Less,
But Better

The Essentialist Product Manager

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Why I Wrote This Book

"Am I working on the right things?"

For years, I asked this question almost daily, both in my personal and professional life. I wanted to know: How can I spend my time working on the things that matter most?

Like many of you, I've lived much of my life attempting to accomplish 100 things simultaneously. I was trying to please everyone and respond to every request. As a result, I scattered my energy and my time. While I made some progress, it often was stressful and came at the expense of the most meaningful things.

Managing products is no different. As product people, I'm sure you understand this well. We're inundated with requests from customers, teammates, partners, executives, and internal stakeholders. When we agree to do it all, or worse, include every request in our products, we wind up with no time for things that matter or feature-bloated and weak products.

As part of my search to find methods, techniques, and practices to accomplish more, I came across the book Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less by Greg McKeown. This book was different: instead of explaining how to do more, it coached the philosophy of doing less. Unlike methods that talked about fitting it all in, this book spoke about working on only the things that matter. If I could summarize this book in one sentence, it would be:

"Less, but better."

If there's a single statement for product managers to live by, that would be it.

I've often thought that product leaders can learn lessons about building better products from the methods we use to prioritize and improve our personal life. *Less, But Better: The Essentialist Product Manager* blends my passions of essentialism, mindfulness, and product management into ideas that you can bring into work and your life to make it all more fulfilling.

The methods in this book may sound simple. But, I promise you they are not easy. They require setting new habits, thinking deeply about what's important, and making tough decisions about what not to work on.

I distilled many of the lessons I've learned about prioritizing products, business, and life. If you're a product leader or you aspire to build great products, I hope this book inspires you to make a more meaningful contribution.

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My Path to Less,
But Better

My Path to Less, But Better

A few years ago, I felt like I was a circus juggler. My time was often stretched thin between my growing startup, travel, twin teenage sons, friends, lecturing, and social life. I didn't feel like I could drop anything. While I have a lot of energy and was happy with my full life, I often felt that I was "burning the candle at both ends."

For years I had the habit of blindly responding to every email and agreeing to new projects or meetings without much consideration. Then, once work began on a project, idea, or meeting, I realized other more critical and strategic things were not getting my attention.

I'm guessing most of you have fallen into this way of being, too.

I didn't have a framework for evaluating whether the idea was the right thing to work on in the first place. My criteria for what I worked on next was often dictated by an item's urgency - and that alone. In the end, the goal became checking things off my to-do list rather than making meaningful progress.

Sometimes I felt as if I were beholden to everyone else's agenda rather than my own. The downside to this behavior is that it was reactive. It was accomplishing tasks blindly, without the big picture of what was actually most important to me, such as my family, friends, and personal time.

When I was a product manager for a startup, I would find myself with a constant stream of tasks and questions to answer from all sides. Most customer requests and ideas wound up in the product backlog. I needed a place to store all the "important" ideas and requests from stakeholders and customers.

Sometimes I would have a line of people, often from the engineering or quality team, asking for details about a story I had written, or a corner case that I hadn't considered. I was constantly putting out fires. I made little time for creative or strategic thinking - one

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of the most critical components for successful startups and product management that I'll discuss later in the book. When I was so buried in the details and urgent requests, I didn't allow space for contemplation and looking at the big picture. Visually, here is how I was feeling vs. where I am now.
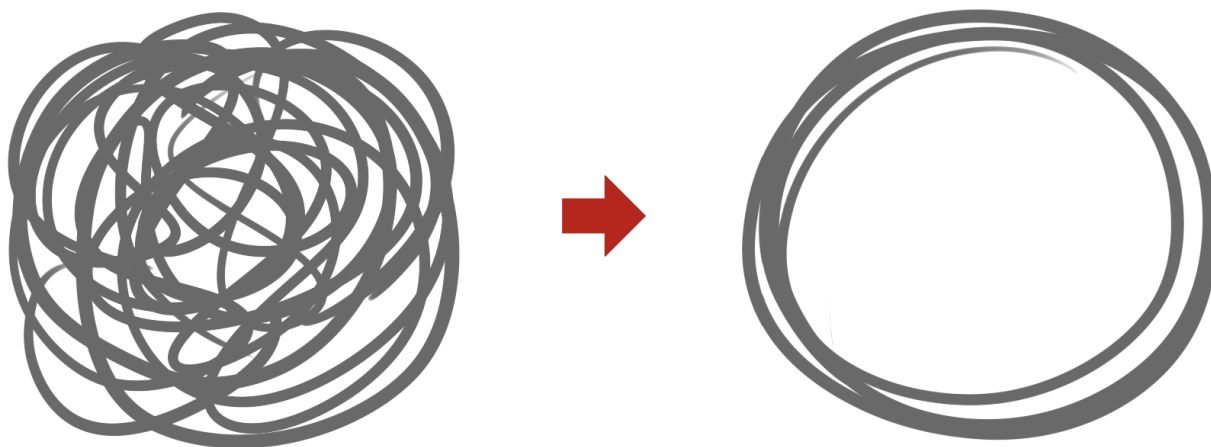
To do it all, I would get through the week and realize I hadn't spent much time doing the things that were truly important or that I enjoy. My personal checklist and work projects were often completed, but the process of achieving them often wasn't satisfying.

If you are a product manager, a typical day will have dozens of decisions, small and large, that dictate your product's course. Like many of you, I read articles about productivity. I learned processes like David Allen's Getting Things Done. These are beneficial and create some order to all the chaos. Yet observing friends, colleagues, and role models, I started to realize that I didn't need to get it all done.

The shift to realizing I didn't need to get it all done began when I honed in what was most important to me in life. Healthy habits, including meditation, exercise, and mindfulness practice, helped me with this thought process.

A few years ago, I spent several days thinking through what was important to me and the personal values I wanted to live my life by — they became my "why" and helped guide my decisions on how I spend my time. I attribute these values to much of my success and happiness, including the success of ProductPlan.

Here are a few of my current values that help me decide what is important. I revisit these values often, so they've changed over time. And it goes without saying that yours will be entirely different:

- **Personal time:** spending time on activities that give me joy, such as running and paddleboarding. This also includes reading and learning for my growth.

- **Quality time with family:** my sons are in high school and are heading off to college soon.

- **Meaningful work:** evangelizing ProductPlan's mission. This work includes writing, speaking, mentoring, thought leadership, and guiding decisions to help our growing team.

- **Inspire:** being a part of team-building products that make a difference and that customers love inspires me.

- **Mentoring others:** both at ProductPlan and in the entrepreneurial community where I live. This includes lecturing at the local university and spending time with students. I've learned so much in the last 20 years, and I want to be of service to others.

- **Travel and adventures:** with my partner, friends, and family.

These values crossed all aspects of my life, including my work life and my interactions with colleagues, friends, and family.

