



Product Leadership Handbook

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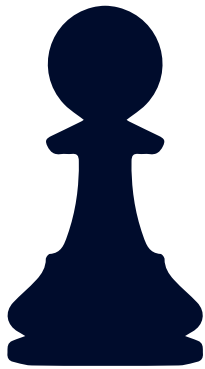
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Introduction

Looking to up-level your leadership skills and build best-in-class product teams?

We know it's extremely hard to find examples and best practices in the real world, so we're sharing the inner workings of our product team and beyond in this ebook.



Chapter 1

Building clarity around product vision and strategy

As a product leader, you're probably thinking about your product vision and strategy all day, every day. So your team must be too, right? Spoiler alert: They're not.

In our [2021 Product Excellence Report](#), we found that product leaders are 58% more likely than their teams to report that they have a clear product vision and strategy. That's a pretty significant difference that, at best, keeps product organizations both large and small from reaching their full potential. At worst, teams risk becoming feature factories, churning out new products and features without a clear goal.

Product leaders are 58% more likely than their teams
to report that they have a clear strategy
for achieving their product vision.

So, how do you explain such a major gap?

We find that product leaders often overestimate how well their teams understand the things they're constantly thinking about, leading them to underestimate just how much they need to reiterate their plans.

It all comes down to clear, frequent communication — product leaders must become the greatest evangelists of their product vision and strategy, taking every opportunity to build alignment. You want your teams to understand how their work ties to the bigger picture, and how it impacts customers and the future of the organization.

Once everyone is on the same page, product teams will be more empowered to solve complex, strategic problems on their own.



Let's jump into some tips on how to make this vision a reality.

Tip #1

Run an internal marketing campaign

Once you have a clear understanding of what you're trying to achieve, it's time to spread the word. You might have the clearest and most simple product vision and strategy in the world — **but it's useless if no one knows about it.**

In the same way you would create a go-to-market strategy for your products, you need to find the right content formats and placements to ensure your message reaches stakeholders and teams from across the company. Building clarity around your vision and strategy needs to happen both upwards — with department leads, stakeholders, investors, and the C-suite — and downwards—with teams and individual contributors.

Treat it like an internal marketing campaign. We'll elaborate more on how to do this in the upcoming tips.

Tip #2

Repeat, repeat, repeat

The more frequently you expose your organization to your vision and strategystartegy, the more clarity you'll create — and the easier it will be to keep everyone working towards the same goal.

At Productboard, for example, we avoid going more than 45 days without meeting with executives. We've found that in the absence of updates, executives might assume there's been no progress made, so these conversations are an important part of managing up.

To keep our product teams in the loop, we've found success with regular "product roadshows". Twice a year, senior product leadership schedules a half-day session with each product group to share updates, answer any questions, and open up the floor for discussion.

Repetition here is really the key.

Tip #3

Meet your stakeholders where they are

If you're just getting started, there's no need to reinvent the wheel or add more meetings to reach people — no one likes extra meetings on their calendar, nor do they have the desire to learn yet *another* tool. Instead, you'll want to seek out existing opportunities to meet with direct reports, cross-functional teams, and other departments.

Your weekly or bi-monthly team meetings, for example, are the perfect opportunity to reiterate your vision and strategy. And you likely have an R&D or EPD meeting every two to six weeks for reaching adjacent departments. Here at Productboard, we host an EPD all-hands twice a quarter — we review quarterly plans across all teams at the start of the quarter, then review progress mid-quarter.



Quarterly kickoff meetings with go-to-market teams and company all-hands are also great opportunities for championing your vision and strategy.

Tip #4

Leverage storytelling to inspire

Our final tip — **and arguably the most important** — is to leverage storytelling to inspire.

Storytelling is a critical skill for product leaders when they need to motivate their teams or bring the wider organization on board with their vision. But far too often, leaders fall short of telling compelling stories and instead end up leaning far too heavily on statistics and timelines.



At Productboard, we like to tell our product story in three acts:

- 01 How the world was before Productboard**
- 02 What the world looks like now that Productboard is in it**
- 03 How we plan to change the world in the future**

We find that this approach is a good way to showcase exactly how we see our product making an impact while simultaneously celebrating the accomplishments of our product teams.

Creative visualizations can go a long way here.

Your product vision and strategy don't need to be locked in a memo. Again, meet stakeholders where they are. Videos, slides, and other visual assets all can communicate a powerful message in a short time. Good old-fashioned printouts taped to the walls in high-traffic locations are great ways to spread your message in a traditional office setting. Remote teams can follow the same strategy, making the product vision visible by pinning it in messaging apps like Slack or making it the first page in a company wiki, like Notion.

