and outcomes, and they must be visible, apparent, and evident to those around you.

First, read through the attributes to see the whole picture. Then, pause and reflect on each attribute as it relates to you, thereby putting you in the best position to *realistically* evaluate your current state—and discern what is *relevant* to you, whether in your present job or based on your aspirations.

As you review the attribute descriptions, you may think they're obvious and, perhaps, somewhat oversimplified since they're not nuanced or deeply detailed. However, I've interviewed many product managers about these attributes, and one of the things I've learned is this: *Understanding a definition is one thing; living the definition is another.* Also, many people feel that when they understand the definition, they are, by default, already living that definition. Unfortunately, that is often not the case—something that will be important as you continue with a self-evaluation.

You will also notice some recurring patterns and connectivity among several of the attribute definitions. For example, you can see why active listening and active observing in the communication cluster have impact on the attributes in the interpersonal cluster. These are important connections to recognize because the *astute* product person will recognize how the interrelationship of these attributes can contribute to a greater level of personal and professional effectiveness.

Attribute Cluster 1: Environmental

- *Product and technical knowledge and experience.* Includes a comprehensive understanding of product functionality, capability, and usage so you know how your product is used and how it solves a customer's problem or meets a customer's need. This also includes characteristics of the technology used in the products you manage (such as software, development methods, materials, and components) or in the techniques, processes, or methods used by your customers. Last, it covers aspects of the product's business that encompass pricing models and promotional techniques as well as sales and distribution channels. These areas, and others, will be discussed further in Chapter 3.
- *Domain knowledge and experience.* Involves the collective aspects of the industry, technology, and other factors related to your product. This

can broadly be thought of as domain (or as I'll discuss in Chapter 4, the product's "environmental domain") in which products are marketed and sold. Note that while technical knowledge is listed above, there is a difference between the state of a technology and having technical experience.

- *International business experience.* Relates to your travels to other countries to transact business or work with colleagues. It must include the analysis and comprehension of discrete market areas—a country or a region. It can also include working with external partners and internal structures such as a manufacturing plant or a customer service center—and the people who work in those facilities. I'll discuss this topic further in Chapter 8.
- *Industry thought leadership.* The work you do to produce research or findings that are published or presented and that identifies you as an industry expert. This, too, will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Attribute Cluster 2: Mindset

- *Critical thinking skills.* How you continually assimilate and evaluate business, market, financial, and environmental data that leads to vital conclusions that could help in the formulation of an insight and/or the derivation of a strategy. I'll review this topic in Chapter 8.
- *Systemic thinking.* The way in which you develop insights from the evaluation of complex interrelationships that are drawn from internal and external indicators. Internal indicators might be derived from cross-functional, cross-organizational, financial, or operational indicators. External indicators might include customer, competitor, or industry data.
- *Problem-solving capability.* The proactive approach you take to solve problems. This includes three main points:
 - The ability to assess a situation (ask the right questions or evaluate the environment).
 - The use of logical analysis to determine the source or root cause of the problem.
 - The engagement of others in the analysis, and the identification of solutions. I'll review an approach to problem solving in Chapter 8.
- *Strategic thinking.* In uncertain or ambiguous market environments, the demonstrated ability to consider and evaluate various,

continuous inputs and situations and to envision future solutions. Derives scenarios that drive business or product line options and opportunities. These may have implications that stretch from broad to narrow and may have near-term, midterm, and long-term impacts on the success of a product or portfolio.

Attribute Cluster 3: Action Orientation

- *Self-starter.* The ability to identify and initiate work without supervision means that product managers and product leaders shouldn't always have to wait for their orders. I'll discuss this further in Chapter 8.
- *Risk management.* Product managers are stewards of the firm's financial, human, and reputation assets. Therefore, product people have a fiduciary responsibility to ensure that their decisions do not expose the company to undesirable outcomes. Refer to Chapter 8 for some additional information on this topic.
- *Decisive action.* Follows a sound decision-making process based on accurate analysis of all factors and consideration of alternatives and outcomes. Ultimately, acts in the best interests of the product's business and that of the organization.