What are the values and activities in your life that you feel are important? How well does that align with what you're spending your time on every day?

As I worked through my values and what was important to me, both a friend and work colleague mentioned McKeown's book on essentialism. It was the concept at just the right time that helped me pull all the pieces together. Rather than trying to do it all, I would instead focus only on tasks that moved my most important values ahead.

This process created a positive shift in my demeanor, and my friends and family noticed too. I was calmer, happier, and somehow making a lot of progress on things I chose to work on.

Product Managers
are Essentialists

Product Managers are Essentialists

As I began incorporating essentialist concepts into my daily life, I realized similar applicability for product managers. Here are two critical areas of the essentialist mindset that would benefit product managers:

1. **Product managers and anyone involved with building products are busy.** They are inundated with requests and are barraged by constant streams of information. In addition to a day full of meetings, they are putting out fires regularly. Releases that don't go as planned, the bugs that make an important customer angry, executives who feel like their needs weren't considered. Product managers are continually triaging, trying to get it all done.

2. **Product managers need to prioritize constantly, saying "No" to most requests.** It sometimes seems that stakeholders feel it's all-important, yet product managers know they need to focus on only the features and enhancements that move the product vision forward. Product managers, working with the executive team and other stakeholders, need to figure out the limited number of key areas to improve.

Defining essentialism for product managers.

Product managers are essentialists by definition: They need to execute what matters most to their customers and organization. Yet it's rarely done well. Most typical days end feeling exhausted and like you didn't make much progress on the most important things. According to McKeown's book, an "essentialist" is someone who lives by design, not by default.

An essentialist isn't reactive, but instead makes choices deliberately by separating the vital few from the trivial many.

How much of your day is on autopilot?

How much of your time is scheduled by default?

Essentialism is an approach for determining where your highest value is and then executing it to exclude many other activities. An essentialist says, "No," a lot.

According to McKeown, essentialism is not about getting more things done; it's about how to get the right things done.

Does that sound a lot like what product managers do every day as we prioritize what to build?

An essentialist says, "I choose to work on only a few things that matter." By carefully choosing these few things that matter (for our products and our lives), we can make great leaps forward. Moreover, we'll live a life that feels in control and one that matters. And hopefully build better products.

The mindset of an essentialist product manager.

Now let's take those core concepts of essentialism and extrapolate it further to product management.

The elements of essentialism have been a part of product development for decades. Legendary industrial designer [Dieter Rams](#) famously said about products he designs: "Back to simplicity. Back to purity. Less, but better." His philosophy for designing elegant physical products also applies to software products and other areas of our lives.

An essentialist product manager will choose to go big on only a few crucial features or projects.

Great product managers have the following characteristics that I believe align with essentialism:

- **A values-driven mindset for making decisions.** This means that they have a mental framework, guided by core values, product values, and customer values, that help them weed out ideas and projects that don't align with those values.

- **An understanding of "why."** They understand their purpose and the reason their product is in existence. An essentialist product manager looks for projects that provide them with meaning and purpose.

- **An honesty-first approach for communication.** If something doesn't align with the values, or there simply isn't the bandwidth to dedicate resources, this is an honest conversation that needs to happen.

- **Building only what matters.** A product manager needs to execute only those initiatives that move the needle for customers and the company. This means strictly prioritizing what gets added to the product backlog.

Essentialism needs to be close to product managers' hearts and products if they want them to be successful.

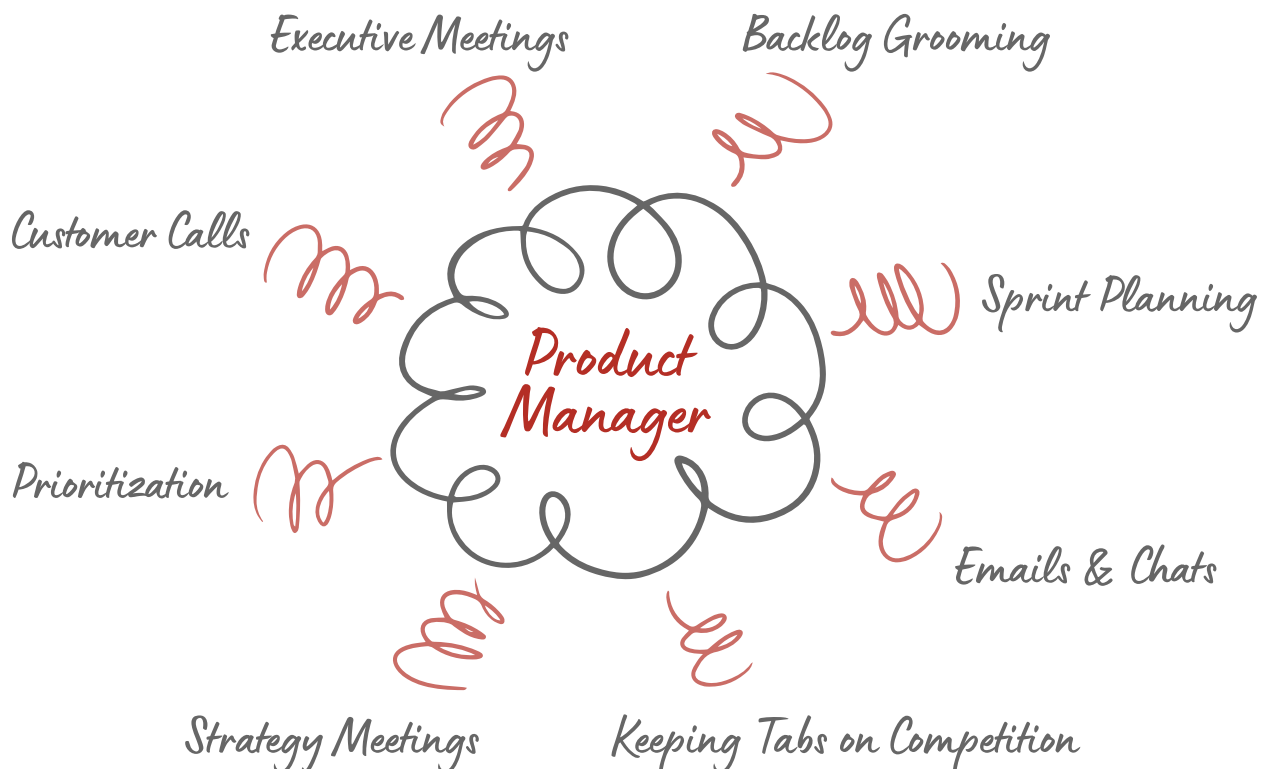# The Non-Essential
Product Manager

The Non-Essential Product Manager

Now that I've introduced some of an essentialist product manager's characteristics, let's review a few not-so-effective non-essentialist product manager behaviors.

