

Executive Summary

1. Leadership is a critical skill that product managers can and should learn as they progress in their careers.
2. For the product manager, leadership skills can be cultivated through a hunger for knowledge, ongoing learning, and the exponential effect of increasing business experience.
3. Product leaders are able to transform ideas, facilitate debate, and process market signals into an actionable vision for a product.

When it comes to leadership, there are those who make the distinction between the meaning of the word leadership as “an act of influence or inspiration” and the meaning of the word management as “an act of authority or direction.” There are those who associate leadership with force of personality and charisma and, alternatively, those who agree with Emerson’s lament on leadership and identity (“Who you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you say”). The words leader and leadership are often defined by the context and nuance of the situation in which they are used.

Product managers need to develop leadership skills throughout their career. They need to project an air of confidence and to stay calm. They must be able to learn and grow—to transform—by incorporating important leadership values, such as employing integrity, engendering trust, meeting commitments, acting professionally, and helping or coaching others. They need to develop leadership behaviors and mindset, as evident in such traits as continuous learning, strategic thinking, networking and bridge building, serving customers, facilitation and collaborative problem solving, and empowering others.

Knowledge and experience are critical building blocks of the product management skill set. The experiences over a career span may be directly or indirectly related to the immediate job and may include programming, user experience design, applications engineering, operations analysis, manufacturing techniques, and finance. Ongoing evaluation and personal development can help managers become more effective leaders.

No one will bestow product management leadership on you. It is yours to own, to internalize, and to practice. Over time, others will follow, and those signs are unmistakable.