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How Does Multi-tiered Product Management Work?

Or “What is the difference between a Product Manager and a Product Owner?”

Premise

When people are working a large scale implementation of agile and they see definitions of the role of Product Owner and the role of a Product Manager (and the various other potential layers of working “content” priorities), they cannot help but feel confused. After all, they also seem to say “there is a backlog that needs to be prioritized” and that they “should work with customers”. How do we position the various roles?

The Roles

Before we get started, let’s make one thing perfectly clear. This is a discussion on how people should collaborate as they work the problem of deciding what value we can / should deliver next. This is not a reporting structure.

But what you do find is that (for large implementation) you might need various levels of structure as there is too much to do for one person. For example if you are working as a Product Owner with a team, then to do this well will require full time work. In this case if the what you are delivering (eg Product, Solution, whatever) can be worked by a single team, then the Product Owner can work directly with customers, work the roadmap, etc. (Note: I am not talking about the different ceremonies different levels attend)

But if the value you are delivering takes more than a couple of Teams, say 35 teams to deliver a solution (OK, “35” was the number of teams I had when I first did an agile transformation) then a single Product Owner will not be able to take this one - you will need a team. Further you will need need to work at different levels to get a complete understanding of the requirements and priority. Take a look at:



This is one way of positioning the differences in role. You can see that there are a couple of axis here and that there are different involvements based on what your focus is and the impact you will have:

- A Product Owner will be more Team focused than Customer focused, making sure the Team really understands what the backlog and working through issues as they discover these, when they work with a customer it will often be a real end-user of the product so that direct feedback can happen

as the work is completed, and the general time horizon that Product Owner worries about is about 2 weeks (and perhaps a couple extra out from that). The Product Owner's "currency" is the User Story. The Product Owner does their work in the context of the Product Management view of Features.

- A Product Manager is more Customer focused than a Product Owner. Like the Product Owner the Product Manager makes sure the Train (Team-of-teams) really understands what the program backlog and working through issues as they discover these, when they work with a customer it will often be a higher level than the real end-user of the product aimed at getting that direct feedback as the work is completed. The general time horizon that Product Manager worries about is about a quarter and the roadmap that represents the next couple of quarter. The Product Manager's "currency" is the Feature. The Product Manager works with Product Owners to understand the Features so they can bring that work to the Team. The Product Manager does their work in the context of the Business Owner view of Epics.
- A Business Owner is mostly Customer focused and more business focused. In many contexts we want our Business Owners to be more entrepreneurial, to really take responsibility for the vision of the product or solution being developed. What this means is that they must be very customer focused as "no useful innovation happens in (your) office". They create an environment where the Trains and Teams are expected and trusted to do the right thing, because they have all the information they need to make good decisions in their context. The general time horizon of a Business Owner is about a year and they can represent and defend the roadmap that results from the Trains and Teams. The Business Owner's current is the Epic. The Business Owners work with Product Management on the total view of the Epics.

Want to Know More?

- [What Are The Characteristics of a Great Product Owner?](#)
- [How Should We Break Down Requirements](#)

[FAQ](#), [ProductOwner](#), [ProductManger](#), [Scaling](#), [SAFe](#), [WIP](#)

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