

One Knight in Product - E183 - Gabi Bufrem

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SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, Gabi Bufrem



Jason Knight 00:00

Hello, and welcome to the show. I'm your host, Jason Knight. And on each episode of this podcast, I'll be having inspiring conversations with passionate people in and around the wonderful world of Product Management. Now, speaking of product management, if you lend me your attention for a couple of seconds, my former podcast guest, Saeed Khan and I are thinking of running a Maven cohort course on B2B product management, and helping B2B Product Managers be successful and present themselves as strategic business partners and not feature factory employees. If that sounds interesting, I'd love it if you could head over to <https://www.oneknightinproduct.com/course> to give us some feedback, and register your interest in the idea. That's <https://www.oneknightinproduct.com/course>, make sure to share with your friends as well. On tonight's episode, we talk all about product strategy, something we all think is important. But so many product managers and indeed, product companies seem to have no idea what theirs is at all. So why is this? And if we're in that situation, how can we even get started? What are some of the barriers to saying a good product strategy? And what are some of the product principles that we can use as guardrails to make sure everything we do is on the right track. For this and much more, please join us on One Knight in Product.



Jason Knight 01:19

So my guest tonight is Gabrielle Bufrem. Gabi is a product advisor and Maven course instructor and Marty Cagan's recommended product coach who says her first job was selling toys as a five year old, showing an entrepreneurial flair and hustle that's obviously set up well for a career in product management. Gabi then went on to be a surf instructor in Costa Rica before writing the product management wave through a variety of companies before deciding it was time to charge into coaching to help product management companies and product management teams by enabling leaders to scale themselves and empower their teams to a strong product strategy. Hi, Gabi, how are you tonight?



Gabi Bufrem 01:52

I'm great. How are you doing? Jason?



Jason Knight 01:54

I'm absolutely fantastic. Thank you very much. And I'm looking forward to getting started. So starting from the top, you are a product leadership coach, and advisor, just like everyone seems to be doing these days as well. But you come very highly recommended, as mentioned in the intro, what sort of clients you working for day to day?



Gabi Bufrem 02:11

Yeah, so I work with a lot of product leader. So I would say heads of product, VPs of product, also sometimes co Head of Design / Head of Product combo, which is so fun. And I have it I have clients that are at like, really early stage startups to scale up to also kind of like pretty big public companies.



Jason Knight 02:34

Have you got like a sweet spot that you'd normally go for? And you kind of take the others on demand? Or do you literally just have an offering for all of those people that's equally well set up for any of them.



Gabi Bufrem 02:44

So I'd say the core thing for me is every offering, I would say is it has a process, but it is targeted to the people's needs. So it all starts with their goals, what they are trying to achieve. And that is my core thing. As a coach, I try to understand that very clearly and see if I am the best person to help them. And if I am I'm like, awesome. Here's what working together could look like if I'm not I'm like, I know a few other people and needs to talk to them. Because they're better at me then. Yeah, at this particular thing that you're looking for. Yeah, I would say some sweet spots, I really loves like, first time head of product, or some of that is becoming VP of product. And it's like inheriting or like getting kind of like the rage to like a big organisation or a big company. That is a pretty sweet spot for me. And when developing sweet spot is like, first PMs that are also now kind of transitioning into head of product. So I have some like really senior, really ambitious clients that are not yet leaders, but aim to be leaders of the future.



Jason Knight 03:48

But that's a tricky transition, right. And it's something that I've spoken about before as well, this idea that you can't just put up management harder. And now you're a leader is like there's actually a whole different set of skills. So is that something that you find is particularly easy to teach to people? Or do you think that there's also some people out there that need quite a lot of effort to actually get them across the chasm from individual contributor through to leadership?

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Gabi Bufrem 04:10

Yeah, I think that it is a tricky transition. And I remember going through it myself, and I had a lot of talks. I mean, I'm a product person. And I really love building products. I love discovery. I love all of that. I love collaborating with engineers and designers and what I learned through the way and I kind of got my role as a product leader because I mentored so many people at the company already and someone was like, Hey, this is a job and like you can get paid to do this. And it's great and we like these people. So I had a pretty kind of like smooth transition. But I would say it's a very different job because in one job you are building the products yourself and then in the other job I described that you're building the product people you're building the people that are building products, and it's your job to scale them up, it's our job to empower them, and to give them enough context to be successful, because you're only as strong as your weakest player.

**Jason Knight 05:12**

He's true, but what's your feeling on the short track career paths that some people are promoting? Now, I mean, I'm personally a big fan of it, this idea that you don't have to be a product leader, just because that's the next step in the ladder, but that you could actually have two parallel ladders. Yeah, where people that maybe aren't gonna be very good at that or don't want to be very good at that can go and do really seedier individual contribution. Is that something you've seen a lot of out there? Or is it still fairly kind of linear track.

