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STRONG
PRODUCT PEOPLE

A Complete Guide to Developing Great Product Managers

PART IV: DEVELOP YOUR EXISTING PRODUCT TEAM— TRAIN FOR EXCELLENCE

PART V: CREATE THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT— BUILD A GREAT CULTURE

CHAPTER 11

HOW TO FIND THE TIME

- Finding time for people development as an HoP

- Understanding if you really care about your PMs

- Finding time for people development as a PM

As you may have already noticed, this book is full of things that you as a head of product can and should do to build a more effective product organization. But, there's just one problem: how to find the time to do all these things—particularly when it comes to developing your people and yourself. It's something that often gets put onto the back burner, much like exercising or eating properly. We know it's a good thing to do, and we know we should do it, but other things keep getting in the way.

Allowing other priorities to get in the way of working with your people to develop themselves and their careers is a big mistake. Why? Because career development is your most powerful management tool. Numerous studies show that it drives employee retention, engagement, productivity, and results.

So, why then don't we do it? Ask any HoP, and the answer you'll likely get in return is "I just don't have the time." This chapter is all

about helping you find the time you need to move people development onto the front burner.

Finding Time for People Development (the HoP Edition)

Finding time for people development isn't so much about doing less of your other responsibilities—it's more about engaging in people development in a much more effective and efficient way. Let's take a look at what you as an HoP can do to up your people-development game.

Focus on small, meaningful conversations. You don't need to do a two-hour, 1:1 session with each of your people every week to guide their development. Much more effective are small, short, dedicated 1:1s plus meaningful conversations—10 minutes here, 10 minutes there—on a frequent and ongoing basis. Provide instant feedback on the good things (right after a meeting) and find a formal setting for feedback on the bad and the ugly things. If I'm heading into a meeting and one of my PMs is there, I'll get out a piece of paper, write down some positive feedback, and give it to her right then and there.

Make it a habit. Bad habits are hard to break, and good habits take time (and hard work) to develop.[74]

Use timeboxing for preparation. It's important that you reflect on each person on your team before meeting with them. You can make this happen by adding a weekly slot to your calendar for this—10 minutes per person should be enough, but even five minutes is better than nothing. Think about what feedback you want to give them, what their next development step is, and what your one main question/topic is going to be for the next conversation. Find a framework that you can use to help prepare—the PMwheel, my 52 Questions card deck,[75] or chapters in this book.

Find a way that you love doing it. Your chances of turning this into a habit are greater if you find a way of making the people-development

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74   For tips on creating a new people development habit, see Chapter 8: Monitoring Performance and Giving Feedback.

75   https://www.petra-wille.com/52questions

process more enjoyable. You don't have to be stuck in your office when you do 1:1s—try walking 1:1s outside the office, catching some fresh air with your PM on a balcony or in an outdoor café or restaurant, or walking phone calls.

If you're still struggling with finding time to do people development, maybe the problem is deeper than just getting organized or starting a new habit.

For example, maybe your team is too big. I recently spoke with a head of product who told me that he has 40 PM direct reports. Frankly, it's impossible to do proper people development if you have 40 PM direct reports. My recommendation to this HoP was to restructure his organization to reduce the number of direct reports. (To me, more than six direct reports are too many.)

You should also reflect on why it's important to do people development. Connect the process to the big picture—if you don't do people development, you'll lose good people, and hiring replacements takes time and money (plus you lose the time and money you've already invested on the employees who leave).

Connect people development to your bigger work and life goals: "If I spend more time on coaching, my people are more likely to stay, and the results of the teams will improve. With people being more experienced and knowing what they are doing, we won't be in firefighting mode all the time, and I can spend more time with my family or playing guitar in my band or doing whatever it is I want to do." (Leo Babauta calls this "making a vow" in his book, *Essential Zen Habits*.)

Do You Care? Really??

If you've done all the above and you're still struggling with finding the time you need for people development, I'm going to tell you something that I suspect no one else has had the courage to tell you: You don't really care about your PMs. Either they're simply not important enough to rate your attention, or you routinely forget that you care as

you deal with the day-to-day demands of running a product organization. I know that may be hard to hear, but it's the truth.

Don't believe me? Here's what Marty Cagan says about this important topic in his book, *EMPOWERED*:

> *By far the biggest reason I see that people don't develop and reach competence is because so many managers either don't like developing people, or they don't view it as their primary responsibility. So, it's pushed off as a secondary task, if that, and the message to the employee is clear: You're on your own.*[76]

If you don't care about your people, you and your organization won't be successful until you do. You don't have to be their friends, but you do need to care about them as fellow human beings—with aspirations and dreams, the same as you. Sure, your people can develop themselves into competent PMs. However, it will take a lot longer than if you make time on a regular schedule to help them develop. Your outside perspective and experience will help them see themselves in a new light. And, through your example, they will make time for this critical task in their own busy calendars.