I can speak with authority because the biggest trap for me was scattering my energy in too many places, and not making significant progress on the most important things. Now I'm aware I'm doing them, and have the tools (which I'll share with you later) to redirect myself.

Behaviors of non-essentialists.

This is what I looked like as a product manager trying to do it all:

Executive Meetings   Backlog Grooming

Customer Calls

Product Manager   Sprint Planning

Prioritization

Emails & Chats

Strategy Meetings   Keeping Tabs on Competition

Here are a few patterns that might represent "non-essential" thinking by product managers:

"It's all important."
A non-essentialist product manager will try to be all things to all people. They will struggle to fit it all in—all the meetings, feeling like they are responsible for everything.

"I am an expert."
A non-essentialist product manager feels they are the product expert with all the answers, and no decisions can be made without their input. They have a controlling mindset around information; preferring to keep judgments and the roadmap held closely. As a result, everything is on their plate, and the smart team they work with feels their talents aren't being used to the fullest.

"More."
A non-essentialist product manager will focus on "more." It's undisciplined and reactive. More features to beat the competition. More saying "yes" without thinking first. Or saying Yes because it's the easier path. What's the harm of fitting in one more user story? It sure is easier to say Yes and add it to the backlog.

"Are we working on the right things?"
A non-essentialist product manager, because they take on too much, will often feel out of control. They're unsure if they're working on the right things, and as a result, will ultimately feel overwhelmed and unsatisfied.

If any of those statements sound familiar, that's OK. We all fall into that trap occasionally. All of us that are building products will, at some point, feel or exhibit these patterns.

Yet there are ways of thinking and organizing our days so we don't get to that point. After all, don't we all want a sense of purpose, ease, and satisfaction in our work?

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Anti-patterns of non-essentialists.

Here are a few common patterns of inefficient product management and how it compares with an essentialist mindset.

Some of these anti-patterns might be fueled by the need to please, some of it by "imposter syndrome," the chronic self-doubt and feeling of intellectual fraud that some product managers feel despite their competence.

After all, colleagues look to product managers to have all the answers. Of course, we don't have them all. But we're expected to know just enough about everything that we can speak intelligently and have an opinion on nearly every subject. It's important for our role. But this creates high expectations, which plant the seeds of doubt in our minds. So we try to compensate by doing it all.

Non-Essentialist PM	Essentialist PM
"It's all important."	*"What delivers the most value in less time?"*
"Yes, we can do it all."	*"That's a great idea, but not yet."*
"I'm overwhelmed."	*"I choose to work on what's important."*
"I'm in too many meetings."	*"I create space in my day for thinking."*

Habits of an Essentialist
Product Manager

Habits of an Essentialist Product Manager

Over the years working directly with outstanding product managers and entrepreneurs, I've recognized several habits they possess. After learning about essentialism, I began to put it all together—these were the happiest, most productive, and most successful people I knew.

Here are essential habits they were weaving into their personal and professional lives to work on the things that mattered.

Create space for thinking.

For most product managers, our days are filled with video meetings, calls, writing emails, writing stories, interruptions on Slack, etc. With the recent switch to distributed work, the distractions may be even more significant—for many, there may be a feeling of being obligated to respond to every message. Recent studies have shown that remote workers work longer hours during the pandemic and are involved in even more meetings.

Yet every ding of a new message or meeting we attend pulls us out of what's essential. With distributed work becoming the norm for many of us, we have been given this opportunity to create time in our day for strategic and creative thinking without the constant interruptions.

What would that look like to you?

An essentialist creates time in their day for insights and contemplation, rather than putting out fires all day.

For example, reducing the number of meetings you have, blocking out time on your schedule, and turning off notifications for some time.

It also means not reacting to everything that comes your way. The first step is to take a deep breath and know that you likely don't need to answer right away. It's OK to take some time to evaluate whether a request aligns with what is important to you or your

product. If you feel the need to handle every customer request, track every idea from a stakeholder, attend every meeting you're invited to, you simply won't have enough time in the day.

If you find yourself in these situations saying, "Well, I have to attend those meetings (or respond to that email) because I'm needed to make the right decisions," I encourage you to ask why. Is it because you feel the need to control the situation? Is it because you feel the need to please others? If you take a step back and ask "why," you may find that the meeting/email/request is not as important as you initially thought.

"Question everything you generally thought to be obvious." - Dieter Rams

It's natural to be concerned with job security in uncertain times, and feeling the need to respond to everything is natural. But ironically, when you do less, focus on the initiatives that matter most, and achieve success because of it, you're more likely to be perceived as a high-performing product manager.

Creating space is more than allowing time on our schedules - it also applies to our working space. Many of us are now working from home—is your space one where you can focus? Is it pleasant to be in? Since you might be spending about one-third of your day there, why not make it one that inspires you to think creatively?

About 20 years ago, I was writing technical books for Microsoft Press and was spending my days working out of my home. I've developed a few practices that have helped tremendously, as we've recently made the shift to distributed work. Over the years, these had helped create the space I need for creative work, even when my kids were little and space was tight:

- **A dedicated space for work that is clean and organized.** For me, the environment is vital to reducing distractions. This includes background music and a window where I can look out.

- **A workspace that is geared towards health - this includes a place to stand and work.** At our ProductPlan office, we have standup desks for everyone and are now issuing them to our remote employees.

- **Taking a break during my day for outside time (a walk, run, or even a stroll in my backyard) is a great way to process what to work on next.**

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Creating space for thinking is essential for the strategic planning that we all know we need to do, but often fall off our priority list.

Think about last week:

How much time did you carve out for thinking about major projects, how you might creatively solve customer problems, or where you want to take your career?

Spend some time being rather than doing.

Another way I've found to embrace uncertainty and focus on what matters: I give myself time for exercise and other mindfulness practices daily. I find that when I prioritize this above other items, the rest of my day (eve) is happier, even when I get thrown a curveball I hadn't expected.

For those unfamiliar with mindfulness, product managers can make progress on their highest priorities during their day by focusing on one item at a time. This requires that you dedicate yourself to being fully present for the task. You'll need to block out the time and distractions, turn off the music, and sit through the discomfort of staying present while you work on it.

Define your product's purpose.

When was the last time you thought through your product's purpose and mission? The Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) you've been managing? How is your product differentiated from the competition? What is your product best at, and how can you double down on that?

With so much economic disruption, you can no longer take it for granted that your product's vision and mission will be the correct one going forward.

Now is a time of reset for reflection on those things. You (and your team) decide to set the stage for which initiatives are the most important things that you choose to work on next.

Establishing these values for your life and product doesn't need to be complicated - it starts with giving yourself some space for contemplation and writing them down. There are several resources for thinking these through - see the Resources section for a few.

The product vision is your compass.