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Gabi Bufrem 05:39

I would say, thankfully, I've seen a lot of it out there. And I am also a huge fan of it. I think, as I've just mentioned, these are very different skill sets, like people that are really good at building products are not necessarily sometimes the best product leaders or the best managers, and coaches, which I think is a core part of leading a product organisation. And that is totally fine. We need both of these people. And we also need to give chances and opportunities for these people to excel and to continuously grow in their career. Because regardless of where you fall, product, people are mostly type A pupil and they want the next thing they want to be able to grow. And I feel like this enables us to actually keep them in product for longer, which is great.

**Jason Knight 06:22**

No, absolutely. We need all the allies we can get. But interestingly, I've been looking into and reading a lot about coaching ever since I got more involved in coaching over the last few months. And I even got an episode coming out with a coaching thought leader tomorrow, which I'm very excited about. And I asked her a question that I also want to ask you. So if you look at, for example, Marty Kagan, who I know, you know, well, if you look at his definition of a product coach, it says that you need to have strong product expertise to be a product coach. Yeah. And that's something that's shared amongst a lot of product coaches, as well. But many coaching professionals from maybe more traditional coaching backgrounds that treat coaching as an art in itself say that actually, you don't need to have any experience in the life of the person that

you're coaching. But that coaching itself is a skill on its own. And it's all about enabling good conversations and getting people to come up with their own solutions. So how do you see it? Do you see product coaching as being completely separate from what we might call classic coaching? Or the elements of it in there? Like, how are you approaching coaching yourself?

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Gabi Bufrem 07:22

So I'll tell a story... I actually became a manager really early. I was like, in my early 20s, I was like, I think like 23. And my first report was like, double my age and a guy and I was like, terrified, right? I was like...



Jason Knight 07:35

Oh, I love that as well. Guys being guys, I bet they loved that.

G

Gabi Bufrem 07:40

And I mean, I knew from the very beginning that I needed to be great, and that there was no other choice for me if I wanted to be on this path. So I actually took a coaching certification very early in my management career, because I wanted to learn what it was to be a really good coach. And I feel like there are aspects of being good managers that are very present in being a really good coach, which is really bringing the best out of your people, and not necessarily giving them the answers, but asking them the questions. And this is where I transitioned into the product expertise and the necessity for that. I do believe that to be a really good product coach, you need to have been there done that. Because there are things that are extremely unique and targeted to product that if you have experience in the past, you can ask way better questions, you can guide way better. And you can stop and be like, hey, actually, no, like I actually disagree here. Like, here's what I've seen work in the past, here's where I have not seen work. Here's how I would approach this right. This is what has worked for me. And I think you actually got the best of both worlds. When you get someone that has done the coaching, training and the coaching expertise. And like since I became a full time coach, it's a lot of what I read about is coaching itself. There's even like a show on Netflix that has like all these like top coaches in the world that you can watch that is way more fun sometimes in books, depending on your mood. But I invest a lot in learning coaching techniques, but I always pair them with my own product expertise.



Jason Knight 09:13

So some people might consider that mentoring or they might consider that advising or consulting as well. I guess the question though, is do you think it matters, what we call it as long as you're going in and helping your clients solve the problems that they need to have solved and make progress in the areas that they need to make progress?

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Gabi Bufrem 09:32

I would say it's a huge part of the finding things as any product manager is. So I started at the

I would say I'm a huge fan of the finding things as any product person is. So I started at the very beginning being really clear like Hey, I am here to be your coach. I am not here to do your job. In my ideal scenario, we start maybe like very evolved from the beginning and then it tapers off and yes I am with you for the long haul but I am not here to be kind of like a crutch. I am not here to do part of your work. I don't want you to depend on me, I want my work to multiply your work. So that is, I think very clearly set up friends, I tell them, I'm not going to do work for you, I'm not going to be in meetings for you, you are going to be in the meetings, and we're going to talk about how you can actually be more effective there and how you can drive them better. And yes, I review their work, and we work on it together. But it's much more problem solving, instead of it being me doing work for them. So in that way, I really love to make things as clear as possible. But if they want to call it something else, I'm sure, as long as it's like super clear that this is what we're signing up for.



Jason Knight 10:41

So what about defining it like you say, good, no, written down at front in some kind of PRD for the relationship? Oh, yeah, one page of an Amazon terms, which is always about eight pages from what I hear, or what I hear, too. But as I said earlier, it seems like everyone is a coach or a consultant in product management these days. There's more popping up every week. And I'm not against that, by any means. But it does certainly seem to be a bit of a trend. And it's something that you've been doing for a little bit now. So what was it that made you decide to take the leap in the first place and leave full time employment, and go out and start coaching clients on your own?