Attribute Cluster 4: Communication

- *Persuasive presentation skills.* This doesn't necessarily equate to your PowerPoint skills. It's related to how you communicate to others in a manner that captivates their imagination and inspires action. In Chapter 8, I'll discuss this further.
- *Clear and concise writing.* The ability to write in an organized manner to a specific audience. This is especially important when you are documenting your market insights, writing product requirements, composing Business Cases, and producing performance reports.
- *Active and attentive listening.* This skill is not only important for interacting with the people you work with, but it's a vital skill for hearing the voice of the customer, especially during the requirements elicitation process. It includes the ability to engage others in your quest for answers and insights. Active listening involves posing open-ended questions, paraphrasing, reflecting, and summarizing because you're focusing on people who are talking. For additional information, refer to Chapter 8.

- *Active observation.* A closely related capability product managers (and others) use to evaluate operating environments. Active observation techniques include the characterization of organizational work flows and operating models used by the company where the product manager works, as well as customer companies.

Attribute Cluster 5: Interpersonal Skills

- *Positive relationship building in the organization.* Acts in an open, available, and friendly manner. Creates personal visibility through actions that show direct interest in others. This is achieved by engaging in conversation with people, finding common interests, learning about their work, and understanding the issues they face. It also includes the ability to help others feel valued and important.
- *Political judgment.* Recognizes, analyzes, and reconciles incompatible interests or agendas on a team, in a department, or in an entire organization. Considers major corporate imperatives whose tenets you must abide by, even if they are not completely consistent with your own beliefs. As relationships are developed with key influencers across your organization, political judgment may also be driven through the understanding of the subtleties of the implicit or unspoken words of others.
- *Developing and maintaining positive customer relationships.* Builds strong, binding relationships with customers through frequent interactions. Knows how customers “do what they do” so that implicit needs can be uncovered. Creates an environment in which a cross-functional team can be led so that a comprehensive, collective awareness of customers can be shaped. Ties key industry activities to the challenges faced by customers. By doing so, deeper customer ties can be forged, which often results in the creation of value-based solutions to customers. Ensures that what is provided to customers fully meets or exceeds their expectations and, as such, creates deeper bonds that transcend product functionality.
- *Developing and maintaining positive external partner relationships.* Your organization may maintain business relationships with other firms such as suppliers, distributors, or ecosystem partners. Your support of these linkages helps your company achieve its strategic objectives. These relationships are built through a common understanding of all objectives for all participants or stakeholders, as well as through

all contractual obligations. This also means that when issues emerge, they can be dealt with to the satisfaction of all.

- *Consideration of cultural diversity and cultural issues.* Cross-functional product team members come from many places. Product people must develop competence in communicating within and interacting across cultural, ethnic, gender, and geographic boundaries.
- *Helping or coaching others.* Product people know that others may need help from time to time. They can be people within your product organization or those who work in other business functions. Communication proficiency equips product people with the skill to uncover clues about where people need help because, often, those who need help don't realize it. You'll therefore need to identify where a person needs help. Your knowledge and experience will serve to guide you as you share your observations, assist people as they set goals, and guide them as they work toward those goals. See Chapter 5 for additional information.

Attribute Cluster 6: Work Efficiency

- *Efficient time and work management.* Product managers must keep their days organized by balancing meetings, work tasks, and administrative activities in order to produce expected outcomes.
- *Dynamic prioritizing.* Product people must continually prioritize urgent and important tasks. They must incorporate a dynamic set of decision criteria to evaluate trade-offs so that things keep moving. Product people who can skillfully prioritize are prize problem solvers.
- *Efficient negotiation skills (internal and external).* Clarity around roles and responsibilities requires a clear recognition of who's supposed to do what and with whom. Negotiation and communication are the watchwords that ensure goals can be agreed upon and met.
- *Adaptability and flexibility.* Product managers function in a dynamic workplace with seemingly endless demands from others. Product managers must adapt to each situation and understand that goals and associated plans may change from time to time. Staying cool and logical are the watchwords here.

Attribute Cluster 7: Performance and Results

- *Use of financial and other KPIs (key performance indicators) to evaluate the product's business performance.* Financial acumen is vital to the ability

to establish budgets, forecasts, market share estimates, and cash flow estimates. Other business measures may need to be melded with financial and operational indicators to help track trends and reveal important business insights. Furthermore, the ability to analyze performance activity in relation to plans is critical so that corrective action can be taken and to ensure that decisions don't expose the firm to unwarranted risk. You will learn more in Chapter 7.