An essentialist has a clear vision for the direction of the product. This product vision describes the overarching long-term mission of your product. Vision statements are aspirational and communicate concisely where the product hopes to go and what it hopes to achieve in the long term.

This vision is a guide for you and a reminder to your stakeholders about the shared objective they're trying to achieve with this product. Your vision statement should also answer the question of your product's "why."

Why are you creating this product in the first place, and what do you hope to accomplish? It's your compass for where you're going.

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From an essentialist perspective, a clear vision creates alignment. It helps you and your team take a top-down approach to decisions, address conflicting priorities, and determine what initiatives land on the product roadmap. From the vision, you can draw your goals and objectives.

When my co-founder Greg Goodman and I started ProductPlan, we started it not with a product idea, but with a mutual understanding of what we wanted to achieve. Looking back, this was the most critical step for us: starting with the end in mind.

What major decisions have you made, either professionally or personally, where you started with the end in mind? It's a powerful tactic.

Use OKRs to drive action.

Essentialist-oriented product managers work with their teams to create Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) for setting business goals and measurable outcomes. OKRs are often used for quarterly planning, so are much shorter timeframes and more measurable than a product vision.

These measurable objectives keep employees and stakeholders on the same page. They're not set in stone. The objectives are reevaluated and adjusted regularly to ensure organizational alignment. OKRs are ambitious direction setters, singularly focused on the company's ideal destination.

At ProductPlan, we have themes that we drive towards during the year, and our management team reevaluates them every six months. From these themes, we set specific OKRs that we review and revise quarterly. The OKRs are cross-functional in that one or more teams implement them. Some are very product-focused, while others are not.

OKRs serve several valuable purposes. First, they foster a discussion among stakeholders, and help us arrive at an agreement about what's important—this creates alignment. They also serve as inspiring goals for employees, keeping them excited. And of course, the key results are measurable ways that the business or product is improving.

Think "Minimum Product."

A minimum product is the opposite of the "it's all-important" mentality. I've written a lot about the [minimum viable product](#) (or the minimum sellable product) that provides customers value. If you're a product manager or part of a startup, you've likely heard about the Minimum Viable Product concept for getting products to market faster.

But please don't confuse the term "minimum" with essentialism.

In my opinion, product teams often misunderstand the concept of an MVP, and I've seen entrepreneurs and product teams misinterpret it with unfortunate results. Those that take the concept of "minimum" at face value run the risk of releasing a thin set of features that may get their product to market quickly, yet deliver a poor customer experience and ultimately fail.

Sure, it's certainly a way of reducing a product's scope to get it into customers' hands faster. But the MVP also must be a set of features that **provides customer value and customer delight.** You need enough customer value/delight that it stands out from alternative solutions. And enough amount that a customer is willing to pay for it (or use it).

I believe that "perfect is the enemy of good."

Your product needs to solve a real problem, and you can often do that with 80% of the features you believe provide value. In my experience, you never want to shoot for 100% of the features, because getting to 100% presumes you know the right thing to build in the first place (you don't).

A great example of this mindset was when I was part of a team that launched the online meeting software, GoToMeeting. Our team concluded that we could get our MVP to market with half the features. Yet that wasn't enough to have a product that stood out from a vast field of online meeting competitors. Through our customer discovery interviews, we learned that we could differentiate GoToMeeting with several innovative "features." First, we made it the easiest-to-use product on the market. We also

introduced what was at the time an innovative all-you-can-use monthly subscription model - something that disrupted the market.

The beginning of the MVP starts with customer discovery—the process of deep learning about customer problems. You are then defining a core set of issues that you want to solve.

Prioritizing what's most important.

Prioritizing is a key part of a product manager's day. You're working with stakeholders to plan for the next two quarters. Prioritizing the product backlog. Prioritizing the development backlog.

If you have non-essentialist habits, you'll soon drown in all the decisions to prioritize.

The concepts of essentialism make sense - of course, I want to be working on the most important things. But how do I prioritize these things in the first place?

As I mentioned previously, I've written down the goals and values that are important to me in my personal life. I frequently revisit this list, and it's been so helpful to guide me on spending my time.

This same personal list comes into play at work, but I layer in the company's goals. Like many companies, ProductPlan has a vision, mission, strategic goals, and OKRs that guide us. When I'm evaluating an opportunity, these all come into play.

Further, you can use various frameworks to evaluate what to work on - the methods abound, for example, a matrix that plots urgency with importance.

For our products, we can use prioritization frameworks to cut out 80% of the feature requests that ultimately would be distracting and focus on the 20% that will make a big difference to our customers.

Think value versus cost.

Essentialist product managers have a mental model for looking at features and opportunities. Typically this model is based on customer value and its relative complexity to implement. Based on our conversations with product managers, this is a common approach. Many product managers go through this assessment instinctively every day.
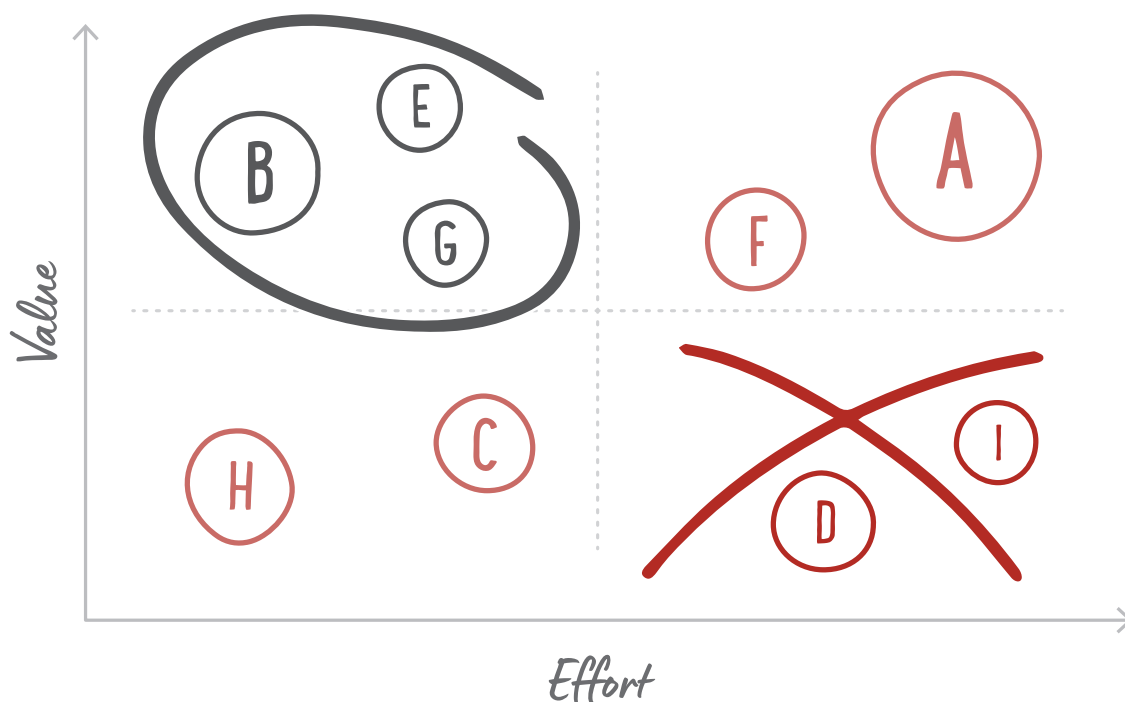
The matrix is simple: The initiatives with the highest value and the lowest effort will be the low-hanging fruit for your roadmap. These are the opportunities in the upper left part of the quadrant pictured above (High Value, Low Effort). As an essentialist, you'll want to include many of these opportunities on your roadmap. The opportunities in the lower right (Low Value, High Effort) you will probably never work on, so don't spend any effort debating these.