Gabi Bufrem 11:17

I think it was really about me, and I tell my clients to do this all the time. Like it's one of our like, core sessions, I made a list, I left my last head of product gig at an early stage startup where I read product design for a mental health for kids company. And I made a list of like, the stuff I loved and the things that like brought me a lot of joy and the things that I didn't like. And a lot of the things I loved were unsurprisingly around growing people, mentoring people, developing people, coaching people. And I started to see like this trend of people doing this, I did have a pretty impactful, amazing conversation with Marty, where he was like, Yeah, I mean, like, go do this, this is great. And I think, for me, it was just like going back to what I really love to do, and getting to do it all the time, which just makes work extremely fun, and has made like the week become the weekend and like afternoons become evenings. But it just is so fun for me. And I think the other big piece was seeing the results in my clients, like I'm a very results driven oriented person. And I was like, I'm gonna give myself a certain amount of time. And if I make progress with these people, and we are closer to achieving their goals, or we do achieve their goals, then this is great. And I can make this my career. Otherwise, I shouldn't do this. So I set kind of like those those goals for myself. And I am very lucky with the people I get to work with every day. And I love having to have its clients, it feels really fun. And I can see the results. So I keep doing it.



Jason Knight 12:54

Here is obviously always really good to see, as you say results and see people improve, although, traditionally coaching is seen as very difficult to measure the impact of any of these

kind of softer things where and this is actually something you say about the mental health for kids seeing them. And I've worked in mental health app as well. Yeah. And it kind of shares many characteristics, this idea that there's definitely something happening there with what you're doing, but at the same time is not always directly attributable to what you're doing. Because obviously, life's a complicated system, and there's lots of stuff going on at the same time. So does that kind of grates against your desire to measure things like the kind of fuzziness of some of this stuff? Or do you always manage to find something to measure that you can kind of use as a yardstick?

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Gabi Bufrem 13:37

I'd say as a as a product manager, I've been very trained to work with quantitative and qualitative data. So I use that to my advantage. And I, I do know that it's not only about what's happening in the session, or what's happening in the environment. But I do have some questions that I asked. And I also can I can see it, I think it's more of a like, you can feel it, you can see it, it kind of like, feels to me a little similar to like the final product market fit thing for coaching. It's like, you know...



Jason Knight 14:09

If you've got it, you know if you've got it.

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Gabi Bufrem 14:11

Yeah, you know if you've got it exactly. And I'm not saying it's like always open to the right. But it's always like, way more, there's like more insight and more clarity and more nuance in like every single answer I get from my clients. And those things for me are very helpful.



Jason Knight 14:29

That's pretty speaking to things that everyone's doing. You've also got a course out there on Maven. Building impactful products. So this is your chance to put yourself in the shop window for a second before we go on to talk about some weighty issues. Who should go out and buy that course. And what are they going to get out of it? If they do?

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Gabi Bufrem 14:46

Yeah, so the course is all about building products that people love that also help the business which is what I'm all about. You need to build products that people are gonna love first because people don't care about your business or you Oh four matter of fact, they care about.



Jason Knight 15:02

Oh, yeah, no one cares about me, Gabi, I'm well used to that.



Gabi Bufrem 15:06

I'm not saying you personally, like us in general.



Jason Knight 15:08

That's what I took away from it. That's what I took away from it.



Gabi Bufrem 15:11

Great. Well, it's all about like really understanding what drives people and building credit. So it is the process I teach for people to build really good products. And I turned that into a course. So that is for, I think, from like, anyone that is like a pm addict company to like someone that's implementing this process at a higher level, like a director of product, VP of product. And I am excited. I'm like, I kind of pre launched this, but it's like, still kind of like new slash, I haven't like really put it out there. But I am excited to launch a new group coaching programme, because when I look back to how I learned Friday, I had great managers and horrible managers, just like everyone. And I have really good fears, which I find, like, I'm just like, feel so lucky that I had this. And I'm trying to create all together all the things that were amazing about my experience and create like a container or a thing that can encompass all of that. So it'll be group coaching, there'll be a community aspect of it. There'll be like all my templates that make my life easier, my clients life easier. And then all the content that I produce, and like the little kind of like snippets of things like how to do a prototype, how to do product strategy, how to do product vision, so that it's all in one place for people.



Jason Knight 16:32

Oh, there you go. So you start to cannibalise your own courses already. But it sounds like you've got a good package coming up. So I'm sure that we can all come and sign up for that after this as well.



Gabi Bufrem 16:42

Yeah, it's not cannibalising, they're complimentary. You can do can do it all, you know.