The real power of storytelling is in making your vision and strategy more memorable—your audience takes your tale and makes it their own, extending your ideas further and boosting your chances of inspiring action and achieving your goals.



Chapter 2

Structuring scaling product teams

You have your product vision and roadmap — but do you have the right groupings of people to actually execute your plan? And will that structure stay the same months (or even years) down the road?

Every product leader inevitably faces these questions as their organization grows and changes. Reorganizing a scaling product team — optimizing the way people collaborate and drive work forward — is among the most crucial factors for delivering the right products and features to market, faster.

The optimal org is whatever drives the most alignment through clear ownership and collaboration. And while there's no one-size-fits-all formula, we've found the most successful product leaders follow a set of guiding principles.

Principle #1

Organize around the problem space

Rather than starting with solutions, many companies organize product teams around core user problems—or [jobs-to-be-done](#)—and how your product addresses those needs.

Facebook is a great example of this. Instead of organizing teams around creativity-related solutions — for example, photo sharing — Facebook realized there will always be a need for users to express themselves. They, therefore, started a Create team, responsible for all of the features and functionalities that help users be creative, like Instagram filters and Facebook Stories.

Organizing teams around the problem space gives teams more flexibility in how they solve problems, so this structure makes sense for early-stage startups that may still be seeking [product/market fit](#). It's also a great option if you have a stable product and you want to continue to innovate and disrupt yourself, as Facebook did with their Create team.

The one downside to the problem-space structure is that teams may take longer to arrive at a solution since each problem has many potential answers. But you can be sure that the eventual solution will be as valuable as possible as it's designed directly around user needs.

Principle #2

Organize around the solution space

Organizing teams by solution space instead of problem space trades off open-ended ambiguity for a lot of clarity on what the teams work on.

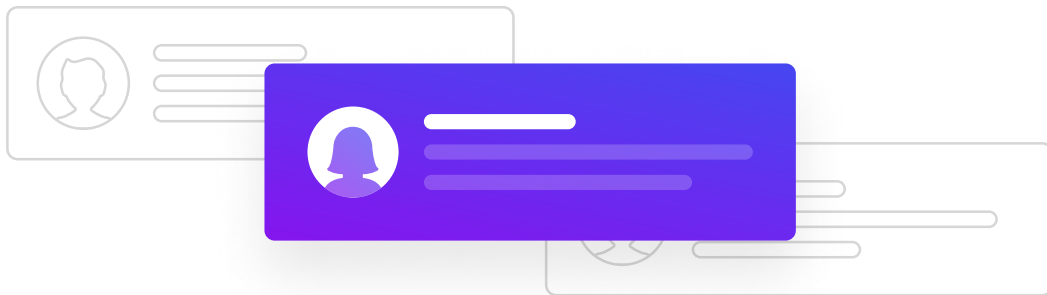
This strategy works best for teams post-product/market fit, when you have a stable product you're seeking to improve over time. Amazon, for example, organizes teams around strongly-defined areas of e-commerce — a homepage team, product detail team, search team, and checkout team. Each solution offers very stable functionality, so teams are organized around making those functionalities better.

The downside: the solution space can be a scary thing for problem-oriented people. But, it brings clarity to your domain and you can still innovate if you're diligent, like Amazon continues to do.

Principle #3

Organize around customer segments or personas

Most organizations have a meaningful set of personas and customer groups that are well-known among stakeholders. Organizing around these personas gives everyone on the team a [focused understanding of user needs](#), maximizing their chances of building and launching valuable products and features.



It's a method best suited for teams with well-defined personas that don't change often, or when there is a specific segment that is very valuable to your business. For example, Miro has a large group of customers who are workshop facilitators.

Organizing around personas works particularly well if you have an existing business and want to enter a new market, or if you plan to launch a new product but don't have a specific problem you want to solve yet. Organizing teams around that segment is a great way to innovate and explore the new market.

Principle #4

Mix and match different product team structures

None of the above principles are perfect for every situation. The good news is that none of the principles are mutually exclusive. You might have certain personas that are really important to the business. You may also have a specific problem domain you want to focus on as well as specific solutions which require dedicated teams to drive innovation.

In this situation, mixing and matching different product team structures can be a godsend. In fact, it's the approach we take with our teams here at Productboard:

- We have a growth team that owns the problem of new user onboarding and thinks about ways to drive additional product-led growth, like our [free Customer Feedback Portal](#)
- We have dedicated [prioritization](#) and [roadmapping](#) teams optimizing solutions
- We have a Scale team focused solely on growing our enterprise customer segment

Mixing and matching structures works best once you have more people. Early-stage startups with fewer than 50 people will find the most efficiency by sticking with one principle, but once you reach 100-150 people it becomes easier to allocate enough resources across enough areas.