- *Evaluation and improvement of business processes.* Product people must know about each process and associated work flow that is used across the organization so they are able to synchronize disparate work flows with various functions. This is important in the evaluation of inefficiencies or other problems that impact key performance indicators and business results. This will be covered in Chapter 6.

Attribute Cluster 8: Individuality

- *Managerial courage.* The ability to stand up for your convictions, values, and beliefs. Managerial courage is called for through quick situational evaluations and decisions that represent those values and beliefs. This is an important characteristic of business leaders. In Chapter 8, I'll provide some hints for you about managerial courage.
- *Integrity and trust.* Integrity and trust are two separate items. Acting with integrity means that you have a sense of ethics and values. This is often seen in your managerial courage (above). Trust means that you behave reliably, fairly, and honestly so that you inspire others to trust you. Product people demonstrate the highest standards of integrity by delivering on commitments and protecting the firm's reputation.
- *Organizational instinct.* Product people learn their craft over many years. This understanding is built from the situations they have encountered. Therefore, *instincts are learned* from those experiences—they are not usually innate reactions. This learned instinct develops like a sixth sense in the minds of product people and appears without warning. Refer to Chapter 8 for some helpful guidelines.
- *Professionalism.* Demonstrates the “uncanny” ability to align personal and business conduct with ethical professional standards. May include

professional accountability for actions and visible commitment to ongoing self-development.

YOUR SELF-ASSESSMENT

Now that the attributes have been identified and described, it's time for you to reflect on them and carry out your self-assessment of these foundational elements of *you*. As you consider each attribute description, think of how much "evidence" you have with respect to your experience and effectiveness in each area. You can use Table 1.1 as a key, and you may use a rating scale such as:

- (1) Not enough evidence in your career to establish sufficient knowledge, skill, or experience.
- (2) Somewhat evident means that you may have acquired some knowledge along the way but may not have had sufficient opportunity to actually develop the acumen you need.
- (3) Evident means that you display the actions from time to time. There may be people who recognize some positive aspects of this attribute or behavior from when they have worked with you; however, others may not.
- (4) Very evident means that your experience is recognized by others, and this validates that you demonstrate more than sufficient knowledge, skill, and experience in this area and that you produce *recognizably* positive results in a fairly consistent manner.

Table 1.1 Sample Attribute Table

Attribute Cluster	Attributes	1	2	3	4
Name of Cluster	Attribute 1				
	Attribute 2				
	Attribute 3				
	Attribute 4				
	-Subtotal: cluster				

Quick Tip: Mind the Gap

With respect to any of these attributes, your acquired knowledge may not necessarily equate with your experience. *It's always best to avoid painting an inaccurate portrait of your experience.* Studying the structure of a profit and loss statement in an accounting class does not equate with the experience of evaluating cost variances in a production environment. Or, if you represent yourself as adaptable and flexible but you're seen by others as rigid and inflexible, you'll quickly be "discovered," and your role will be marginalized.

REFLECTION AND THE SECOND OPINION

After you do any type of self-assessment, you'll probably want to contemplate on your responses. This is often a deeply personal process because it leads you to insights about your professional makeup. Such a self-assessment is also important because it provides you with the ability to connect the dots of your own professional and career puzzle. Contemplation allows you to think more carefully about your own strengths and weaknesses. Just like you would think of a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis for your product, you can easily carry out a personal and professional SWOT analysis to capture these important insights about yourself.

However, in these types of assessments, you might find there is some bias in your self-assessment. In other words, it is a normal part of our behavioral patterns to misinterpret our own performance in any of these areas, so your responses may not be 100 percent accurate. With this in mind, it might be a good idea to validate your responses. You may need a second opinion—or several second opinions. The only true test is to find out how others have observed you or have seen the evidence of your actions and behaviors.

How you get that second opinion will depend, in part, on where you start. If you refer to the three starting points I discussed earlier, your perspective on how you score yourself may change. If you are on the path to recalibrate or reboot, or if you wish to move to a more senior level, you should be able to solicit the feedback of others. These people may include your boss, your boss's boss (these people matter a lot), and peers of your boss and your boss's boss. You can also speak to people in other functions

with whom you've worked. No matter how you put the pieces of this validation exercise together, the benefit of a more complete perspective can be invaluable.