Jason Knight 16:47

Yeah, we should buy both. That's what I'd say if I was selling them. But one thing we talked about before this, and it comes up in your course, as well, and obviously, something that you're super passionate about. And it comes up again and again, out in the field, I'm sure you see all the time I see it with the companies I'm talking to as well. When we're talking about coaching and advising startups, we're often talking about coaching advising startups that often don't have any discernible product strategy yet, so maybe they started out chasing individual deals

all the time, or just have like one big whale customer that represents 85% of their revenue. Or they'll just do anything that the next person says that they speak to. And all of these things have a knock on effect of making product management quite hard. Yeah. So is that something that you see a lot with the types of companies that you work with? Or have you kind of managed to find people that don't have those problems, and you can just try and help them get better?

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Gabi Bufrem 17:41

Yeah, I would say every single company, I coach, we work on product strategy. It's just like one of the constants that is just always there. Because I would say it's like the highest leverage artefact that any product leader can have. It's also probably the hardest to do, which is why a lot of companies don't have it. And it requires not only a lot of focus, but also a lot of work. Like it's like some serious, serious work. I'll add a few to your list of like the whale customer. There's the like, I joke that like everything in the pizza strategy of like, let's do it all. And it's like half pepperoni, half this m&ms Like grown chicken in there. Like that's like another one that I see. or the like, let's please all the stakeholders the more the merrier strategy, which is just like, oh, marketing once this, okay, I guess we're gonna do some of that and some of sales and some of ops. And then you end up with like a really strange narrative. And you wonder like, why people are not buying?



Jason Knight 18:45

It's been a while now, since business and product thinking has been around. Like, it's not like we're just inventing this now. Right? So what do you think, aside from just people wanting to please everyone somehow? Why do you think that people, the business leaders, and indeed product leaders are still struggling with the concept that having a strategy is a good idea?

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Gabi Bufrem 19:08

So I don't think they struggle with the concept that having a strategy is a good idea. I think if you ask like product leader, they'll be like, yeah, like, that sounds great. Let's do it.



Jason Knight 19:17

But okay, then why don't they do it?

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Gabi Bufrem 19:19

Why don't they do it? Exactly. That's a good question. I think the first thing is it requires people to focus and to say no to things. And people are very bad notoriously ad sales, though. And it's maybe because you work with these people maybe because you have like the fear of missing out maybe because you don't feel confident enough to actually like take a stance. And that is

the first thing I tell people when we start working on strategy is like hey, get ready to say no to like everything. We're gonna be doing like two to three things. Max, and that is it. And three is maybe too many, depending on the size of your company. And besides of your team, but



Jason Knight 20:03

whilst I agree with the concept of saying no to many things, and something that I advocate, of course, just like any good product person would, yeah, that can sometimes be the irresistible force of everyone in the leadership team. Yes. Basically making you turn that no into a soft or indeed a hard. Yes. So how do you push back against that? Because, you know, saying no, is a cliché, right for product managers. Yeah. But it does sometimes seem to clash with that irresistible force. Is that something that you've managed to somehow work out a way to defuse?



Gabi Bufrem 20:35

Yeah, so I think the best way I found to defuse is the second part that I told you about doing the work. And I think the only people that can defuse it, or that can turn that no, or that soft, yes, into a no, because sometimes the yes is given to you, as a friend of yours, like, Oh, we've already kind of decided, and then you're like, No, no, no, no, we've all like not yet kind of decided we are not doing this. But in order to like, keep that no up, right? You need a tonne of things. And I like to actually separate them into five buckets. So hence, the a lot of work, you need a very strong understanding of your company's strategic context. And by that I mean, their business model, their health metrics, like what their board is looking for, what their investors are looking for. You also need quantitative customer insights, and qualitative customer insight. So you need to actually know what customers are looking for. And that's not just like testing prototypes. That's like legit understanding, like your customers biggest pains, biggest fears, their biggest desires, if they won the lottery tomorrow, like how would they react like that level of like, this is what I want, then also their technology inside. So like, are you talking to your engineering team to like really understand what is possible or what is like now possible. And then further on, like Industry Insights, so people that read things like strategically like, which is one of my favourite things read, or whatever it may be to, like really be up to date on your industry or competitors. All of that this is kind of like a concept that I like to call like the Vizio class of Product Strategy, which I'm very big fan of cooking. And if you think about cooking, in general, you are creating this like, ideally Epic Meal. But in order to do that, you need to prepare all sorts of ingredients. And these are the ingredients that you need in order to have a really good strategy. And they are sometimes tricky to prepare, or they are very far away, and you need to go out and get out of the building to get them just like pioneer customers, maybe like foraging for something. And then eventually, you can kind of like, bring it back and actually have that like aha moment in the shower, quote, unquote, which doesn't really happen until you have like, all these things in your back pocket.