3 tips for avoiding reorg chaos

1 Align on key product areas that drive business

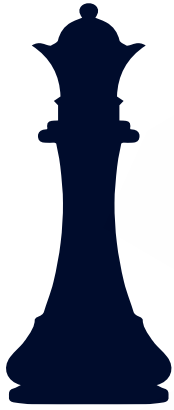
Identify key segments you want to support and key points of friction that you want to improve. By building alignment around the *why* behind a restructuring, you'll have a far easier time optimizing *what* your teams are working towards.

2 “Rip off the bandaid”

Once leadership teams have aligned on a new product team structure, execute on the agreed-upon changes quickly and decisively. The goal is to avoid gossip, speculation, and fear that may get people distracted from your mission.

3 Build transparency (and earn buy-in)

Reorgs are challenging. Minimize that stress by being transparent and ensuring that information doesn't break down as it cascades through the organization. We've found that getting visual — drawing something in Figma or another tool — helps team members understand the topology of the organization as you scale.



Chapter 3

Onboarding best practices

Product is still a nascent field in many ways, and the role really varies from company to company. Because of this lack of clarity, setting expectations on what great looks like is essential — and there's no better time to do this than the onboarding phase.

During onboarding, new product managers begin to understand how they fit into the product org as well as the outcomes they are trying to achieve. It's also when relationships and habits are built — two things that are very difficult to change after they've been initially formed.

So, here's what you should do instead of throwing your new hire straight into the deep end before you know if they can swim.

Best Practice #1

Write a 'success brief'

It's important to first get your existing team and other key collaborators on the same page regarding how a new hire will fit into your organization. At Productboard, we align everyone using what we call a "success brief". In this brief, we include information like:

- Why this person is being brought on
- What they'll be working on
- Who they'll need to meet and work with
- How we'll know if they're successful
- How we'll keep them (and ourselves as managers) accountable



All of this helps to provide context for your team. Now you'll need to provide context for the new hire.

Best Practice #2

Provide and reinforce context

When companies go on the road to seek new funding, they make sure their audience gets a comprehensive overview of the business and its target users. Do the same for your new hires!

Create a pitch deck not unlike what you would create for a venture capitalist, but in this case, position it for onboarding purposes. You can include things like:

- Your mission and vision
- How customers are solving their problem today
- How your company and product is changing this
- Your products' key value propositions
- Where you will compete vs. partner and integrate
- Your ideal customer profiles
- Segments you're going after and how you're ranking them
- Your progress in serving those customers so far
- Your three-year strategy and current roadmap
- Your go-to-market strategy

Imagine you were in the position of the person being onboarded and ask: "What would I want to know to have the best context to do my job?"

Best Practice #3

Share your processes and oddities

Today, your team might be working remotely and using numerous tools for collaboration. Without as much facetime, it's easy for important context to get lost in the digital sprawl, so make it clear which tools are crucial for the product team — **and the ones they can feel free to ignore.**

More importantly, help new hires discover the oddities of your culture and processes that may not be as intuitive. For example, share the names of specific Slack channels you use for certain tasks or projects, or places where information tends to be stored and shared (at Productboard, our teams live on Slack and are actively anti-email).

Your ultimate goal here is to help new hires integrate into their new environment with comfort and confidence.

Best Practice #4

Let them unlock achievements at the outset

As part of onboarding at Productboard, we like to plan an activity that new hires can complete in their first week. Here are some examples:

- **Schedule a conversation with a customer**

By scheduling a conversation with a customer and talking to our target persona firsthand, new hires can begin to build empathy around their needs and problems.

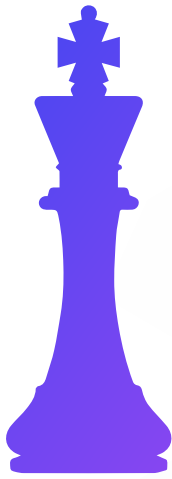
- **Sit through a planning process with the engineering and design teams**

This introduces new hires to existing workflows and shows what cross-functional collaboration looks like at Productboard.

- **Go through an exercise within the product**

An exercise encourages new hires to dig deeply in the product so they can become experts faster.

The idea is to set new hires up with the tools and information they need to succeed, to give them a strong sense of accomplishment from the get-go, and to show the rest of the team that this is a person who gets things done.