Sometimes, it's good to be reminded why we should care about our PMs. We may know that exercise is good, but we may not really care about doing it until after we have a heart attack. We may know that protecting the environment is good, but we may not really care about it until one of our children becomes sick after swimming in a lake that is tainted with industrial pollution.

Imagine, for a moment, the following conversation between a cost-conscious CFO and a performance-conscious CEO. The CFO asks the CEO: "What happens when we invest all that money in the development of our employees and they leave us?" The CEO replies by asking the CFO her own question: "What happens if we don't do it and they stay?"

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76   Marty Cagan with Chris Jones, *EMPOWERED: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Products,* Wiley (2020)

You can use this same logic to understand why you should care and apply it to your own situation. Here's a canvas I created to help you do just that. The canvas is based on four reasons why you should care: good for them, good for you, good for us, and good for all. Figure 11-1 is an example of the canvas with responses filled in.

Why I should care about people development	Petra Wille | strongproductpeople.com
good for them What will change for the better if you invest some time in people development?	They feel seen, they tend to stay if they are developing, they are motivated, they want to learn more if they see the positive effects
good for you What will therefore change for you to make your life easier?	Less hiring and onboarding efforts if people stay Less escalations if people get better Better products if they know their craft
good for us What are the positive effects of people development even beyond our organization?	Teams are achieving better results with a motivated product manager -> their positive energy will influence the whole team More value for the customer if PM knows more about his craft and ultimately more revenue for the company
good for all What are the positive effects of people development even beyond our organization?	Company will come closer to its vision of making the world a better place faster My family will see me more because of less firefighting and overtime hours

Figure 11-1: The "Why I should care" canvas—completed example[77]

Finding Time for People Development (the PM Edition)

Keep in mind that your PMs may have the same challenge you're facing: they can't find the time to develop themselves. If this is the case, then you need to help them understand why it's good for them to invest in themselves—it's good for the PM, it's good for you as HoP, it's good for the team and organization, and it's good for all beyond the organization. Make it clear to your PMs that you and the organization value self-progression.

More specifically...

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77   You will find a blank version of this canvas, ready for you to fill out at: https://www.strongproductpeople.com/downloads

- Always refer to how this learning will help move your PM forward and toward their career goal.

- Ask them to set aside time for personal development during their working hours. Just 20 minutes a week is a good start. Consistency beats intensity! And tell them to never miss twice!

- Be their friendly reminder.

- Ask them to figure out how they learn best (time, location, medium).

- Make sure they know about the different ways of learning: consuming, applying, reflecting, contributing (see Figure 11-2).
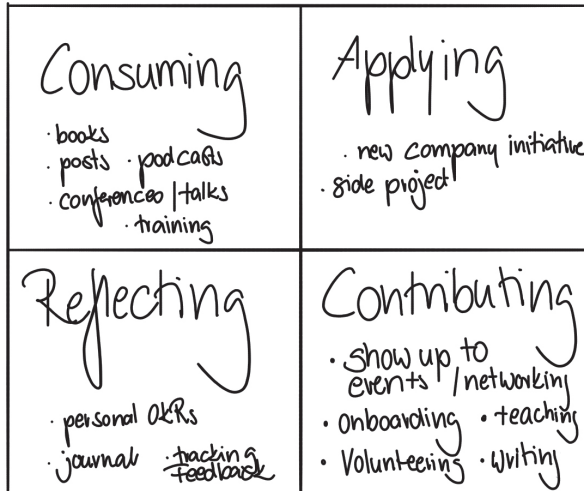

Figure 11-2: The various ways to learn something new

We learn by *consuming* books, blogposts, podcasts, and so on. We improve our skills by *applying* what we have learned to our daily work, or to a side project we're working on. *Reflecting* helps us make sure we're investing our precious development time wisely. And *contributing*

to the product management community (no matter whether it's your company's tribe or the global community) helps you to see how much you have already learned. Similarly, onboarding a new colleague allows you to see your methods, tools, and ways for working through a new set of eyes, which can help you switch perspectives.

Further Reading

- Books:
  - *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg
  - *Mindsight* by Daniel Siegel
  - *Immunity to Change* by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey
  - *The Dip* by Seth Godin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Petra Wille is an independent product leadership coach who's been helping product teams boost their skillset and up their game since 2013. Alongside her freelance work, Petra co-organizes and curates Mind the Product Engage Hamburg, Germany.