Jason Knight 22:58

Alright, here's the problem there, though. You talked about tying stuff into the company strategy isn't the problem. In some companies, that doesn't actually appear to be too much of a company strategy, either. And it's not just that the product strategy is missing. Yeah, whether

the whole thing's missing. And we think about that pyramid that people draw with the strategy down to the initiatives or whatever, what a strategy down to, yeah, tasks, or however they do it. There's actually nothing anywhere. It's just tasks.

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Gabi Bufrem 23:25

Yeah, I think it's like, yeah, there's like, normally some broad goals like, oh, we want to make more money. Like, I've never heard a company not want to make more money.



Jason Knight 23:32

So aside from money, aside from money!

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Gabi Bufrem 23:35

They have that and then they have a tonne of tasks, right. So what I tell product leaders that is like, if you want a product strategy, you need a company strategy, and you need to be the one that's how you're co like, hey, here are the things I need from you. How can we get these, how might we make this happen? Like, I would love to help you reach your goals. So help me help you, by us getting to this place together. So I've coached a lot of my clients on going to their CEOs and having these conversations so that they can have like a really good starting point in figuring out what they need to do. Because to your point, like if you don't really know where you're going or where the company needs to go, which is the other piece like that we haven't talked about yet, which is having a really strong product vision. So having like that clear picture of what the product looks like in like three to five years. I think that combined with like a really good understanding of the company are another like must have for crafting a really good strategy.



Jason Knight 24:35

I think that's really interesting. The three to five year thing one thing I always like to challenge PMS to do in an organisation is to kind of try and cast their mind for three years as an example and tell me where they think their products gonna be even if they don't have a vision yet, like what do they think the products gonna be in three years time? And if they can't see three years, well, how far can they see can I see one year can I see six weeks? How short is that window and what do they need to know? To know more, but it kind of speaks to a different truth, which I have seen out there time and time again, which is quite a lot of product people seem to be disconnected from the business in the first place. Like they're all busy talking to the engineers or talking to the designers and trying to get stuff done. But they don't actually really understand where the product is going. And I'm not saying it's all their fault, because obviously, if they're working for a company with no strategy, maybe that's really hard to do. Yeah. But also, they start to complain, for example, when they are having a nose turned into soft yeses or hard yeses, yeah. But they don't actually have a better idea to effectively almost make the trade off against like, they're sitting there saying, Well, you can't tell me to do that. I'm the

product manager. But when you push them for the slightest whiff of a different idea, they don't actually have a better one. So do you feel it's fair to say that a lot of PMS are disconnected from the business and need to get closer to it,

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Gabi Bufrem 25:55

I would say it's extremely important for product managers to be connected to the business I talked about like the product trio, right? That then can expand to include like data and Product Marketing, in some organisations and has like other shapes and others. But it starts really, with like product design, and engineering. And ideally, these people are sitting together, they're working super closely together, they're doing discovery together. And I tell people like you, as a product manager represents the business, your job is to represent the business, the designer represents the user, and the engineering represents the technology. So when you mash all of these together, you have magic, in my opinion, because you have something that is great for the business that actually aligns with the goals that are more clear that does make money, you have something that people actually want to use, which is amazing, because you need to build that otherwise, it's not going to work. And you have something that's like not only possible to build, but ideally easy to build and easy to maintain. Like that's like all we're trying to do.



Jason Knight 26:56

Now, I'll buy that. And I'm obviously very happy to have as many people in my trio as possible when needed. But I want you to now imagine that you're working with a company that's in a perilous situation like we've kind of just touched on total feature factory, no strategy, company or product to speak of. Product managers don't feel connected to the rest of business struggling to make an impact. Everyone's feeling kind of demotivated and doesn't know what to do next. You walk in day one of your engagement. You surveyed the scene, you kind of work out what's going on. But what's your first move after you've surveyed the scene? Like, what is the first concrete move that you take to start to get that company back on track?

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Gabi Bufrem 27:37

I think the first move is to do the work on understanding the customers. So I'd say if you don't understand the business, or if the business doesn't have really clear goals, that is not great. But you as a product manager, you're like, Okay, I can only impact so much. And I can ask the right questions, I can push my leaders, but I would say both for like, directors or product heads of product. And also for product teams, like get to know your customers, like understand who you're building for, either create, like personas jobs to be done, like, pick whatever artefact you want to represent these people, like have enough conversations that you can start to see trends. Because whenever that starts to happen, things start to click, because those are the quantitative qualitative insights, then you start having conversations with engineers. And you're like, wow, like, amazing. Like, there's actually some stuff we can do here. And then you start reading some industry stuff, and you're like, Okay, wow, there's like, clearly a push in this direction or that direction. And then you have some ammo to go up and be like, Hey, we see this stuff. Does this matter to you? Does that matter to you? And that is a strategy. I tell my

clients all the time, it's like, if you're not getting the concrete stuff you need, bring them something concrete, and ask them to help you get there. But if you're kind of just like, blank page, like, Now, give me the thing. It's much harder for people that haven't done it before.



