Product Principles – A Leadership Tool

TOLPAGORNI
product management

Created by Adrienne Tan

More info: https://brainmates.com.au/product-management/product-leadership/product-principles-leadership/

About Tolpagorni

Research and Knowledge are the key foundations of Tolpagorni. We take the lead in testing new strategies and in developing a framework of methods, tools and techniques for effective product management.

We work closely with research organizations and we continuously build our skills framework through our ongoing projects.

We also take an active part in building the Book of Knowledge (BoK) for the world's leading organization for Software Product Management (ISPMA).

However, the most important thing for us is to make sure we deliver results to our customers. We understand that theory on its own will not deliver usable outcomes. We strive to apply our knowledge in a practical, hands-on approach so that our customers have tools and methods to use in their everyday work practice. This approach also develops the role of the Product Manager so that they add value to their business.

All of us who work at Tolpagorni know product management from the inside, because we have done it ourselves. We believe that the combination of theoretical research and "on-the-floor" pragmatism is what makes us excel in what we do.

If you want to learn more about Tolpagorni go to www.tolpagorni.com.

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One of my all-time favourite books is *The Hard Thing About Hard Things* by Ben Horowitz, in particular, the chapter entitled 'The Struggle'.

I can relate to The Struggle. All of it.

Product Leaders will likely find many of the struggles described in the book are just as relatable as the struggles entrepreneurs such as Horowitz's face.

As Horowitz puts in:

"The Struggle is when you wonder why you started the *job* in the first place. The Struggle is when you don't believe you should be **Chief Product Officer** of the company. The Struggle is when you know that you are in over your head. The Struggle is when you are surrounded by your team and you are all alone."

The Product Leadership struggle is akin to the Entrepreneurship struggle because the role has no clear learning path. No school or course can prepare you for the breadth of issues and challenges you'll be faced with. From operational to strategic, people to the product, financial to technical, Executives to Developers, you'll have to respond with the right aplomb to ensure you give just enough direction to guide rather than decide.

Simple tools, such as Product Principles, can be highly effective for this. I've used Product Principles to save sinking Product ships, where every product decision is fought over like a tug of war, where no amount of customer data or empirical evidence can sway minds.

What are Product Principles?

Product Principles are a simple set of guidelines that reminds the team to behave in an agreed way. Principles are neither the mission or the product's vision statement, but act similar to lists of dos and don'ts, working to quickly bring about team alignment and improved performance. They help keep folks focused and accountable while limiting the need to command and control individuals.

There are **different layers** of Product Principles.

They can exist at an **individual** level. "I will behave and develop products in this particular way." If you're serious about your craft as a Product practitioner, spend time reflecting and penning what's important to you when developing and managing products.

They can exist at a **team** level. "We will behave and develop products as a team in this particular way." If you want to amp up consistency and develop team culture, take time out as a team to craft the team's principles.

And, they can exist at the **product** level. "The product will behave for the customer in this particular way." If the product is complex, with multiple hands involved, consider creating a set of principles to help individuals make consistent decisions.

The concept of Product Principles is not unique – you can find myriad examples of how others do it. I particularly like the ones collated from the team at Mic, a digital news organisation. Among their 13 principles, this is my favourite:

A problem well-stated is half-solved

"Sometimes a team is midway through a project, and members are wondering about the context and background story of their work. If a team can't answer every question about the origins and purpose of a project, they don't truly understand what they're building."

"A problem well-stated is a problem half-solved" holds us accountable: it requires us to ask hard-hitting questions to cut through the noise to get to the core problem. As Albert Einstein said, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." If we can very easily explain a problem, we understand exactly what it is, which brings us that much closer to finding the solution."

The benefits of using Principles

Product Principles are particularly relevant for Product leaders because they empower the team to be self-led, with limited operational involvement from the Product Leader, while giving the team more control over their work environment.

In a HBR article entitled *How Leaders Can Let Go Without Losing Control*, Mark Boncheck, the CEO of Shift Thinking, writes:

"By creating the missing layer of decision principles, leaders have an opportunity to let go without losing control, and to add structure without losing speed. It's a way to transcend the tradeoff between alignment and autonomy and to create a culture based on principles over process."

Establishing a set of Product Principles in conjunction with the Product Team should be your first step as a Product Leader. The process of arriving at a set of memorable and useful Product Team Principles begets deep discussion with your team, enabling you to learn more about your people.

This conversation reduces barriers and shows your leadership skills, particularly your openness as a leader to team contribution and the opportunity for the team to create their own narrative.

Creating your Product Team Principles

Product Team Principles are unique to each organisation and the people within the organisation. For example, If you work in a mature organisation that operates in a regulated environment (health, safety, financial services), having a principle which encourages individuals to bypass those regulations only sets the team up for disappointment, so it's vital that your Product Principles help the team achieve their goals.

To begin the process, give individual team members time to consider what's important to them at work as, essentially, each team member will develop their own set of principles.

Ray Dalio offers up great advice:

"Think for yourself to decide 1) what you want and 2) what is true, and 3) what you should do to achieve #1 in light of #2."

Sharing individual team principles is a great way to kick off the process of finding patterns of similarities and differences in the team. The team can vote for a principle or debate which ones should form part of the Product Team Principles.

More importantly, David Rock, CEO of the Neuroleadership Institute suggests that "principles should be pithy to the point of ready recall." This takes time to get right.

With the dawning of a new work year, schedule time to make Product Principles a reality in your workplace. Setting the wheels in motion to create a set of Product Principles should begin to lift some of the fog from 'The Product Leadership Struggle'.