One other point. What you feel you do in one work environment may not be what is considered acceptable in another environment. If you work for a company in an industry where you were considered a thought leader or a domain expert, your stature will change if or when you switch industries. Be sure to do this assessment with an eye not only to where you are or were, *but to where you hope to be*. If you make a change, such as a promotion to a different venue or move to another company, it could happen that you may actually move backward in your assessment of where your attributes are now.

Quick Tip

If you do this assessment of attributes and behaviors every year and work with your manager to complete this evaluation, you will clearly see how a path of continual improvement will contribute positively to your own career growth. It's also a great tool to use to work with your manager during your performance planning and goal setting process. If you are in a position to manage or coach others, you'll find deep satisfaction in using this tool with them.

IDENTIFY AND CLOSE GAPS

After you do this assessment, you'll note that most likely you did not get a top score on everything. Having the knowledge of where you are now gives you a chance to build aspects of the blueprint I speak about in the Introduction, and as you can view in Chapter 9.

It is better to undertake your performance improvement *after* you understand what your next strategic step is to be. The decision to focus on a particular area should depend largely on the impact you want to have and the goals you want to achieve.

As you familiarize yourself with the content in these chapters and gain greater context, the goals you set will begin to become clearer. Then you may wish to fine-tune those goals, perhaps with the input of your manager—or even with your peers or subordinates.

As you read through this book, you will be able to more clearly understand your experience gaps. If you know where you need to be in relation to where you are, then you can clearly focus on areas for improvement and map out your action plan. This is a great tool to use with your boss, too. You can collaborate on goals and plans that will allow you to get to the next level. If you find that your boss is not receptive to this or cannot completely help you or coach you in the steps you should take, you may wish to locate a mentor—either inside or outside your company. By doing this, you can leverage as many resources as possible to raise the bar and improve your position.

While it may be easy for you to discover areas you need to develop, the actual work may present some challenges. In essence, your plan will involve some self-learning and some coaching.

Furthermore, product people are *situational learners*. Therefore, you, as a product person, must turn on your personal and professional radar to detect opportunities to learn, adapt, and grow. There will be some goals that you can work toward by scheduling some time to do so. For example, to become more of a domain expert, you may arrange one-on-one sessions with various experts inside and outside your organization. On the other hand, systemic thinking may take some time and effort and some good coaching in order to learn about cause and effect and the interrelationships between situational variables. This may be more of a challenge to master, so you may really need to reach out to some mentors in order to have them help you cultivate that skill.

The main point is that *you will always be a work in progress*. Throughout this book, I will offer you a number of tips and equip you with tools that will enable you to start your journey of continuous improvement—a program that will provide surprising, stimulating results and that will spark your motivation to learn more and more. And you will achieve objectives that could have taken you longer to attain on your own.

USING THE PROFESSIONAL ATTRIBUTES TO INTERVIEW OTHERS

You may find yourself in a position in which you are either managing product managers or are interviewing prospective product managers for your manager. In any case, think about how you might apply the use of this

assessment to formulate specific questions to be posed to a job candidate and how you might gain insights that might normally be hidden from view.

If you choose to use this technique, you could devise a series of open-ended questions, the answers to which would provide you with the evidence you need about the person's degree of expertise with respect to any given attribute. Furthermore, you can employ this technique if you are a manager of product managers and are evaluating a person for an annual review or a promotion.

SUMMARY: THE JOURNEY YOU ARE ABOUT TO START

Business and military strategists (and surveyors) always try to get the lay of the land—in order to grasp the big picture and accomplish their mission. This way, they can set their targets and mileposts. They use their battle map as a way to position their resources and to deploy them in order to claim victory.

At the beginning of this chapter, I used the metaphor that product people usually “parachute” into the open field of their organization. If you land in that field and are assaulted from all sides (meetings, to-dos, and urgent tasks) you may be inundated and become captive (to the needs of others) in your own organization—probably without your even knowing it. Obviously, this is an undesirable and unproductive path. You need to know the components that make for promotable product people. I have outlined most of the characteristics as part of learning your way around. And that's also where self-assessment comes in.

It's perfectly natural to perceive ourselves in a certain way. However, the challenge comes if our perceptions and beliefs do not match the reality. That's why a good self-assessment will provide you with a data-rich baseline from which you can plot your next move and stay ahead of the curve. When you can paint an accurate portrait of yourself at the outset, you then have the wherewithal to proactively make changes and improve your game. In the Introduction I indicate that you have a few months to get positive traction in a new role. Use what you learn here to get a running start.