Jason Knight 29:05

Yeah, it feels like quite often in these situations, that product managers and maybe even pull out leaders, they kind of when they're faced by that blank sheet of paper that you've touched upon. Or maybe they just feel that they're in a company that doesn't really get product or doesn't really understand the benefits of product thinking and just sees them as delivery managers, and all of the things that you see people complain about, yeah, online. And when you're out there talking to people, you can kind of get situations like that where product managers and product leaders, they kind of just, they almost give up and they retrench into themselves, they start feeling negative. They start saying they're not quote unquote, working for a proper product company. There's no point trying to change it. Now, obviously, there are probably some companies out there that are much more difficult to change than others. Yeah. But do you think that in general, it's possible to, I guess, motivate people that are in that situation that maybe haven't had guidance, and they haven't been able to affect any change so far that you can actually go in there. and motivate most teams to actually get back on track.



Gabi Bufrem 30:04

I would say in order for a, I think you're talking about like product transformation here, right? You're talking about like a company that like, love, it isn't doing the right things. And now like, once you have your product of the, I'd say what I've seen be successful. And the ones I've seen work, and I'm going through one right now with one of my clients, and I think he's told me like our first call, he's like, yeah, so this is like a 60 day thing, right? Like, in like two months, we're gonna be done. I was like, no, no, no, no, this is like, we're in it for the long run here. But it's been amazing to see what we've been able to do in four months. And what enabled that wasn't just like me and him being really committed, but also the rest of the leadership team being extremely committed. So if you are going to go through a product transformation, which is let me just like qualify like super hard, like insanely difficult. Oh, yeah, yeah, if you're trying to like go down this path, you need at least the entire leadership team to buy in. And to understand that this takes time. It's expensive. And it's difficult. Yeah, there's like a rainbow, or like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But there's the entire rainbow to go through in order to get there.



Jason Knight 31:18

Yeah, I think it is tricky. And I do agree that having leadership buying is important. One of the things that tends to get in the way of that leadership buy in is, quite often you'll have product leaders or product managers that are in that situation, trying to win that battle for hearts and minds. And what they'll do rather than making some of the cases that you've talked about tonight is they'll almost like, go back to Marty, they'll print out a bit of inspired, yeah, they'll go to the CEO or the CFO or someone like that and in a meeting and they'll just start talking about outcomes over outputs and basically starting to sound a bit like a fundamentalist. Again, very disconnected from the business. And they're just seen as like, almost quoting bits of book to try

to win an argument rather than actually winning it on the substance. Yeah. So do you feel that that approach of kind of being fundamentalist and just quoting things and being very idealistic, ever resonates with the leadership team? Or do you always have to go straight down to the things that they care about,

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Gabi Bufrem 32:20

I would say you need to go to the stuff they care about. These people have their own agenda, that they have their own things, their own quota, their own goals, books, as well as books, they have their own books show, they're not the same as our books, they're normally very different. So I would say I talk about this all the time, like product leaders, product managers, a core part of our job is being a really good translator. And understanding the language people are speaking and speaking their language, like, I am not going to win an argument. If someone speaks French, if I'm speaking English to that, like, that's not going to work out for me. So I need to learn French, I need to understand I need to know what these people care about. And I need to tell them what's in it for them. Because the truth is, like, there's a lot that's in it for them. And we need to literally explain to them why they should care and why it's great. And I normally lean on the side of explaining with results. So trying like really small experiments, really small things. I remember one time I was like a pm on a team. And there was one feature like a stakeholder really wanted. And we did user testing on it, because we were we just like knew we had to do it because none of none of the team was like excited about this. We were like we don't think this is gonna go really well. But there's a lot of I am from leadership, weirdly, they're interested in this one thing. And we literally had like a user just like pound on the table of annoyance towards this thing. And I took a quick and I was like, Hey, this is what this shirt looks like when we actually do it with the person. And then they were like, oh, no, we can't do that. So I've like inject evidence wherever you can, and show people in ways that are meaningful to them. Why this way is better, I think quotes and books like I did ship like empowered to like quite a few people. And I was like Christmas gift. So like, I mean, that works too. But I think the best thing is for you to actually show small wins in order to then ask for bigger potential wins.