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Based on dozens of interviews with product managers, we arrived at a quantitative model for our prioritization model in ProductPlan. The Planning Board is tied to the roadmap. It uses the value versus complexity model, but layers in scoring to arrive at an objective result. This model, shown below, is a way of introducing a framework for decision making into your prioritization.

By using a scoring method to rank your strategic initiatives and significant features, product managers can facilitate a more productive discussion about what to include on the product roadmap. While many inputs ultimately go into a product decision, a scoring model can help the team have an objective conversation.

TITLE	LANE ↓	BENEFIT			COST			SCORE	RANK ↓
		Increase Revenue	Customer Value	Strategic Value	Implementation Effort	Operational Costs	Risk		
WEIGHT		20	20	20	20	20	20	120	
☰ New Admin Console	Web Team	1	4	2	2	4	1	72	3
P Landing Page Review	Web Team	4	3	4	2	2	3	88	1
P Cloud Support	Web Team	5	3	2	3	3	2	80	2
☰ UX Improvements	Mobile Team	1	5	2	5	2	1	72	3
P iOS Reporting	Mobile Team	3	3	4	5	3	3	68	5

Delighter features are a priority.

The Kano model is one way to think minimally about the features you add to your product. With the Kano model, product managers can look at potential features through the lens of the delight a feature provides customers versus the potential investment you make to improve the feature.
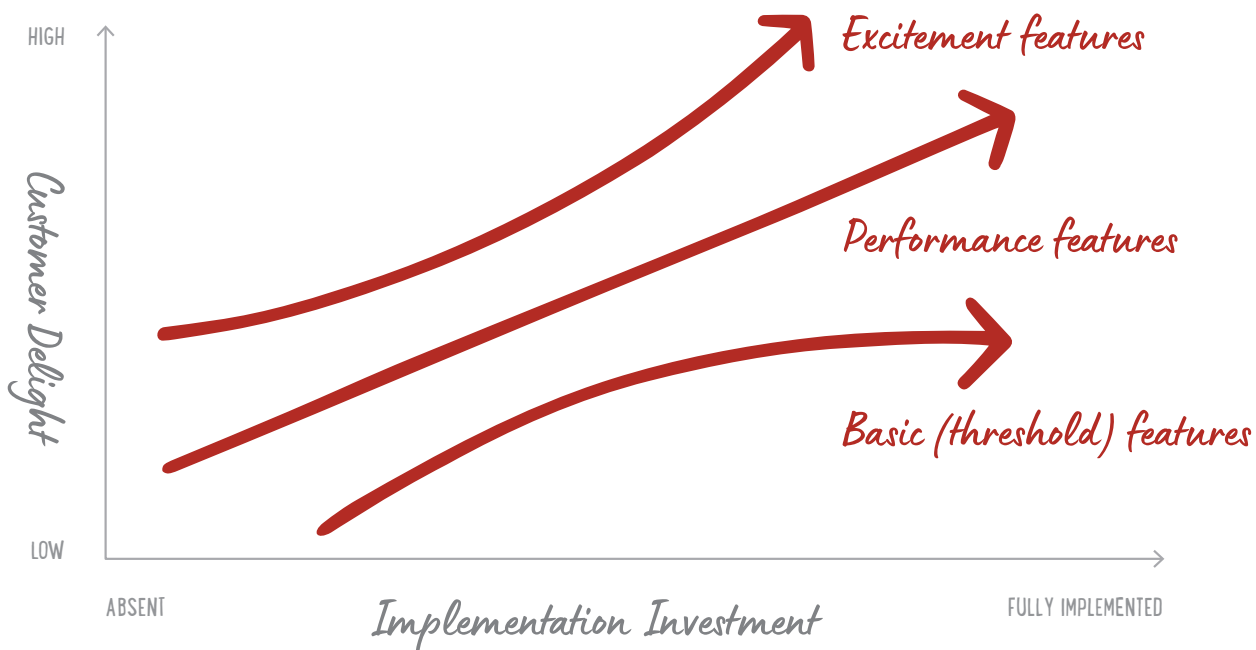
In this model, there are some basic features that your product simply needs to have for you to sell your product in the market. You need to have these "threshold" features, but continuing to invest in them won't improve customer delight dramatically. Don't spend much energy here.

There are some features (like performance) that give you a proportionate increase in customer satisfaction as you invest in them. You can continue to invest some energy and resources over time in this category.

Finally, there are some excitement features that you can invest in that will yield a disproportionate increase in customer delight. If you don't have these features, customers might not even miss them; but if you include them and continue to invest in

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them, you will create dramatic customer delight. This might be the one area to test and then support to achieve a significant result - the very definition of essentialism.

Delighter features don't need to be paramount. They can be small, sometimes UI features that make a difference in the customer's experience. These "small wins" are important for an essentialist product manager. They allow you and your team to celebrate progress and keep the team's energy higher for the more significant, more long-term projects—your customers benefit, as well.

In the case of ProductPlan, one of our early delighters was our visual drag-and-drop interface for building a roadmap. We spent a lot of time and engineering resources, making that 3-second experience of dragging an item onto the roadmap into delight. Ultimately, we created delight through our overall ease-of-use to create, collaborate, and share a roadmap with your team in minutes.

If you cut features back to only the "must-haves," you have a recipe for a weak product that doesn't succeed. Like a non-essentialist, you would be scattering your energy in multiple places to achieve a limited result.

The habit of fewer distractions.

I believe that cutting out many of the distractions in our lives can help us focus on the tasks that matter.

Everyone has a different way of defining a "distraction." For me, I've freed up hours every week by cutting out most television and only occasionally relaxing with a movie. For others, it may be hiring someone for landscaping, or perhaps limiting social media.

