Top 10 Tips for New Product Owners

HELLO
I am a
PRODUCT OWNER

Congratulations...
You're a new Product Owner!
Now what?

Whether you've just taken a CSPO class or recently earned a new title and the team to go with it, building your first new product may feel like a 'paradox of choice.'

While Scrum talks quite a bit about roles, ceremonies and artifacts, it leaves a lot of room for you to decide just how to get there -- how to arrive at a prioritized, well developed backlog, motivate the team around the work to be done, and manage the myriad of stakeholders who may be interested in the work you and the team are embarking upon.

Here are 10 tips to break down your next steps into more manageable choices. It's not a huge *How To* manual or *PO for Dummies* book - just a quick set of tips and a few frameworks to get you started.

Tip #1: Define Your Product Vision

Every team and every product needs a vision; something "greater" to be working toward. It's the foundation of context and one of the very important parts of your job as a Product Owner. Maximizing value delivered by the team often means rallying them around a compelling idea. If an overall vision doesn't exist, it may be hard for the team to understand the priority of an item or the context in which it should be delivered.

Your organization may have already identified the vision when building your team or, your executive sponsor may have shared a high-level vision with you. If that is the case, count your fortunes. If not, it may be up to you to develop the vision. This, too, has its benefits, as it allows you to collaborate on the vision together with your team.

FRAMEWORK: Vision Statement through Product Differentiation

One quick way to develop a vision is to create a vision statement using a Product Differentiation framework. It is simple, but powerful. If you have trouble with a

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section, set aside a time-box and use some supporting frameworks to develop an answer.

Step 1: Define your target customers. Who will benefit from the product you are delivering? Give them a name, say a few works about who they are. If you have Personas, reference them to drive clarity or gain inspiration.

Step 2: Identify the problem your product solves for your customers. Again, if you are lucky, you have a well-defined and tested problem set you are solving with your product. If not, you could leverage a quick Empathy Map to identify a few.

Step 3: In one sentence describe your product in a way that defines how it solves your customer's' problem.

> **Pro Tip:** *Tie it back to your target customer and the problems you are solving. If they don't connect, that might be a sign that you're not truly solving your customer's problem. (We'll come back to this step later.)*

Step 4: Write down at least one alternative solution to your product - a competing product or some other solution.

Step 5: Write down two or three ways your product is different and/or better than the alternative solution.

Step 6: *Go back to Step 3.* Is your description defensible or unlike any of your customers? In other words, can they easily replicate how your product is or will be better? If not, find the defensible, problem-solving capability.

Now take the work you have done in the six steps above, and use that to plug into the differentiation template below:

For

_____.

[insert target customers from Step 1]

Who are dissatisfied with

_____.

[insert problem from Step 2]

Our product is a

_____.

[insert defensible, problem-solving description from Step 6]

Unlike

_____,

[insert alternative solution from step 4]

Our product provides

_____

[insert the two or three key capabilities from step 5]

Voila! In a few simple steps, you have just created a clear product vision that you can leverage with your new team. Staring at the task of creating a vision may sound daunting, but by leveraging a framework with a few simple steps, you have your Product Vision.[1]

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[1] This product differentiation statement framework was developed by Regis McKenna.

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Tip #2: Communicate Your Vision… Repeatedly!

Now that you have a vision defined, review it with your sponsor and as many stakeholders as you can. Edit it, improve it, refine it. Then, take it to your Development Team and Scrum Master. Review it with them and answer their questions.

Once you're happy with it, share it widely. Be proud of the work you are doing. Post your vision prominently on a wall in your team room or on your shared online workspace - a wiki or some other repository.

You're not done yet. You are now the vision keeper. You will probably encounter stakeholders you haven't met yet and you'll need to explain the vision to them, too. Use your vision to welcome new team members and aligned them to what your team is building.

You may find you'll need to remind team members and stakeholders about the vision from time to time - what it <u>is</u> and what it <u>is not</u>. You may be able to filter some requests because they are not aligned to the vision.

> ***Pro Tip:*** Saying "No" is one of the hardest things a Product Owner must do. But, it's easier to say no to a request that doesn't support the team's clear vision.

Tip #3: Find Your Passion

The Product Owner role is demanding. It comes with long hours and requires working with lots of different people; the Development Team, customers, internal and external stakeholders, and so on. If you have a passion for the product on which you are working, it will fuel you along the way.

FRAMEWORK: Articulating Your Purpose

Passion *can* be cultivated but sometimes it's hard. If passion doesn't work for you, consider finding a personal purpose in your work. There are many ways to do this, but is one way to frame up the purpose for your work using the following easy format.

Our product improves the lives of:

_____

and that's important to me because:

_____

Example: "Our product improves the work lives of 911 operators, and that is important to me because my grandmother was saved by the quick actions of a first responder."

