

The Product Excellence Maturity Model

A guide to building customer-centric products



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product**board**



**Excellent
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As the pace of the market accelerates and customer expectations evolve, it has never been more important for companies to build excellent products and get them to market faster.

But what exactly is an excellent product?

Excellent products—products that people truly use and love—are those that solve real problems and cater to the needs of users.

The product teams behind excellent products do things differently, and what we've discovered is that they all share three pillars of mastery:

Deep user insight

Clear product strategy

Inspiring roadmap

We've coined these pillars the Product Excellence methodology



Simply knowing what these three pillars are isn't enough

There must be a culture and processes in place that give product teams the room to put the methodology into practice. And Product Excellence isn't a one-and-done achievement, it is an ongoing process—one that organizations must persist in to continuously deliver great products that customers need."

Hubert Palan

Founder & CEO of productboard

The **Product Excellence Maturity Model** is a framework that helps product teams develop the foundations they need to build excellent, customer-centric products. The model codifies effective product management processes, helping to identify where an organization falls along the three pillars of Product Excellence along with next steps for improvement.

There are five levels of Product Excellence maturity

Level 1 represents inexperienced product organizations, and Level 5, the mastery of Product Excellence. As teams progress through each level, their products become more sophisticated and increasingly align with the underlying needs of users.

The 5 levels of maturity are independent of the age or size of the organization. Though it's unlikely a startup could achieve the highest stages, it's not impossible. And there are more than a few enterprises that may find themselves performing at the lowest stages.

LEVEL ONE Intuition-driven

Product makers rely on **gut** rather than customer feedback and data

Emphasis on **shipping features** whether or not they drive real outcomes

Lack of understanding around the product roadmap leads others to question it

LEVEL TWO Introducing process

User requests are taken at **face value** & feedback is interpreted with **bias**

Basic product strategy in place but prioritization methods are overly **simplistic**

Roadmap **lacks clear objectives**; long-term goals are private and **undocumented**

LEVEL THREE Listening to customers

Product makers begin really **listening to customers**

Product strategy includes clear and **achievable KPIs** to measure progress

The product roadmap is **shared**, but focuses on outputs rather than outcomes

LEVEL FOUR Aligned on user needs

Product makers **systematically** uncover underlying user needs

Product strategy and objectives are **fully aligned** with broader business goals

Product roadmaps **clearly communicate** why some ideas are prioritized over others

LEVEL FIVE A thriving product culture

The entire organization understands **customer needs**

Cross-functional teams understand how they contribute to product success

Everyone **rallies** around both the product strategy and roadmap

CHAPTER ONE

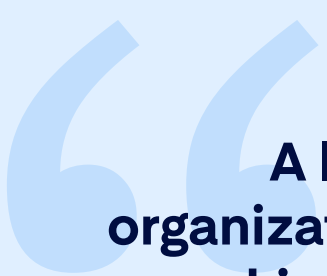
The five levels of the Product Excellence Maturity Model

LEVEL ONE

Intuition-driven

As the co-founder of a three-year-old SaaS company, Sarah often wears the hat of a product manager. Her company has seen moderate success, and they're edging their way towards profitability but can't quite make it over their current revenue plateau. Sarah is excited to move forward with a new product idea that she is sure will wow the market. Unfortunately, there is considerable disagreement amongst the founding team & the product team on what to build next.

Sarah pushes forward and starts delegating work to developers. At first, she receives pushback because they don't understand the significance of her requests. After eventually getting to work, they stop halfway through to address unexpected feature requests from the company's largest customers. Without a unifying strategy or vision, everyone is in pure execution mode without understanding why major product decisions are made.



A lot of organizations skip user research, testing, and validation and get right into solutions and what they want to build. The result is a struggle to find a meaningful market that will use and pay for the product."

Rich Mironov,
product
consultant &
thought leader

At Level 1, product managers dream of innovation but fail to seek enough input from the market, resulting in products that don't reflect the needs of users. In the rare cases where teams do find product/market fit, it is often blind luck that they must work to sustain.

At this stage, there is no formalized product vision, product strategy, or prioritization frameworks. Without a North Star, it's easy to get sucked into short-term thinking and quick wins that don't move the company forward.

As product decisions are made on the whims of founders or product leaders without any context or shared documentation, product managers spend extra time setting and resetting expectations for cross-functional teams. To put it plainly, no one understands the "why" behind major product decisions.

In Level 2, product teams begin to build elementary processes to understand users and make small efforts to align the company.