At work, many of us have typical days full of back-to-back meetings. We're also constantly distracted by the ding of chat applications and email notifications filling up our inbox.

As product managers, it's tempting to believe that every request from a customer is important. The customer is not always "right" in the sense that their ideas might not be the ideas that move your product ahead.

Which of these distractions in your day do you truly need to address immediately? How many of the meetings you attend are actually out of habit rather than actual necessity? Perhaps you can review your schedule next week and opt-out of a few.

There are many great examples of business leaders who take limiting distractions seriously, focusing on only the activities that matter.

When Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky had lunch with Warren Buffett in 2014, he was struck by the lack of distractions in Buffett's life. "There are no TVs anywhere," he said. "He spends all day reading. He takes maybe one meeting a day, and he thinks so deeply."

That's a great description of an essentialist's life.

Is your product backlog a distraction?

Most product managers have a product backlog that is a list of prioritized opportunities for your product.

But has your backlog become a dumping ground for every random idea from every stakeholder? Sure, it feels good to be able to tell a vital stakeholder you've "noted" their opinion (and in a sense avoided the responsibility of saying, "No.") Is the minuscule, incremental cognitive overhead worth it if you do that 100 or 1,000 times?

If you have items in your product backlog that you now realize you won't get to within the next six months, that's probably a sign that you're committing to too much, either to stakeholders or to yourself.

When the product backlog is too long, it clouds your vision and creates underlying stress of what's not getting done. A shorter backlog frees you up to think about what's most important. It improves creativity. Think in timeframes of perhaps three to six months out.

I was there once a few years ago, with a product backlog of 600 items. I diligently prioritized and managed the epics and stories, moving them into the next two or three sprints. As the months passed, it became clear there was no way we'd develop what was in the product backlog over the next few months. There was rising frustration from the whole team at the pace of development, partly from the perception that we would never get to everything.

Every day, my stress grew as the backlog ballooned. What was the point of diligently managing the backlog when it would be impossible to accomplish it all? Especially when everything a few months in the future would likely be different?

At that point, stressed out and overcommitted, I decided to declare "backlog bankruptcy." I deleted every story, issue, bug, and idea that we weren't planning to release in a near-term sprint. Clicking Delete was one of the more challenging things I've done. Over 600 items… gone.

But then something interesting happened. There were no repercussions from that decision. No stakeholder brought it up—no one said, "where did my idea go?" I got a sense of relief after eliminating the cognitive overhead created by the backlog.

After ruthlessly prioritizing and limiting what we added to the backlog, we got the product to market faster. Starting from scratch felt good.

The lesson declaring backlog bankruptcy taught me was that if an idea has high enough value for customers, it will come back. It will bubble up to the top. I no longer keep massive lists of all the ideas and things I want to do in the future. Sometimes the simplicity this creates in your product is a positive experience for customers.

Let go of what's not working.

A few years ago, I learned about the concept of sunk cost theory, the errors we make when deciding to continue with a project, investment, or even a relationship long after it's become clear it's no longer working for us.

In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize Winner in Economics, demonstrated that we choose options to avoid loss. We don't behave logically when presented with the same choice framed in different ways.

In sunk cost theory, we will often decide to stay with something because we've put time or resources into it. We believe that because we have "sunk" that cost into it, we somehow need to recoup it. That's a fallacy. What's done is done, and the only thing

that matters is future cost. An essentialist product manager knows this - they know that goals, objectives, markets, and products change. Whatever you say, "No" to may require that you stop working on something you've invested considerable time and energy into.

Weed your garden.

Small things that fall on your plate will inevitably accumulate. I've found that when I let these little things pile up (figuratively on my to-do list, or literally on my desk), I'm more distracted and stressed out.

One habit that essentialist product managers have is carving out time to clean these small things up. They weed their garden so that they have space for their most important plants to grow.

Things that might fall into this category include meetings to schedule, emails that pile up, articles to be read, and various administrative tasks.

The problem with having too many of these small items on your plate is that it feels good to accomplish them - you feel like you're making progress. I know that feeling so well, cleaning out my email inbox, and getting to the end of the day not having worked on the most important things.

Leaving blocks of time on your calendar for weeding your garden can help. Perhaps at the end of every day for an hour. That way, you can minimize the distraction that these weeds cause.

Another approach promoted by David Allen of *Getting Things Done* fame: if it takes less than two minutes to do, "Do it now." The cognitive overhead of remembering to do it in the future isn't worth it. Of course, it's crucial to not blindly complete every item that piles up - using essentialism; you need to determine if it's necessary to your goals to do it in the first place.

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Think in themes.

An essentialist product manager plans what they work on based on high-level goals. This translates well into planning your roadmap, which should also be high-level and strategic.

This is why your first step when roadmapping is determining the most critical high-level objectives. By organizing your roadmap by themes, you're guiding the decision process for your top priorities.

Think of themes for your product, you narrow down the themes to a handful of areas you want to improve for your customers, and you'll be able to make significant progress. If you have too many themes, too many goals, your energy will be scattered, and you will make less, incremental progress that may not give your customers meaningful value.

Themes are the higher-level objectives on the roadmap - and they should represent successful customer outcomes. For example, an e-commerce company's theme might be "improve the shopping cart experience to speed up the checkout." Themes help you stay on track with the bigger strategic picture for your product.

Embrace uncertainty and spend less time agonizing over decisions.

In the past, I've wrestled with needing to control uncertainty. For years, I thoroughly planned everything and felt the need to know the eventual outcome of decisions.
I spent a lot of time that, in the end, wasn't necessary.

Uncertainty is uncomfortable.

As a result, I found myself with a lingering sense that things were out of control. As a product manager, the uncertainty manifested in really detailed and lengthy Product Requirements Documents. I know I'm not the only product manager with this challenge. All of the research, time spent writing long documents, and time spent worrying were, *well,* non-essentialist.

Over the years, I've realized through observation and personal experience that the most successful and happy people are those who are willing to embrace uncertainty. They are the ones who make "risky" decisions without knowing 100% of the information. It's especially true for product managers, entrepreneurs, and others who want to launch products or ideas.

I'm much better now about letting things unfold without needing to know how the plan eventually will materialize. And yes, I get the irony that I'm the co-founder of ProductPlan, software that helps product managers visualize their plan.

If we can stop for a moment and change our thinking that we're not in as much control as we think, and surrender to it, we're more likely to succeed because we're open to change and opportunities we wouldn't see otherwise. And I've realized these opportunities somehow align with my most important goals.

Here are a few thoughts on how product managers—especially those in an agile development environment—can embrace uncertainty and live with the inevitable discomfort. Hopefully, these ideas will help you focus on what matters.

Make decisions based on outcomes.