Jason Knight 34:31

Absolutely... makes a lot of sense. And definitely agree. I think it's important. I've been accused of just talking book talk before. And it was almost like well, but these books have been written by really clever people. But again, by the time you got to that point of the argument, you've not really got anywhere further to go in that discussion. So definitely agree with trying to bring it back to better basics. All right. Let's assume that we've done all of this good work. We've kind of got everything on track. We've got a vision. We've got a strategy. Everything's connected up. One of the things that you can find, though is that that almost immediately starts to crumble when you then go out into the organisation, and maybe people either weren't there when it was announced, or they didn't read the document, or they, yeah, read the document wrong or that yeah, they got their own idea about what some of the things mean. Yeah. So you kind of have this balancing act of trying to advocate for and publicise and communicate the strategy, whilst not doing that all the time. Because obviously, if you're just talking about it all the time, then you've got no other time to do any work. So what are some of the ways that you recommend socialising, advocating for doubling down on that strategy so that everyone in the company is aligned around it?

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Gabi Bufrem 35:40

Yeah, I love this question. Because it's so common, and it's so true, it doesn't matter. Like you have this like, beautiful document, and no one's using it, or it's actually not driving anything in your company. It's like, why even habit, right? So I first like, I tell my fans all the time, like your job communicating the vision doesn't start when it's or communicating the strategy rather, doesn't start when it's done, your job starts today, like, you're gonna be making some decisions today, like, we're gonna be talking about the persona we're focusing on right now you're gonna talk about that every day, without ideally sounding like a broken record, one of the best characteristics of great product leaders, they can talk about the same thing in 100 different ways. Because that's what you need to do. Because people need to hear it multiple times. They're not in the same meetings as you, they are not thinking about this stuff all the time, they're thinking about other things that are important and important for the business from where they're contributing. So I'd say, start by communicating early, and product leaders are normally really reluctant to do that, because we're also perfectionist, and we don't want to look bad in front of our teams. And I'm like, believe me, you're gonna look worse if you don't start communicating. So I say start very early and consistently bring it up. And then once it's out, I have a couple of tips for people. So the first one that I seem to be really helpful is you have this meeting, you communicate the vision, it's there, it's exciting, it's great. Then you talk about the strategy. It's great. It tells us like the problems that we're solving, why we're solving them where we're investing on. And then people start to have questions. They're like, Wait, so how does that like relate to me? Like, where? Where do I play here? I know, I'm not being told what to build anymore. So like, where do I fit into all of this? So what am I tips is I tell people to hold a very hands on workshop right after this, and make people start seeing where they fit in. And when that happens, the same people that have questions are starting to use the language and they're starting to use the product principles. And they're starting to like, see themselves in this. And it's only because you've allowed them to project themselves into what that strategy could look like. So I'd say making space for people to actually get to work on this very quickly, is very important. And then you talked about, like not talking about it all the time, I actually tell people to talk about it all the time. I'm like, every meeting, you're starting with, like, Hey, here's why we're here today. This is an awesome, beautiful day in New York City, we are now going to be solving the most important problem for the company that is x, here are the three things our users really care about. Now we can move on. So I'd say like every meeting, you need to have like some way shape or form to bring people back to why you're there, what problem you're solving and why it matters.

**Jason Knight 38:35**

No, absolutely. Although that does also begs another question, which is, do you have like, either a canvas or some kind of one pager or some PowerPoint template that you like to use to demonstrate a strategy. I mean, obviously, strategies can be quite detailed things under the hood, but like some kind of top level view that you recommend, you can say one of those pillar charts with the temporal thing on top of you like or whatever kind of chart you've got, but what's your preferred way of getting a strategy into a consumable format that people can actually kind of look at and understand very quickly.

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Gabi Bufrem 39:10

So I normally opt in for the narrative. So I love narratives, I love product, people having to put stuff on paper, make it very coherent. I don't want like charm and just like charisma to drive any of these conversations, it needs to be inspiring and exciting on its own pen and paper. And there are like a few I think categories. I'm very reluctant on the word like template, because I don't think there's like a fill in the blank thing. Wherever creates that. And it's accurate. Great, but I don't think there's like really a plug and play here. But there are a few things that I look for. So I really care about like what's the state of the world, like what's going on in the world right now in your world for your company? Why are we making this investment? What are the business goals, then? Some characterization of like personas or jobs should be done, like whatever people want to use, there's like too much debate there, and I don't want to get involved. I'm like, whatever floats your boat, you do that, then I want, like, Assistant articulation of the strategy that could be talked about in an elevator, like needs to be able to go from like floor 123, you need to be able to say that and people understand, then I want to know what bets you're making. And finally, I want to know the product principles that are driving your decisions. So I'd say most of the strategies that I've written and that I've helped create, have all of these aspects.



Jason Knight 40:38

Now talking about product principles, though, there's been some discussion online about this recently, there's something I'm quite keen on as well as a concept. So they will sit there and we'll talk about visions, company strategy, product vision, product strategy, product initiatives, the things that we're working on. But how do you define the principles that then underpin some of that work or kind of wrap around it? Like what is a product principle in your mind?



