SRE & Product Management

How to level up your team (and career!) by thinking like a product manager

Jen Wohlner
Product manager, platform engineering

LinkedIn: Jen Wohlner, Instagram: @jensface
Sometimes SREs must do product management.
You: Jen, what?
Jen: Yes
# Product vs Program Management

## Some key differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prioritize <strong>ideation</strong> to impact business</td>
<td>Prioritize <strong>implementation</strong> to impact business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closer to <strong>users</strong></td>
<td>Closer to <strong>engineers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often focus on <strong>growth of product</strong></td>
<td>Often focus on <strong>health of tech stack</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What and why?**

**When and how?**
When do SREs do product management?
All the time!
Common SRE product work

You do these things.

• proof of concept experiments
• creating alert plans
• rolling out a new deployment process
• stuff with UIs, like Prometheus dashboards
• internally negotiating and creating SLAs with your team and other teams
• and more!
Um, but why should you listen to me?
Listen to me.

Plz.

- BuzzFeed’s infrastructure/SRE TPM
  - Initially focused on products to escape toil
  - Struggled to create broadly useful data and platform infrastructure
- Failed. Then learned from lead product designer
- Took learnings to LinkedIn’s product SRE org and iterated
- Now at Fastly as a product manager for platform engineering
Product management is about meeting needs.
Product management is about **EMPATHY**.
It doesn't matter WHO does product work as long as it gets done.

— me, but don't tell my PM colleagues
Let your inner product manager shine.
Know your users and talk to them
1. **Know your users and talk to them.**

- Most users of your SRE products are other engineers at your company.

- Just because you sit near them or have a similar job title … **do not assume** you know how they work or use your product or service.
User Interviews

Do them!

• 30 mins
• Interview no more than 2 people at a time
• Interview team leads and managers separately from ICs.
  – They have different jobs and uses tools differently.
• Feel free to bring one teammate to help you interview.
• Share user interview findings with your team.
  – presentations
  – video watching party
  – quotes
Ask non-leading questions
## 2. Ask non-leading questions.

### Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leading</th>
<th>Non-leading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chef</td>
<td>Have you created a Chef cookbook at Fastly? If so, tell me when and walk me through how.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A spreadsheet documenting a major compliance effort</td>
<td>Do you wish correlating estimated resource weeks to priority happened automatically?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deployment</td>
<td>Do you use the SRE-compliance spreadsheet? Do you find any columns on the spreadsheet more useful than others? How so?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why does your team do so few deploys? And why are they always huge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are the steps to go from code committed to code successfully running in production for the application you work on?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Prototyping sprints
3. Prototyping sprints are wonderful!

- One week, one focus for all involved
- Narrow in on core users (some are more important than others)
- Limited time forces limited scope
- Team bonding
Add user-centric goals to roadmaps
# 4. Add user-centric goals to roadmaps

## Simple Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>User-centric Goal</th>
<th>Deliverables</th>
<th>Deliverable Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make tacos</td>
<td>family members</td>
<td>feed the family cheaply and quickly on a weeknight</td>
<td>buy tacos shells, ground beef and seasoning</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>stretch goal: find affordable side, like refried beans</td>
<td>Won't do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cook food</td>
<td>In progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>serve food</td>
<td>Possible delay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make dessert</td>
<td>family members</td>
<td>feed the family a cheap post-dinner sweet</td>
<td>defrost cheesecake</td>
<td>At risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>serve cheesecake</td>
<td>At risk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higher priority projects above

Lower priority projects below
Roadmaps
Do you even roadmap, bro?

• Including more than just technical deliverables helps **define scope**.

• User-centric goals answer **what and why**?

• Deliverables answer **how and when**?
## Roadmap

### Engineering example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>User-centric goal</th>
<th>Deliverable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New CI pilot</td>
<td>Eng leads at company</td>
<td>Get early feedback on the new CI pipeline before general rollout to all of eng</td>
<td>User interviews &amp; share findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Architecture design doc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Select one eng team for pilot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Technical deliverable 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Technical deliverable 2 ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Migrate team’s services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SRE &lt;&gt; pilot eng team retro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New CI general availability</td>
<td>Eng leads at company</td>
<td>Improve all engineers’ CI workflows</td>
<td>TBD: Transition all non-legacy applications with owners to new CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New CI final phase</td>
<td>Eng leads at company</td>
<td>Reduce risks to the engineering org</td>
<td>TBD: Transition legacy and ownerless apps to new CI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How to use a roadmap?

- Add updates to the roadmap weekly or bi-weekly in dedicated meeting
- Team lead shares screen
- Update statuses line by line for incomplete projects and deliverables
- Be willing to occasionally move high priority projects down to low priority section
- Quarterly retrospective on roadmapping process, estimation and project execution
Roadmap Note

The roadmap spreadsheet is an internal tool.

To share project status, do not just share the spreadsheet.

Make it easy for your manager, other teams, and stakeholders to understand your progress:

• bi-weekly emails
• monthly status meetings
5 Follow-up with users regularly
5. Follow up with your users regularly.

- Users needs and pain points change

- Follow-up with users after releasing a product or feature

- And at major development milestones
Recap
SRE & Product Management

1. User relationships!
   Know your users and talk to them

2. Non-leading questions!
   Ask non-leading question.

3. Prototyping sprints!
   Prototyping sprints are wonderful.

4. User-centric goals!
   Add user-centric goals to roadmaps.

5. Follow-up with users!
   Follow-up with users regularly.
Thank you!

LinkedIn: Jen Wohlner

Instagram: @jensface