LEVEL TWO

Introducing process

Sarah and her team are starting to have conversations with customers and prospects about the product. She jots down their ad-hoc requests and creates requirements for them, but they are more or less a recap of the conversations at face value. In each of these conversations, Sarah does a lot of the talking—it is clear that she is trying to contain her excitement about the new product direction she has in mind. Most of these conversations are one-on-one and undocumented, so everything is filtered through Sarah's experience alone.

Level 2 product organizations understand that they need to interface with users. They have basic processes for talking to customers and recording feature requests, but still analyze inputs at face value rather than digging deeper into underlying needs.

Additionally, due to a lack of a formal system to gather and synthesize product feedback from diverse sources, there is no real collaboration between the product team and customer-facing teams, resulting in valuable insights slipping through the cracks. Because the product team works in a silo, there is a fundamental disconnect between product objectives, overall company strategy, and the broader organization. And, while there may be some effort to prioritize features, frameworks usually don't go beyond quantifying value vs. effort.

Lack of clear objectives is apparent in the roadmap.

Long-term goals are private or undocumented, leaving much of the organization unaccountable for their contributions to the product. Necessary dependencies are missed, launches are delayed, and product leadership does not have access to information on why the product team is heading in one direction instead of another.

“Only about 10% of institutional knowledge [about the product] makes it to a centralized place. 90% stays in email, Slack, in people’s personal notes, in people’s heads, or on the whiteboard. This is a huge missed opportunity.”

Sachin Rekhi,
Founder & CEO



LEVEL THREE

Listening to customers

Sarah spends her time thinking more about the underlying needs behind what customers tell her in interviews and begins to document everything in the company's internal wiki. Sarah's also invested in training her colleagues, helping them understand how to dig deeper into the issues that customers face. Her product team has a clear direction and defined KPIs to hold themselves accountable for moving the product forward. That said, they are still having a hard time translating insights into a coherent product vision and strategy.

**"Get into
that curious,
diagnostic
mindset and
away from
those
transactional
or
confirmatory
ones."**

C. Todd Lombardo
VP of Product



While product managers start talking to users at Level 2, Level 3 is where they begin to listen. Level 3 product organizations capture feedback from diverse touchpoints like email, support tickets, and user research, and work to uncover real-world pain points and needs. These insights then inform product vision & strategy.

Now, PMs are learning how to ask the right probing questions, and are beginning to document and pass on necessary context to relevant stakeholders. They approach customer conversations with enough patience to ask *why*. Instead of rushing through conversations, biasing users with leading questions, and skipping over the uncomfortable silences that users need to consider more profound topics, PMs sit back and listen.

Still, there is a potential for decision paralysis due to information overload. Product managers don't yet understand how to systematically comb through the vast quantity of available data and prioritize their work around broad themes and objectives. While objectives at Level 3 are customer-centric, they lack the refinement of an experienced product researcher. More importantly, there is no segmentation present, making it difficult to target different use cases & specific users.

At this stage, teams have clear and achievable KPIs to measure progress. And, whether it's in the form of a shared release plan or a roadmap, the product development process is transparent to everyone. That said, the roadmap still focuses on outputs rather than outcomes, which leads to a lack of context around how product work impacts the bottom line.

LEVEL FOUR

Aligned on user needs

Sarah and her team are 100% in alignment with their customers' needs. Everyone works together to gather deep user insights, cross-reference new product ideas against a wealth of customer data, and update the vision and strategy according to findings. And the team is all moving forward together. When asked about their direction, everyone can clearly articulate why certain features are prioritized over others and how each step of the journey builds towards their long-term product and business goals.

Great product managers—the ones who put entire businesses on a different trajectory—go beyond merely translating user insights into product requirements. They treat them as critical inputs, applying their deep expertise around the market, the trends, the technology, and their team's unique strengths to form a clear product vision and strategy for how to get there."

John Cutler
Head of Product
Research & Education



At this point, product teams have a deep understanding of customers & a clearly documented product vision and strategy. Every product decision is tracked against a defined set of goals and backed up with robust customer research.

At Level 4, each member of the product team has the experience and training they need to conduct valuable product discovery and user interviews. The team is empowered to ask better questions, and there are rigorous processes in place to validate potential solutions. All features going into production are prioritized based on real needs and aligned top-down as well as bottom-up. Everyone on the product team holds themselves accountable for their role in the product.

Product objectives tie to broader business outcomes and goals, and the entire product team moves collectively towards the company North Star. For the first time, product roadmaps simultaneously communicate why some ideas are prioritized over others. All this is codified in a living document—one that shifts and evolves with changing customer and business needs.