One way to live with uncertainty is to relax about the exact plan, and instead make decisions based on an outcome-driven goal. For example, rather than creating a list of arbitrary and disconnected features for your product, instead, focus on what your desired outcome is for customers – *what is the goal you want them to achieve?*

By focusing on an outcome-driven roadmap, you (and your team) have room to think about new possibilities, about different and possibly faster ways of achieving the goal.

Focus on today (and maybe a few sprints out).

Product managers expect to spell out our products' vision and what the product looks like one or two years down the road. But it's problematic if this planning is too detailed. One or two years out, any plan is only a fantasy and a waste of time.

There's no way things will go exactly to plan, and the goalpost will probably change

along the way. You'll never achieve perfection. Unfortunately, this detailed planning sets an expectation in your head (and your stakeholders' heads) that simply won't come true. It sets up everyone for disappointment.

My advice: Don't plan too far ahead. Focus on the big picture vision in broad terms. Then, focus on what is in your control today to meet that vision. For your product planning, a few sprints out are far enough.

Get comfortable with the discomfort.

Stop spending as much time dwelling on problems at work and what-if thinking. You're causing stress, which will affect you in all areas of your life. Spend more time working to solve the problems your customers are facing. Those are the fun problems.

If you're a worst-case-scenario planner—cut the negative thinking. Why worry about all the endless gloomy scenarios that your (fearful) mind can conjure up? Plus, I believe that if you expect the worst, you'll put yourself in a position of being close-minded to recognize new options and opportunities. I'm not saying that you should avoid realistic contingency planning, but truly, the five percent chance of a worst-case-scenario is unlikely to unfold. Spend your brainpower toward an optimistic outcome. And your nights will be more restful.

Embrace confrontation.

Essentialist product managers initiate the conversations they know they need to have. I'm not saying to pick fights, but rather address conversations directly.

Rather than avoiding conflict by saying Yes, have an honest, upfront conversation about the situation.

Discovering the most important things to build.

You might be asking yourself, "how do I choose the most important things to work on?" I believe that part of the answer is through conducting customer discovery. Customer discovery is a way of engaging with your customers to find pain. And it's this pain that leads you to the solutions that are the right things to build.

People buy products to reduce pain or create a gain. You can learn what it would mean to a customer through customer discovery if you solved that pain. Your goal is to uncover the value proposition of solving problems. A value proposition represents the value that the customer gets out of using your product. So a value proposition could mean: Saving money. Saving time. Making money. Lifestyle benefits or professional benefits such as looking good in front of your boss.

Through an ongoing customer discovery process, I've learned that the right things to build bubble up to the top of your priority list. While there may be a debate about exactly what to build, learning from your customers their greatest pains will point you in the right direction.

You can read more about Customer Discovery in my book, Find Product-Market Fit Faster: Lessons for Product Managers.

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Communication:
Conversations that Matter

Communication: Conversations that Matter

Think about the conversations you've had this week with stakeholders and peers. How many had an impact on the direction of the product? How many had tension because there was a disconnect in objectives?

In my experience, a few approaches to how you have these conversations can have a significant impact on the success of the discussions and help them truly matter. Here are a few.

Don't say "No" literally … but say it a lot.

I've talked a lot about how product managers need to say "No". And maybe it's time to stop. Sounds like a contradiction? Let me explain.

A product manager told me recently that most stakeholders don't like it when the essentialist product manager shuts down their ideas. That's true. It's less about saying "no," and more about the conversation.

Yet how can we navigate these conversations, maintain our priorities, and still keep stakeholder relationships strong? Rather than saying "no," it might look like this:

- Show a bit of empathy for their perspective. Understand that you work with smart people who have great ideas.

- Help them understand that while it's a great idea, it's more about "not yet."

- Help them understand it's a tradeoff decision: If we implement one idea, what else won't get implemented? Help facilitate the decision. Often stakeholders don't recall what they've already requested.

- A long-term product strategy guides your decisions - how do the ideas fit into that strategy?

- Your priorities need to be transparent - show them what you have in progress and help them understand the order of development.

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Product managers need to stay steadfast yet, at the same time, be open to change based on changing information. Your stakeholder may have a better idea that's lower risk or lower effort than something you already have planned. Be open to discussion and change.

A non-essentialist product manager will pause before eventually saying, "Yes." An essentialist says "No" a lot, focusing on the vital few. Product managers will need to do this with empathy and reasoned explanations about why the answer is "No" (or " not yet").

Additionally, it's not only about saying "No" to feature requests. But instead, not committing to projects and decisions that do not lead you towards the greater goal. By saying "No", and having a well thought out justification, you will foster more respect among your peers, stakeholders, and customers. Help them understand what the tradeoffs are. What will they (or the company) be giving up if you choose one path versus another?

Admit you don't know the answer.

Admitting that you don't have all the answers can be a product manager's greatest strength. There's no way that you can create something precious from your ideas alone.

By admitting you don't have all the answers, you're showing you're human. You're vulnerable. It also creates transparency.

Instead, bring to the table your objectives and ideal customer outcomes. This allows your talented teammates to bring their ideas and creates a true collaborative environment.

During customer discovery, it creates clarity by showing customers what we don't know, or features we see a product won't have (yet).

When writing documents and business cases for internal stakeholders and development teams, it's helpful to have a section stating what you don't know.

I like the concept of "incomplete by design." In traditional organizations, there is a virtue in completeness. Even if that completeness is fiction and risky. The truth is that most organizations are continuously changing, and there is no such thing as "complete."

By purposefully coming to the table with an unfinished document or deliverable, and collaborating with engineers and people on your team, you can achieve better results.

Incompleteness stimulates real innovation. "My deliverables" become "our deliverables." In the end, your team will acknowledge and advocate for your work because they contributed to it.

Have (flexible) boundaries.

Are you allowing other people to decide how you spend your time? Having solid boundaries can help ensure that you spend your effort on the right things. In the absence of boundaries, other people will prioritize your time for you.

I believe that you'll be a happier product manager (and human) if you don't obsess about making everyone else happy. Boundaries require that you sometimes will put off some people. While we want to be a good teammate, boss, or partner, we don't have to solve other people's problems for them instinctively.

Boundaries are particularly important for many of us working in distributed teams. It's easy for the boundaries between work and home to become fuzzy, especially with the technology that connects us to work on every device, all the time. The result, if you don't have clearly set boundaries on your schedule, is that your work will seep into your home and family life.

Most product managers work for someone else, and therefore need to define many boundaries that give some flexibility for important projects and (sometimes) stakeholder needs. For example, if you've decided to not work during your lunch hour, you might decline some less-important lunchtime meetings, but might fit a meeting in during lunch for an upcoming major release.

However, if you've decided to stop rescuing your co-workers when they don't meet their deadlines and ask you to help, well, that's perhaps a boundary you want to keep. It's possible to be a team player yet be protective of your time. While helping your co-workers may not take much time and might feel good in the moment, you aren't focusing on what's most important to you if you do that too many times in a week. And you're training your co-workers to come to you the next time.