Gabi Bufrem 41:04

A product principle is what you need to create in order to facilitate decision making within your team. So they normally are derived from the insights that you're getting from customers. And they're going to make it easier to decide if you go right, or if you go left, for example. And I think a very good preference vote works. When you're faced with a decision, you look at the principle and it becomes easier for you to make that decision. Because I believe the best teams make decisions and the right amount of time, I don't think we can make all the right decisions in product. But I think we need to invest the right amount of time in a decision given its importance. And product principles have shown to be super helpful in terms of helping people decide one way or another based on some real user insights.



Jason Knight 41:57

So what's an example of a product principle that you've used recently?



Gabi Bufrem 42:01

Yeah, see an example of a product principle that I've used recently that I can share online? Okay. I think one, that one that I talked about, especially when we're thinking about, like B2B one that is common, and I've used multiple times is build for a company's needs without

breaking user trust. So that is a really helpful one, because we're very clearly talking about who we care about most, which are companies. But we are also saying that if we break user trust, we're actually not caring about the subsidy enough, because we're going to be potentially like incurring some damage for them. And that is like the snappy version of it. Then there's like normally a little bit more description on what exactly that means for each company. Another one that I've seen common that is really helpful is like, Don't reinvent the wheel. Yeah, that is really true for companies that are maybe like really good at a certain segment, and they're trying to expand to another segment, they need to think like, are we going to reinvent the wheel? Or are we trying to repackage and just making that distinction makes it so much easier for product teams to think outside the box while still understanding what their constraints are?



Jason Knight 43:12

No, absolutely. I think it's important. Have you put up principles and put those in every single meeting and document as well, just so everyone? Yes, everyone knows the guardrails that are being put around your product development.



Gabi Bufrem 43:24

Yeah, I actually recommend people like whenever you're having like a meeting with like Post Its, so I'm like, add those in already. Just like pre populate your board pre populate your documents, just like make it so easy for people to see. Because I think the key to strategy is to make it lived every day. And also to iterate on it. I think we haven't touched on this. But like, it's not like a static doc that you just write once. And then you're like, Awesome, now we're done for the year, product leaders can go on vacation. It's like, No, you need to like constantly learn from what you're doing, and constantly revise your insights in order to make sure that it's always up to date.



Jason Knight 44:01

Well, that's an interesting question, though, because strategies are somewhat long lived. But how often would you expect a good well functioning company to refine and change its strategy rather than, say, some of the shorter term initiatives that are supporting that strategy?



Gabi Bufrem 44:16

Yeah, I'd say a really good strategy is supposed to live from like eight to 12 months. And that is longer than a quarter longer than like two quarters. So you're making like some pretty big bets there. But you're not saying like, here's the way for like the next two years. And even within that, especially if you're smaller, I really do think it depends if you're talking about like pre product market fit and post product market fit, like your pre product market fit, like, oh, you should care about it to get your product market fit. Like I can't say that enough. And if you learn new things that like really contradict your strategy, that's a time to revise, if you're really small, if you're like really without traction at the beginning. I wouldn't say just like, we have a strategy. So let's like fly We go this direction even though we've learned like not right?



Jason Knight 45:04

Well, plenty of companies seem to do it. But you know, we'll hopefully change the hearts and minds one at a time. Yeah. But where can people find you after this? If they want to find out more about your course, maybe check up on the group coaching, have a deep and meaningful conversation about product vision or strategy, or see if they can snag a surf lesson.



Gabi Bufrem 45:24

Oh, yeah, there's like, maybe we need a part two of this is there's like a lot of like very good surf analogies for product that I think about all the time that really resonate with people do surf. But back to your original question, you can find me at my own website, which is GabrielleBufrem.com. Or on LinkedIn as Gabrielle Bufrem. I am sometimes on Twitter as @gbufremsays, but I've been way less active than recently. So yeah, LinkedIn or my website.



Jason Knight 45:53

I can't even imagine why you would not be active on Twitter these days. It's almost like something's happened over the last few months. It's made it less attractive to be at.



Gabi Bufrem 46:02

Just a little bit!



Jason Knight 46:03

That's a whole different strategy discussion. Yep. Well, I'll make sure to put all of that into the show notes. Hopefully, you'll have a few people hanging 10 in your general direction, whatever that means. Amazing. All right. Well, that's obviously been a wonderful chat about some important topics. This should hopefully inspire a few people so they can get hold of their strategy, hold their vision, and obviously get hold of their principles as well. But obviously, we'll keep in touch but as for now, thanks for taking the time.



Gabi Bufrem 46:28

Thank you so much, Jason. This was so fun.



Jason Knight 46:32

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to <https://www.oneknightinproduct.com>, check out some of my other fantastic guests, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite

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