Maturing to a Level 5 product organization is about sharing this context so every single person in the company is on the same page.

LEVEL FIVE

A thriving product culture

Sarah and her team regularly meet with cross-functional teams to discuss important product decisions. They are transparent about the product's direction and share the roadmap with the entire organization. Sarah is confident about the company's trajectory and can see how the product makes a real-world impact on customers and business goals. All this comes together to create an exceptional product experience for everyone involved, both in- and outside the organization.

The best product teams and organizations operate with a high degree of unity and cohesion



Everyone shares deep user insights, knowledge of product strategy, and alignment around execution. Only then do you see teams achieving Level 5 of Product Excellence maturity.

Hubert Palan

Founder & CEO of productboard

Level 5 is the pinnacle of Product Excellence maturity, and companies at this stage have achieved a deep understanding of customer needs. This makes it easy for the team to execute on individual tasks autonomously & moves the entire organization toward the North Star vision.

The customer is now and always will be the **core of every single conversation.**

At Level 5, product teams have built a scalable culture around gathering insights across the company. Everyone—not just the product team—are stakeholders in the product and understands their role in the product development process. All team members share product ownership and can provide valuable insight on an individual level, pulling in the requisite data and context to inform decisions. Insight from customer interviews and data underlies every conversation about the product. Finally, the entire organization understands the “why” behind the product roadmap and rallies around it. Even better, they keep themselves accountable for staying updated.

Here's what this looks like in practice:

Sales and marketing teams

aren't just selling anymore—now they have an ear to the market. What's happening in the industry? What are competitors doing? What is the product's main differentiator (& what isn't)?

The customer success team

is no longer just preventing customers from churning or encouraging them to renew; they are actively trying to understand the gap between customer needs and the product's capabilities, clarifying where the product falls short for the product team.

The support team

is no longer being reactive to customer issues. Instead, they are listening for usability pains to share with the product team.

Great product teams have empathy and a deep understanding of what customers want.



SaaS helps bring companies closer to their customers because if you fail to deliver, it's very easy for a customer to churn. To deliver Product Excellence as a product organization, you need to develop empathy at scale. This is why it is mission critical for product teams to pull data and insights from a wide range of sources and applications, including sales, support, success and surveys, not to mention internal teammates. Your product team can synthesize these inputs to ensure they have the pulse of the market."

Bella Renney
Head of Product

 **tray.io**

CHAPTER TWO

Three steps to achieve Product Excellence maturity

Reaching Level 5 of Product Excellence maturity requires an authentic curiosity about your users, strategic focus, transparent communication, and buy-in from your team—and that only grows over time.

Below, we've outlined three steps that product organizations can take to become more customer-driven, and, as a result, consistently build products that are used and loved.

Visitor expectations are constantly increasing

They covet lightning-fast speed, brilliant design, and proactive support. Winning digital companies have to adapt an ongoing, user-focused mindset in order to build excellent products and deliver a high-quality user experience...anything less is leaving money on the floor.”

Scott Voigt
CEO

fullstory

STEP ONE

Establish a process for collecting deep user insights

In the top customer-driven product organizations, everyone has a shared understanding of what users really need. This allows them to excel in their work—whether that's prioritizing, designing, developing, promoting, supporting, or selling. After all, product touches every team, and everyone benefits when it is excellent.

“Unlocking meaningful and actionable user insights that drive great experiences begins with building empathy for those using your product

Teams do this by continuously engaging with users throughout the product development lifecycle, from ideation and discovery through delivery and optimization. The result is an organization-wide product culture, driven by customer empathy, that ships products that deliver value and outcomes.”

Janelle Estes
Chief Insights Officer



Here's how product teams can start gathering and leveraging deep user insights

Audit all existing user and product inputs. Consider all the different touchpoints that people have with end-users, like support tickets, emails, win/loss analyses, and more. From there, organize inputs according to user segments, specific features, and other categories, and begin to identify trends and patterns.

Regularly interface with customer-facing teams. Sales, support, and success teams speak with customers every day. Set up processes to access the treasure trove of insights they have to offer.

Make it a habit to talk to customers. Intentionally set aside time to speak to a wide range of users via interviews, sit in on sales calls, and nurture power users of the product.

Set up a system to consolidate product inputs from all sources.

A central repository allows product teams (and everyone else) to have continuous access to fresh insights and easily track and make sense of different feedback types.

