SRE & Product Management

How to level up your team (and career!) by thinking like a product manager

Jen Wohlner, senior product manager at Livepeer
Linkedin: Jen Wohlner, IG: @jensface
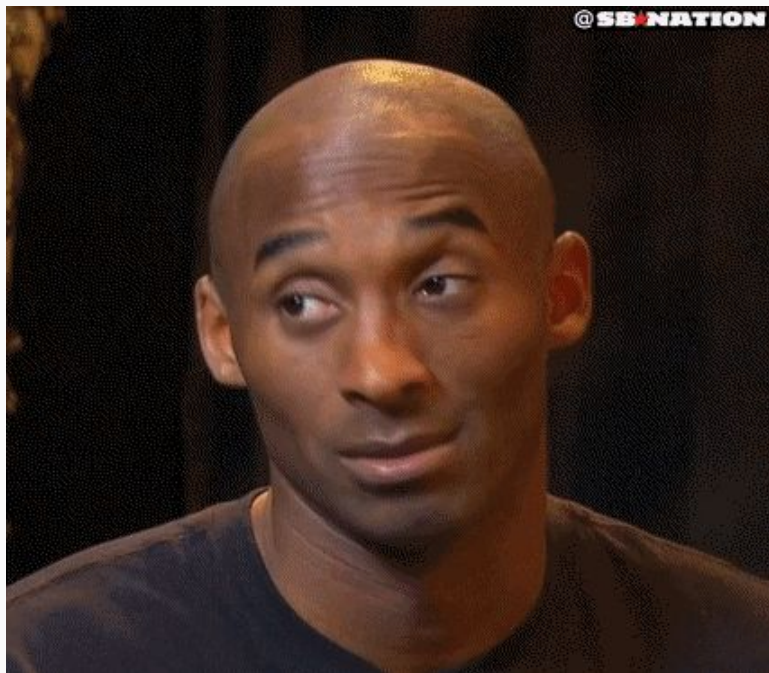
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Sometimes SREs must do product management.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

You: Jen, what?

Jen: Yes.

Product vs Program Management
Some key differences

Product	Program
Prioritize **ideation** to impact business	Prioritize **implementation** to impact business
Closer to **users**	Closer to **engineers**
Often focus on **growth of product**	Often focus on **health of tech stack**
What and why?	**When and how?**

When do SREs do product management?

All the time!

Common SRE product work

You do these things.

- proof of concept experiments

- creating alert plans

- rolling out a new deployment process

- stuff with UIs, like Prometheus dashboards

- internally negotiating and creating SLAs with your team and other teams

- and more!

Um, but why should you listen to me?

Listen to me.

Plz.

- BuzzFeed's infrastructure/SRE TPM
  - Initially focused on products to escape toil
  - Struggled to create broadly useful data and platform infrastructure

- Failed. Then learned from lead product designer

- Took learnings to LinkedIn and Fastly and iterated

- Now at Livepeer as a product manager working on video and CDN infrastructure

Product management is about meeting needs.

Product management is about **EMPATHY**.

Fun fact / secret

It doesn't matter WHO does product work as long as it gets done.

— me, but don't tell my PM colleagues

Let your inner product manager shine.

1

Know your users and talk to them.

1. Know your users and talk to them.

- Most users of your SRE products are other engineers at your company.

- Just because you sit near them or have a similar job title …
do not assume you know how they work or use your product or service

You don't know anything about me.

User Interviews
Do them!

- 30 mins

- Interview no more than 2 people at a time

- Interview team leads and managers separately from individual contributors (ICs).
  - They have different jobs and use tools differently.

- Feel free to bring **one** teammate to help you interview.

- Share user interview findings with your team.
  - presentations
  - video watching party
  - quotes

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Ask non-leading questions.

2. Ask non-leading questions
Examples

	Leading	Non-leading
Chef	Do you have problems with Chef?	Have you created a Chef cookbook while working here? If so, tell me when and walk me through how.
A spreadsheet documenting a major compliance effort	Do you wish correlating estimated resource weeks to priority happened automatically?	Do you use the SRE-compliance spreadsheet? Do you find any columns on the spreadsheet more useful than others? How so?
Deployment	Why does your team do so few deploys? And why are they always huge?	What are the steps to go from code committed to code successfully running in production for the application you work on?