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An essentialist product manager will look at boundaries to protect their time and avoid becoming stressed by the lack of it.

Of course, when enforcing your boundaries, it's necessary to be a good communicator. In ProductPlan's annual Product Management report, communication consistently ranks as the most important skill in product management. The more you practice, the better you'll be at saying "No", and you'll be able to say it with less discomfort. These tips might help you enforce your boundaries when people ask you to do something that doesn't align with your goals:

- Spend time acknowledging and discussing the request.

- Give a thoughtful reason why you're not able to help. "This month, I'm focusing on this important project for the company."

- Be consistent. If you make exceptions, it's easy to slide into less control of your time.

Get executives in alignment with your vision.

Building consensus among executives can be one of the most challenging aspects of a product manager's job. Part of the solution is to get upfront agreement around your organization's strategic goals and be transparent about your prioritization process. It's important to make sure all parties in your organization are on the same page.

Essentialist roadmapping.

As a product manager who now sits on the other side of the table as an executive, I understand how much thought (and possibly anxiety) goes into roadmapping and roadmap presentations.

Roadmaps are a culmination of a lot of work, customer conversations, and experience. The most common mistake product managers make in the roadmapping process is assuming they know exactly what to build without building consensus first. Of course,

you are the customer expert, but leading with the assumption that you alone know the ideal priorities has consequences that might sabotage your well-intended roadmap.

Have informal discussions with executives and other stakeholders before the executive planning meeting. That way, you'll present a roadmap with the right priorities and align those to its business goals. It will help you to have a seamless review and approval process.

Flexibility is a friend of the essentialist product manager. If you must create a roadmap with delivery dates, try to keep broad timeframes such as quarterly. Things are always more complicated and take longer than you and your team thinks. It will help your cause if you educate executives over time to know that you can only estimate fuzzy delivery dates and that priorities will undoubtedly shift.

Another characteristic of an essentialist product manager is the preparation that goes into planning the roadmap. This preparation comes in many forms, such as reviewing prototypes and concepts with customers early, working with the team to groom features well ahead of the sprint, and well-organized stories ahead of sprint planning meetings. In contrast, a non-essentialist product manager will be working on these things at the last minute and will be hoping for the best.

Using a visual roadmap to connect the roadmap to the strategy behind it is helpful. It ties the roadmap initiatives to actual customer value, business goals, and meeting real needs. Executives have a lot on their plates and generally try to stay as high level as possible.

Don't be afraid to acknowledge that there are unknowns. Communicate your level of certainty for each initiative during the presentation. Of course, the further out you go, the less certain things are for everyone. You can mitigate this by creating roadmaps that don't extend as far into the future.

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Conclusion:
Live with the uncertainty

Conclusion: Live with the uncertainty

Over the years, I've realized that the most successful and happy people are willing to embrace uncertainty through observation and personal experience. They are the ones who make "risky" decisions without knowing 100% of the information. It's especially true for product managers, entrepreneurs, and others who want to launch products or ideas.

As you begin introducing some of these essentialist concepts into your life and work, I encourage you to keep this in mind - that everything changes, and you don't have perfect information to make progress on the most important things to you. I wish you good fortune.

One final thought: try to stop caring about what other people think. When you're confident in your abilities, you know you're doing good work, and are treating people well, it becomes second nature.

Work less, do fewer things, and do them better.

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Resources

Over the years, there have been several instrumental resources that have helped me both personally and professionally. Here are a few:

- Essentialism – The Disciplined Pursuit of Less, by Greg McKeown

- Zen Habits. A blog by Leo Babuta for achieving simplicity and mindfulness.

- The Product Manager's Complete Guide to Prioritization. A free book by ProductPlan.

- Sam Harris. Writings, interviews, and an app for mindfulness and focus.

- Getting Things Done. David Allen's book and talks about productivity and focus.

About the Author Jim Semick

I believe that great products don't happen by accident—it's exceptional leadership that truly makes a difference. I'm passionate about empowering future product leaders to build successful products that solve real customer problems.

For almost 20 years, I have taken new disruptive software products from concept to market launch. I've perfected a recipe for building and launching great products that have a greater chance of succeeding in the market.

My company ProductPlan creates software used by thousands of product teams at the world's leading companies to power their product roadmaps. I've previously helped validate and launch some of the earliest SaaS products, including AppFolio, GoToMyPC, GoToMeeting, and GoToWebinar.
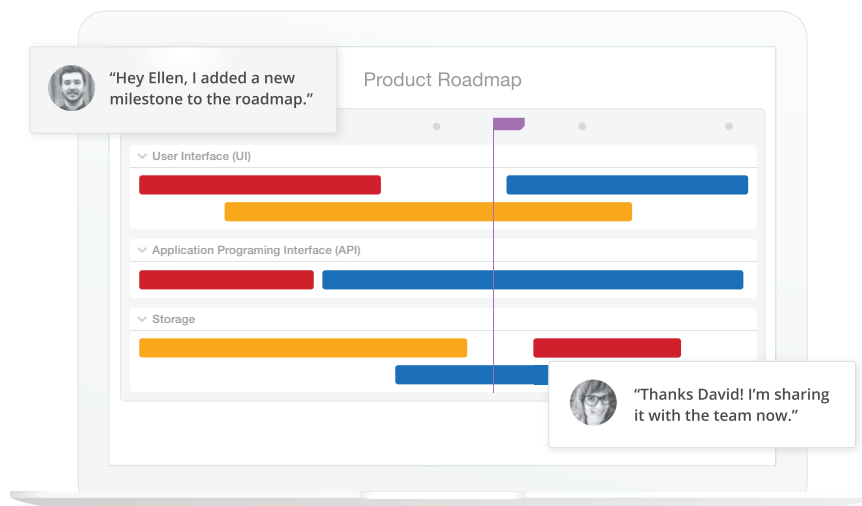
I write, mentor, and speak about product management, entrepreneurship, and building winning software products. I give talks on product-market fit, product roadmaps, and product management. I'm a guest lecturer, mentor, and investor in my community in Santa Barbara, California.

I've written books on product-market fit, product roadmaps, and product leadership. I'm a guest author for various publications and numerous podcasts and publications have interviewed me.

My entrepreneurial journey is unique, spanning from product manager to founder. I hope to continue sharing what I've learned.

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About ProductPlan

ProductPlan makes it easy for teams of all sizes to build beautiful roadmaps. Thousands of product managers worldwide–including teams from Nike, Microsoft, and Spotify– trust ProductPlan to help them visualize and share their strategies across their entire organization. With our intuitive features, product managers spend less time building roadmaps and more time shipping products.

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