When things get tough, and they will, passion for your work will keep you going. You will need it during those late nights you are wrapping up development, or working hard to prepare your backlog for Sprint Planning the next day.

Tip #4: Create a Roadmap—Together

By far, the most effective roadmaps are built through collaboration – with customers, sponsors, stakeholders, Development Team… you name it. Roadmaps built in a silo are dead on arrival. Collaboration helps to center on the needs of the customer while planning for incremental delivery of value in reasonable timeframes.

You will find a myriad of formats for product roadmaps out there, but the best are rooted in collaboration. Here is a quick framework for building a collaborative roadmap.

FRAMEWORK: Collaborative Roadmapping

Step 1: Do your research. Whatever format you choose, your first job is to gather real customer information about problems they are trying to solve by using your product. One simple way to do this is by talking to them. Jump ahead to Tip #7 for some help on how to do that.

Step 2: Bring others together. Invite people from across your organization to collaborate on building the product roadmap - engineering, architecture, sales,

marketing, customer support, training, professional services...anyone that wants to participate. The key here is to be inclusive, not exclusive.

Step 3: Lay it all out. When you get together with everyone, lay out your initial assessment of the prioritized features over the next six to twelve months of work, as informed by your customer research. Ask sales for input and adjustments. Next, ask engineering if there is anything they need to support building those features. Then talk about market windows by asking marketing about the planned activities for the next few months. See if any of the marketing activities like trade shows align to a market window for a release.

Invite customer support to add their input to the feature list, and perhaps product features they need to serve customers. Include all of these on the roadmap.

Step 4: Do it all again. While this sounds like a step-by-step meeting, in reality it's a dynamic interaction between the many people who bring different points of view to the process. Listen to what they have to say and facilitate the conversation to bring out all the salient points. The goal of the collaboration is to seek alignment and to create a plan for next two to three months.

Aim to spend a full day with the group iterating on roadmap items and talking about the plan. If you can't get a full day, start with at least half a day. This is an exercise that takes time but is an investment that pays off in the long run. Be sure to capture any questions the group can't answer, any decisions the group makes and any other important notes from the collaboration and follow-up on them.

There you have it… A roadmap that is born out of collaboration and an effective bridge between your vision and your backlog.

> **Pro Tip:** Roadmaps are visual devices. Like your vision, find a way to make your product roadmap visually prominent for all to see.

Tip #5: Mind the Backlog

How much time should you be spending on your backlog? The fact is that there is no single, magical answer. But what we do know is that if you aren't spending time tending, grooming and generally ensuing that you have a healthy backlog, as a new Product Owner you are going to quickly get into trouble.

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As the Product Owner for your Sprint Team, it's up to you to ensure that the product backlog is maintained. Take a moment and think about how you spend your time throughout the sprint.

- *Find a natural rhythm* to ensure that you are carving out enough time to tend to the needs of the backlog. Maybe that's a little each day; maybe a set time throughout the week. Ultimately you will want to experiment and figure out what rhythm is right for you.

- *Talk to your team* about how much time they can spend with you refining the backlog. The Scrum Guide indicates that no more than 10% of the capacity of the Development Team should be sprint on refinement during the sprint. Consider that in a typical 2-week sprint, that amounts to a whole day. Talk to your team about how much involvement they want to have in helping you refine the backlog. It could be a whole team event or it could be just a few people who are interested in helping. Regardless, it's usually a good idea to get them involved.

How much of the backlog you should refine is the topic of great debate. If in doubt, about midway through the current sprint ask yourself, "Am I ready for the next sprint?" If the answer is no, well you have your work cut out. Looking ahead, aim to have 75%-85% of what you think your team can commit to in the next sprint ready by the back half of the current sprint. Beyond that, aim to have 50% of the stories in the following sprint and 25% of the stories two sprints out refined to ensure that you have a well-groomed backlog.

Caution: Don't work too far into the backlog. You will probably be spending too much time on things that you may not need to do next.

Tip #6 Focus on Outcomes, Not Output

Teams should remember that success isn't just "slinging code." It's delivering real value to customers and ultimately to the organization. Teams can crank through code and deliver features each sprint that never get used, or that don't deliver the right value to customers. That's not success. Help ensure your code drives success (defined by your vision) by measuring outcomes not outputs. Put another way - it's not how much you get done, it's how much what you got done, does. The fact that three new features

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were released following the last sprint is irrelevant if the goal was to increase sales but in the following weeks they remain flat.