Chapter 4

Building stakeholder alignment as a product leader

Product leaders who create strong alignment within their organizations build more successful products and deliver those products to market, faster.

But earning trust and buy-in for your roadmap is an uphill battle. Priorities aren't always aligned. Stakeholders each bring their own agenda to the table, and the larger your organization, the steeper a hill you must climb.

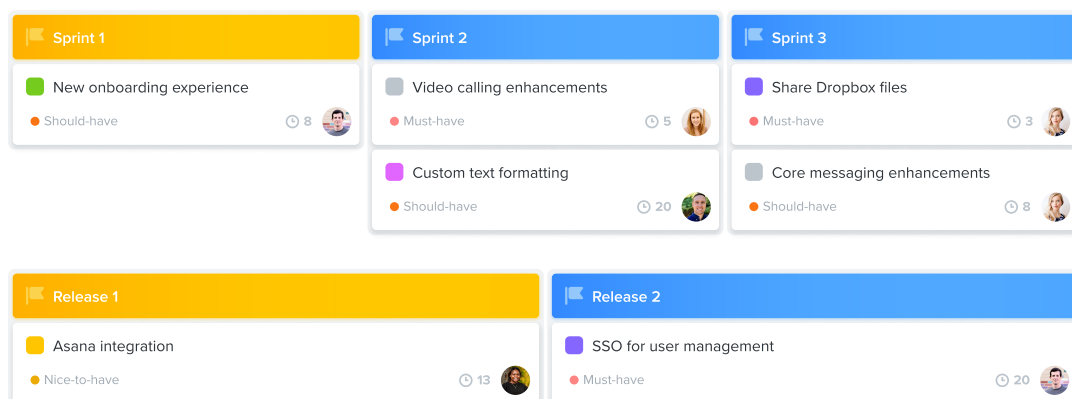
As a product leader, you're in a unique position to manage a broad cross-section of stakeholders. The earlier you can create alignment and get everyone on the same page, the smoother all your product operations will be down the line.

Best Practice #1

Start small by integrating stakeholders into your existing planning

Nearly [one-third of product teams](#) have no regular communication with customer-facing teams—but building alignment doesn't mean adding even more meetings, documents, and tools to your existing workflow. Start by inviting collaborators into your existing planning and documentation meetings and carve out specific times for them to contribute.

In smaller startups—under, say, 50 people—you should review your [product roadmap](#) with key stakeholders on a monthly basis. Share updates on progress from the prior month, review priorities and requests for the upcoming month, and, if you have too many things to complete, you can discuss what to focus on alongside your stakeholders.



If you're part of a larger organization, start by looking at the different departments in your company that are stakeholders of your work. Reach out to a senior manager or department head for each group. Let them know you'd love to have someone from their team be more involved in product planning, spending a couple of hours a month working closely with them on product prioritization and roadmapping.

Here at Productboard, we bring sales, customer support, and success representatives into the quarterly planning process and listen to the top patterns they're seeing. [We use Productboard to collect that feedback](#) and in-person sessions with each department to double-check that we didn't miss anything crucial.

At first, stakeholders may only be able to contribute their own perspective instead of the wider goals of their department. That's OK. By creating space within your existing processes, you'll make sure that people are being heard and avoid situations where people feel like one department—most often, product—is "above" others.