Experiment and act on insights. Use frameworks to understand the “why” behind customer insights and use that knowledge to inform the product vision, strategy, and roadmap.

Learn more:

[How to gather and leverage deep user insights: A guide to becoming a customer-driven organization](#)

STEP TWO

Set a clear product strategy and define objectives

With so many competing priorities and different stakeholders to please, it's easy to get stuck in a reactive mindset—putting out one fire and then the next, impulsively adopting the hottest tech trends, or going tit for tat with competitors.

That's why mature product organizations prioritize around clear, measurable objectives that are aligned with their strategy. Rather than haphazardly swinging from one feature to the next, they work on initiatives that unify the entire team's efforts. Think about it as breaking a monolithic product up into smaller units that organizations can tackle one at a time, depending on where their need is greatest. Many teams set objectives over 6, 8, or 12-week work cycles. When the cycle is over, they evaluate their success and decide to either continue pursuing the objective or declare it *complete* and move on to the next one.

Objectives may relate to solving the needs of specific types of users or market segments. Or, they may relate to driving growth, competitive differentiation, regulatory compliance, security, or any number of other goals that would help the business succeed in the mid-to-long-term. In the latter case, they may even directly support organization-wide OKRs or priorities set by leadership that direct every team's efforts.

To start, create a living document that codifies product vision and strategy that considers the following questions

Where should your organization be in 3-5 years? Base this long-term strategy on the company's unique strengths, market trends, and opportunities for capitalizing on them, all while acknowledging constraints, weaknesses, and external threats.

What is the organization's 12-18 month strategy? Where should the product be in the mid-term and how does the team aim to get there?

What objectives can you pursue in the short-run to advance your mid-term strategy? Whether the goal is to drive user acquisition or improve platform reliability, everyone working on the product knows why their work matters. What objective will you define for your team's next cycle?

Now, to the "living" part of the living document

Teams must refine and revisit their strategy on a regular basis. Each new insight or data point surfaced can have direct implications on the kind of product experience customers expect, so product makers must remain open-minded and flexible.

Learn more:

[Defining objectives and key results for your product team](#)

[Why you need a product strategy framework to build a great product](#)

STEP THREE

Involve stakeholders in product development

When the product teams roll out their strategy and roadmap to the company, the goal is not to inspire shock and surprise. People need to be bought into the whole process and feel like they've contributed along the way. After all, everyone's success—from top-level executives to individual contributors—is tied in one way or another to the product.

Establishing regular rituals and processes can help the product team engage stakeholders across the company and ensure that they feel heard. Additionally, roping in stakeholders unlocks knowledge, expertise, and insights normally outside of the product team's domain. This broadened perspective can lead to better products.

“Developing a clear strategy and keeping everyone on the same page is critical to product teams pursuing Product Excellence.

For some teams, doing this in a fully remote mode is a challenge. Miro ensures that, no matter where or how they work, teams stay connected in order to collaborate cross-functionally, communicate the company vision and drive the strategy.”

Anna Boyarkina
Head of Product

miro

How to involve stakeholders in product development

- Establish **clear processes** for submitting feature ideas, relaying feedback from users and prospects, and collecting win/loss analyses.
- Set **regular meetings** with sales, customer success, support, and other customer-facing teams to hear their biggest challenges with the product and where they see the biggest opportunities.
- Schedule regular meetings to **share product updates** with the organization. productboard, for example, has a weekly “product lunch” that the whole company is welcome to join.
- Make it a habit to **present the product roadmap** at all-hands meetings.
- Encourage leadership to **regularly remind the organization about business goals**, product objectives, and how they support one another and advance the company toward the vision.
- **Celebrate product successes** with the entire organization, and be transparent about learnings when the performance of a product or feature falls short of expectations.

These rituals will become the core drivers of a mature product team. And they ensure that lines of communication stay open and flowing at all times.

CONCLUSION

Build excellent products by leveling up your team

Product Excellence is all about creating an environment where every part of the organization can execute together toward shared product goals. Once product makers understand where their company currently stands, they can define the best path forward when it comes to vision, strategy, and execution.

As teams progress through each stage of maturity, it becomes easier and easier to build the types of products that serve customer needs and advance broader company goals.

Ready for your evolution to begin?



About productboard

productboard is a customer-driven product management system that empowers teams to get the right products to market, faster. It provides a complete solution for product teams to understand user needs, prioritize what to build next, align everyone on the roadmap, and engage with their customers. productboard is easy to use, enables company-wide collaboration, and integrates into existing workflows.

Learn more at productboard.com