Role Definition and Alignment

Your Product Management organization can be a means for developing and achieving strategic product objectives. Organizations perform better when all the parts of the organization work well together. When aligned, people reinforce each other to create more effective organizations. Although each business is unique, there are important relationships within every group that, when working together, lead to higher levels of performance:

- Leadership is engaged in driving organizational alignment,
- Expectations and accountabilities are clearly understood,
- Decision-making rights are clearly defined, and
- Systems and processes are designed to motivate desired behaviors.

However, in our research and organizational diagnostic work, we frequently find many examples where product managers’ roles are not clear:

- Product managers take on work no one else is doing,
- Cross-functional stakeholders make product decisions without including Product Management,
- Product managers make decisions that others think is their responsibility,
- Key interdependencies between product managers and others are unclear, and
- In general, key stakeholders often don’t know what a product manager really does.

Research Says

Product managers, like everyone else, are more effective when they have clearly defined roles. However, our research* shows that Product Management leaders and individual product managers are generally in agreement on the lack of role clarity for product managers and cross-functional stakeholders.

In the same study, more than 33% of leaders and product managers consider role and decision-making clarity in their organizations to be fair at best.

The Importance of Role Clarity

Role clarity is particularly important in facilitating collaboration and engendering good teamwork. As leaders of cross-functional product teams, product managers (and their teams) are more successful when everyone understands their roles on the team and their responsibilities in meeting the team’s objectives. When roles and responsibilities are unclear, cross-functional teamwork and collaboration are sub-optimized. The negative impact is usually evident in product managers’ ability to successfully lead cross-functional teams: Functional agendas trump product objectives because stakeholders don’t understand (or agree with) their fit within the team, team members don’t deliver as promised because their accountability toward meeting objectives is not well-established, key milestones and deliverables are missed, and products are late to market. This list goes on.

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Leaders can support product managers and their teams in becoming more effective by ensuring that accountability is crystal clear. When the overall business organization has a good understanding of roles, product managers’ efficiency, and their ability to influence and lead a team is strengthened.

Clarifying Roles

Role definition IS the identity of the product manager. Leaders can help their product managers to be more successful by making their roles clearer to them and to all other stakeholders with whom they interact. To do this, product manager job descriptions should include the following elements:

1. Expected Outcomes: The high-level results to be achieved by the role, such as “Prepares Strategic Product Line Plan”, or “Develops and implements an 18-month strategic roadmap”.

2. Responsibilities: The high-level tasks that the person in the role is expected to carry out to achieve organizational objectives, e.g. “Gather, coordinate and reconcile market and product requirements from marketing, sales, regional channel partners and engineering.”

3. Decision-Making Authority: The authority the role has in making key decisions, e.g. “Decides the content of the product roadmap.”

4. Interdependencies: The mutual expectations, key interfaces, and hand-offs the role has with other key players involved in the process, outcome, task, or decision, e.g. “Product Manager and Product Marketing Manager work together to gather market data, to identify insights, and to jointly provide strategic recommendations to the product portfolio council.”
A Useful Tool: The RACI Model

Knowing boundaries enables one to focus on the key activities of a role. An especially useful tool to establish boundaries in cross-functional arenas is the RACI model, which uses the following definitions:

- **Responsible** – Indicates who actually performs the activity.
- **Accountable** – Indicates who owns and oversees the activity, has the authority to make decisions about the activity, but may not necessarily perform it.
- **Consulted** – Indicates who must be consulted and give input to the activity or decision, but may not necessarily own or perform it.
- **Informed** – Indicates who is kept up to date on the progress of the activity or decision, but may not necessarily provide input to it.

The RACI model helps to identify gaps, overlaps, and assumptions about roles, particularly where responsibility or authority is shared. Product Management leaders and those from other functions should review key roles together to clarify and agree on the responsibilities across the spectrum of Product Management work and the interdependencies that exist across the functions. When roles are aligned in this way, product managers and those with whom they work know who has responsibility and authority for activities and decisions that affect the product. This makes all of their jobs just a little bit easier, giving them the freedom to focus on where they add the most value.

What Can You Do?

1. Find out how clear Product Management roles are in your own organization. Talk to the functional heads and find out if their expectations of Product Management match yours. In our work with clients, we’ve found that the lack of organizational understanding of the Product Management role is substantial. Find out where your gaps are most problematic.

2. Review your product management job descriptions, or create them if they don’t exist. Use the RACI model to outline the roles and make sure decision authority is clear.

3. Consider working across functions to take organizational clarity to the next level. Identify key interdependencies between roles, and make sure that all expectations are clear and aligned.

Defining and aligning roles is arguably one of the most important activities a leader can undertake. Your organization is a means for accomplishing strategic product objectives. Each role defines the unique value an individual is expected to provide in pursuit of those objectives. Interfaces are the grey areas that require a clear understanding of the mutual expectations one role has of another, which reduces organizational friction. By clarifying and aligning Product Management roles, leaders can facilitate collaboration across functions and help product managers to focus on factors that create a competitive advantage to the business.