



THE TEAM THAT BLOSSOMED

A first principles reflection on purpose-driven Product Teams

To abductive makers everywhere.

Reflected by Mikal Lewis, 2020

This is not your typical product management book.

It is focused on purpose;

Your purpose for developing products;

Your team's purpose;

And the power of purpose-driven product teams.

Why read this book?

You want to do good through your position as a product leader and you know this is not where you are currently.

About this book.

This book is self-supporting.

It includes no references, no case studies, and no external data.

In just a few pages, it will become evident why.

About the author

Lastly, while I'm proud of what I've accomplished in my career, I ask that you approach this book independent of my career.

Thoughts should be evaluated for their merit. Thoughts which draw their potency from who thinks them may be interesting, but are fundamentally weak.

This book is a contribution towards my personal belief that we can and must do better at developing truth seekers and identifying truths.

Chapter 1: In search of Product Team

1.

There are at least five levels of product teams.

Level one. Spaghetti Western.

Level two. IT Shop.

Level three. Feature Factory.

Level four. Optimization Team.

Level five. Product Team.

2.

Each level represents the organizational tendency towards a set of behaviors. The details of how each team arrives at their level is impertinent—but how each organization behaves at each level is.

Spaghetti Western teams throw spaghetti at the wall in hopes of finding the next big hit.

As an IT Shop, a faceless organization known as “the business” selects initiatives through a buying and budgeting process. The IT Shop is tasked with delivering the capabilities and integrations the business buys—with little opportunity to negotiate scope or implementation. Very few of the selected initiatives ever make it to completion.

Feature Factories operate with an effective delivery cadence. The organization selects features, delivers them, and monitors them in the period immediately after launch—before moving on to the next feature. Few feature investments are traced back to a goal or an outcome, and promising features are forgotten when they don’t show immediate returns.

Optimization teams are the highest level most organizations aspire to achieve. They have one clear goal in mind, to increase some metric or outcome, for example conversion rate, user engagement, or onboarding actions—

and they measure it and get after it. The team settles debates and decides priorities through experimentation. They are open to all ideas—supported through a priori data and confirmed through experimentation.

Higher performing optimization teams have strong collaboration within the product team but half-heartedly support company initiatives that don't correspond to their key metrics.

And lastly, Product Teams are the highest level. Product Teams are special.

3.

Product Teams make decisions based on data, insights, and first principles.

Product Teams are guided by a product vision and hypothesis about the value the product can bring to customers' lives. They explore hypotheses through an embodied product research and development process, which actively seeks both confirmatory and disconfirming signals that the product hypothesis and product execution are a fit or will be a fit for the marketplace within their desired investment horizon.

Product Teams keep a healthy pulse of timelines but regularly delay product launches when they are not ready. The Product Team prioritizes psychological safety and has open conversations about what is and is not working.

The Product Team defines, manages, and shepherds a product vision grounded in the value it delivers to customers through the marketplace. The Product Team is oriented towards the company's purpose and therefore, naturally integrates strategic initiatives into the product vision—without being commanded to do so.

In short, The Product Team is a team that has found its purpose to serve.

4.

Product Teams aren't created. When environmental conditions and leadership are just right, they blossom from lower-level product teams.

The purpose of a team is to serve.

And like all blossoming events, they are fostered by pre-conditions.

And also like blossoming events, they are deterministic. If conditions are present, the flowers will bloom.

Our blossoming event is a product team with a purpose held.

5.

There are two components of a team with a purpose held: (1) Purpose and (2) Holding it in day-to-day creation activities.

A team with a purpose is a team with a just cause.

A team with a purpose held is a team that has integrated its just cause into all value creation activities.

Chapter 2: In search of Purpose

1.

While I began my career as an analyst, this book is absent data, case studies, and citations. Because information, with rare exception, is not timeless but you, the future reader, and your purpose are.

Data, a fast expiring form of information, derives its meaning from context. 9.8 m/s^2 means something to humans on earth. It is not useful to humans in orbit.

Data is improved upon with time. It is replaced with richer data better suited to the current context.

For this reason, a purpose-driven organization is not a data-driven organization because to be data-driven is in conflict with its timeless purpose.

A purpose-driven organization makes purpose-driven decisions, not decisions based on data.

Arguments made through data are arguments made through magic numbers.

(We just don't know it yet.)

2.

A data-driven organization is the opposite. The data-driven organization is an organization that values the known and quantifiable over the unknown and not readily quantified. As a result, the data-driven organization is not a purpose-driven organization.

A purpose is not a pre-requisite for high performance, no more than morality is a pre-requisite for wealth.

A high performance company, with a purpose-driven leader, can make purpose-driven decisions in the macro, but fail to make purposeful decisions as an organization because the organization does not have a defined purpose.

3.

If being purpose-driven is not a pre-requisite for a high performance team. Why should a team be purpose-driven?

This question is the first test for any leader.

We are purpose-driven because to be otherwise is to suppress our humanity.

4.

For a certain type of leader this call will be lacking.

We won't spend any time on these leaders.

If a leader is not intrinsically moved to bias towards what is right they hold no hope of leading an organization that is.

5.

These leaders are no threat to your purpose.

Your purpose cannot be threatened.

Nor will these leaders, on their own, inhibit a Product Team from achieving bloom.

7.

A leader that cannot be moved by what is right is an impaired leader. An impaired leader is a leader operating with reduced decision making faculties.

The most common type of impaired leader handicaps their ability to synthesize the unknowable. They make decisions based on the false precision of what can be "proven" a priori.

9.

A purpose-driven team will, given sufficient time, make superior decisions to the impaired leader because holding a purpose forces the team to better integrate the known and unknowable.

These superior results can be used to "buy space" outside of the traditional organization processes.

Therefore, the first action for any product team in this position is to find it's purpose.