Best Practice #2

Grow by shaping your organization around product goals

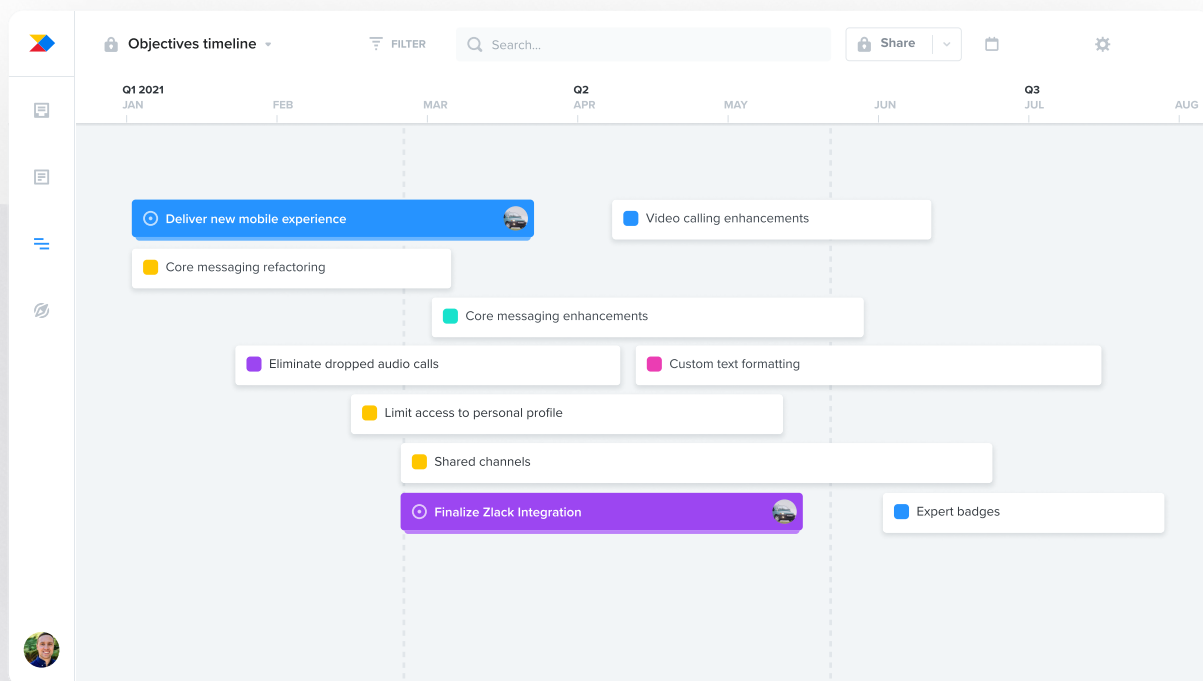
As stakeholders become used to the idea of being more involved, you can begin adding a more formal structure to these unofficial discussions. I know what you're thinking—*another painful reorg*. But building cross-functional teams doesn't mean Jane from Marketing has to report to you now.

Instead, we suggest creating cross-functional engineering, product, and design “circles” centered around which part of the product is being worked on, a common goal, or even customer personas. Inside Productboard, we call these cross-functional teams product groups, but we've seen other companies call them [tribes](#), domains, or pillars. Try to keep each group to around 25-50 total team members to avoid complexity—a good rule of thumb is if you can take those people and put them in a new building, they'd be [fully self-sufficient to innovate for their customers](#).

When rolling out product strategy, it is really important to get explicit buy-in on the plan from the various parties. Each group should include representatives from departments outside of Engineering and Product whose work impacts (or is impacted by) the product—from marketing and customer success to finance or legal, depending on your business. Think, who are the top 3-5 stakeholders that you want deeply involved in the planning and review of the product roadmap.

Product groups should meet regularly with these stakeholders — at least once a month — to share updates on their area of the product and gather feedback from stakeholders. At Productboard, we hold monthly group meetings between product directors and department directors — both groups get equal facetime, but product leadership is mostly there to share and listen.

Take sales, for example. A group meeting might involve the product team sharing progress against quarterly plans with sales stakeholders, while the sales team might share red flags they're seeing across deals. That feedback can then be funneled back into the roadmapping process and other tactical discussions.



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Best Practice #3

Supplement discussions with transparent tooling

What about in-between meetings, though? What if a stakeholder has a question about the status of a request, but your next group meeting isn't for weeks?

That's where a tool like Productboard can help. [Capturing insights](#) from key stakeholders in one place helps you discover new opportunities that you can bring to the table in the next meeting. Each piece of feedback includes details on who submitted it, making it easy to call on stakeholders to share further information during the next group meeting (and avoids the need for them to remember details for weeks on end).

Stakeholders can also check on your product roadmap at any time. You can see whether they're looking at the roadmap (and how often), letting you tailor your conversations to their perspective rather than spending time explaining every detail. And if you do find yourself managing conflicting priorities and troublesome stakeholders, you can quickly walk them through the rationale behind your decisions and explain how the chosen prioritization helps deliver against your agreed strategy.

One important caveat: even the best tooling is no substitute for in-person discussions. Use your roadmap and stakeholder feedback as a catalyst for questions and discussions, not a black hole of information capture.



About Productboard

Productboard is the leading customer-centric management platform, helping product teams to deliver the right products to market faster. Over 5,400 modern, customer-driven companies — like Zoom, UiPath, JCDcaux, and Microsoft — use Productboard to help understand what users need, prioritize what to build next, and rally everyone around the roadmap. With offices in San Francisco, Prague, Vancouver, Dublin, and London, Productboard has raised \$262 million in funding from leading investors like Dragoneer, Tiger Global, Sequoia Capital, Bessemer Venture Partners, Kleiner Perkins, Index Ventures, and Credo Ventures.

Learn more at productboard.com and follow [@productboard](https://twitter.com/productboard).