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Prototyping sprints

3. Prototyping sprints are wonderful!

- One week, one focus for all involved

- Narrow in on core users (some are more important than others)

- Limited time forces limited scope

- Team bonding

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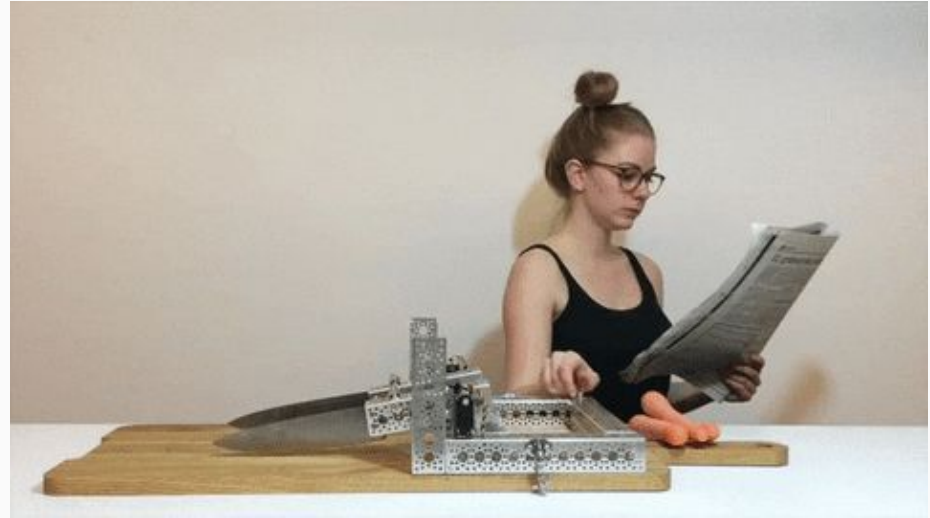
Add user-centric goals to roadmaps.

4. Add user-centric goals to roadmaps
Simple example

Project	Stakeholders	User-centric Goal	Deliverables	Deliverable Status
Make tacos	family members	feed the family cheaply and quickly on a weeknight	buy tacos shells, ground beef and seasoning	Done
			stretch goal: find affordable side, like refried beans	Won't do
			cook food	In progress
			serve food	Possible delay
Higher priority projects above				
Lower priority projects below				
Make dessert	family members	feed the family a cheap post-dinner sweet	defrost cheesecake	At risk
			serve cheesecake	At risk

Roadmaps
Do you even roadmap, bro?

- Including more than just technical deliverables helps **define scope**.

- User-centric goals answer **what and why**? ← **Product management goalzzz!**

- Deliverables answer **how and when**?

- Shorter roadmapping intervals (ex. 6 weeks) allow you to **pivot from bad investments** and sunk costs

Breaking down a big project, engineering example

Project	Stakeholders	User-centric goal	Deliverable
New CI pilot	Eng leads at company	Get early feedback on the new CI pipeline before general rollout to all of eng	User interviews & share findings
			Architecture design doc
			Select one eng team for pilot
			Technical deliverable 1
			Technical deliverable 2 ...
			Migrate team's services
			SRE <> pilot eng team retro
New CI general availability	Eng leads at company	Improve all engineers' CI workflows	TBD: Transition all non-legacy applications with owners to new CI
New CI final phase	Eng leads at company	Reduce risks to the engineering org	TBD: Transition legacy and ownerless apps to new CI

How to use a roadmap

- Strict start and stop dates

- Add updates to the roadmap weekly or bi-weekly in dedicated meeting

- Team lead shares screen

- Update statuses line by line for incomplete projects and deliverables

- Be willing to occasionally move high priority projects down to low priority section

- At the end of the quarter or 6 week interval, hold a retrospective on roadmapping process, estimation and project execution

Roadmap note

The roadmap spreadsheet is an internal tool.

- To share project status, do not just share the spreadsheet.

- Make it easy for your manager, other teams, and stakeholders to understand your progress:
    - bi-weekly emails
    - monthly status meetings

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Follow-up with users regularly

5. Follow up with your users regularly.

- Users' needs and pain points change

- Follow-up with users after releasing a product or feature

- And at major development milestones

YOU KNOW WHAT I'M GONNA DO?

Now get started!

To hire or not to hire a product manager?

Stuff to consider.

- Is this an experiment to you? Because it's a career for the new hire.

- Product management mentorship?

- Who has product management potential on your existing team?

SRE product manager characteristics

- Senior individual contributor (IC)

- Must be technical

- Must be a strong leader

- Must have excellent soft skills

- Very valuable to have direct SWE or SRE programming experience

Recap time

SRE & Product Management

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User relationships!

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Non-leading questions!

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Prototyping sprints!
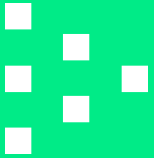
Prototyping sprints are wonderful.

User-centric goals!

Add user-centric goals to roadmaps.

Follow-up with users!

Follow-up with users regularly.

Thank you

LinkedIn:
Jen Wohlner

Instagram:
@jensface

livepeer.org