Here are a few ways to remain focused on the outcomes of the value you are delivering:

- *Set Sprint Goals* -- Many teams skip right past this step in Sprint Planning. This is very important in keeping the team focused on why they are delivering what they deliver each sprint. Establish sprint goals at the beginning of Sprint Planning and carve some time out at the end of planning to look back at what the team is committing to. Think about whether or not what the team is committing to achieves the goals.

- *Weigh in Value of Each Goal* -- Not all goals have the same weight. As you are thinking about sprint goals, ask your stakeholders about how they might weigh each of the goals. You might be surprised at what they feel important. Assign a relative numeric value to each. At the end of the Sprint Review, ask the stakeholders to weigh in on how much of the value they think you delivered in that sprint, as related to the sprint goals. This will be a leading indication of whether or not you will achieve the desired outcomes.

- *Build Data Gathering into Features* -- Don't just build features, instrument them. Make it easy to quickly measure the value you are delivering by instrumenting the features you build so that you can quickly gather data to measure the outcomes. This can be as simple as pixel tagging to measure traffic or larger data gathering tools to measure shopping patterns through your app.

Tip #7: Connect with Your Customers… and Keep the Conversation Going

Go out there… don't be afraid to talk to your customers and listen carefully to what they have to say. You never know what you might learn. Some of the most successful Product Owners carve out time to connect directly with their customers often. This could be as elaborate as getting on a plane and visiting with customers across the globe or as simple as talking to people in a shopping mall. (On that last topic, it's always a good idea to talk to the mall administration first -- just trust us on this one.)

Talking to customers doesn't have to be a big deal or involve great expense. It could be as simple as sitting down with them for 10 minutes, buying them a cup of coffee and talking about how they shop. Often new Product Owners think that they must go out and produce big surveys or spend tons of money on market research, when all they need to do is have a conversation.

FRAMEWORK: Immerse, Observe and Engage

The Design Thinking framework uses some great strategies for gaining empathy for your customers through observing and engaging with them directly. In fact, the good folks at the Stanford d.school (or officially, *Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford*) produced this very handy *Empathy Field Guide* which is a great reference for new Product Owners on how to gain insights through your customers. It even includes step-by-step instructions on how to observe your customers, how to have an easy conversation with them, and how to capture what you learned in a structured way.

Here is the important part... don't stop talking to them! Customers change over time and their problems evolve -- you need to keep up with your customers. You can't do that if your insights are stale. So, make it a point to consistently get out there and talk to those folks for which you are solving problems. You will uncover new needs to fulfill and new uses for your products. That is a guarantee.

Tip #8: Plan to Re-Plan

Plans are just that... plans. And what do plans do? They *change.* As a Product Owner, you must be ready for, and okay with, scrapping yesterday's plans and making new ones. The world around us changes, and the last thing that you want to do is to be stuck in yesterday's, outdated plans.

Remember that plans are forecasts and not commitments. For certain, many roadmaps in financial services firms changed as a result of the climate of 2008. Plans must adapt to the changing consumer, competitor and even political landscapes around them. That's why you are working in an Agile environment, right?

Ensure that you establish conditions that trigger replanning. These triggers could be based on time -- at the end of each sprint, refresh the Release Plan -- or changes in market conditions -- sales growth has decreased 5%, refresh the Product Roadmap. In

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fact, though usually the result of something catastrophic, even a Sprint can be cancelled and replanned. (*Caution:* Consider this akin to the nuclear option, use <u>only</u> in a catastrophic event.)

Tip #9: Take Care of your Fellow Team Members

Your team should be the most important group of people in your work life -- put them above (almost) all else. Without them, you will not be delivering anything. So, take good care of them. Here are a few ideas to set you apart as top-rated Product Owner.

- *Get to know them 1:1.* Spend a little time with each team member, just the two of you, to get to know them and for them to get to know you. Take interest and remember little things like their favorite food, sport team, or partner's name. These little things can make a big difference.

- *Be available.* There is nothing worse than your team getting stuck because you, the Product Owner, aren't there to answer a question, or give feedback on a new feature. Ensure that you establish what your team needs early on in terms of your time -- and then stick with it. With that agreement as a baseline, know that at times they will need you more and others they will need you less. This doesn't mean that you can't take a vacation, but it does mean that you need to ensure that the team knows when you won't be available and you spend a little extra time with them before you leave.

- *Buy them food.* Stock your team room with plenty of snacks, candy, health bars and the like. That little pick me up maybe just what someone needs to keep going when having a tough time debugging some code, or an enticement to press forward on long Sprint Planning sessions.

Good care and feeding if your team is a critical part of your new role as Product Owner. An investment in your team will return dividends in spades.

Tip #10 Have Fun and Enjoy Your Work

Probably the most given advice, but do have fun in your new role. Being a Product Owner on a team that produces great work can be so much fun and so fulfilling -- you should enjoy it!

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