



Doing the Right Things, Not Everything: Product Management and Ownership

(an Activity in Three Parts)

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In my product coaching work, I often find product people (Product Managers and Product Owners) struggling to attempt to do far too much. They are often overwhelmed, confounded, and conflicted about where to focus their energies and how to best interact with their product development team.

Rather than attempt to do *everything*, it is far better to focus on doing the *right things*. I have created a three-part activity designed to help product folks and their development team do just that.

Goal

The primary goal of this multi-part activity is to obtain a deeper understanding of the strategic and tactical work of product management and product ownership along with the value of transparent decision-making. This activity provides a forum to explore how product development teams can support product people and, conversely, how product people can lean on their teams. This allows product people to focus more on their strategic responsibilities, build healthy team interdependence, and increase product team domain expertise.

Overview

This activity consists of three parts:

Part	Activity	Goal
1	Identify the work of product management and product ownership	Understand the work of product management and ownership.
2	Decide How to Decide	Establish product-related decision rules and process.
3	Learn product leadership using Delegation Poker	Explore and decide how to progressively increase the degree of freedom a product person allots to the product development team to make product-related decisions.

This entire activity should take between two to three hours including time for the group to debrief. If you can't devote the time in one sitting, I'd suggest doing parts 1 and 2 in one sitting. Part 3 can be conducted at another time as a standalone activity at a later time.

Materials

To perform these activities you'll need the following:

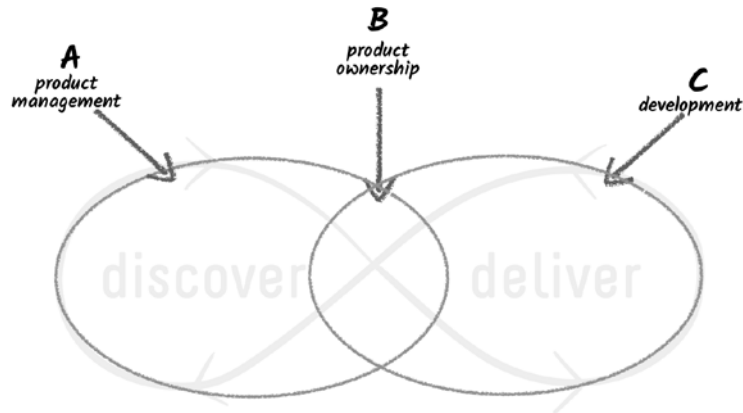
- One sheet of poster paper and a marker for drawing the Venn diagram illustrated in the Instructions for part 1.
- Product Work Cards (2 x 2 inches) to be printed for part 1. You can download from [here](#) and you'll need one set per table.
- Printout or hand drawn poster of the Decision Rules and the Gradient of Agreement for part 2. You'll need one to share and explain to the entire group.
- Delegation Cards available [here](#) to either buy or print on your own for part 3. You'll need one set per table. You may want to mark "PM" (Product Manager) or "PO" (Product Owner) on the hats on each card.

Part 1 Instructions: Identify the Work of Product Management and Product Ownership

Goal: Understand the work of product management and ownership.

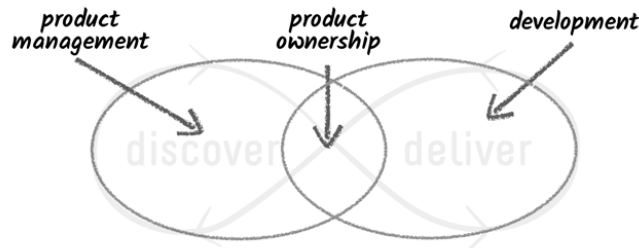
Here are the steps for part 1:

1. Identify a neutral facilitator who familiarizes herself with the activities and facilitates all steps.
2. Gather the Product Manager (or Product Owner) and the product development team in a shared space. Everyone should be situated around a table.
3. Draw the Discover to Deliver infinity image shown below, explaining that continual discovery and delivery is the essence of agile. Add a Venn diagram overlap and explain the disciplines as shown below:



Source: EBG Consulting | www.ebgconsulting.com

4. Explain the gradient of work along the horizontal axis (strategic/tactical, external focused/internal focused, and so on). Refer to [this blog](#) for more background information.



strategic	_____	tactical
external	_____	internal
customer	_____	code
market	_____	making
business	_____	technology

Source: EBG Consulting | www.ebgconsulting.com

5. Distribute the [Product Work](#) cards, one set per team. If you are conducting this activity with only one product team, you'll only need one deck.

Each card describes an activity that is part of the work of product management, ownership, and product development. In some cases, there may be an overlap between disciplines.

Note: The cards are numbered for purposes of identification during the activity debrief. (There is no other significance to the number on the card.)

6. One person is identified to shuffle the deck, select a single card, show it to the group, and read it out loud. The team explores where that work item belongs along the continuum of strategic and tactical discovery and delivery and the

areas for product management, product ownership, or development. Everyone should discuss and agree to place the card along the horizontal axis on the Venn diagram. The photograph below demonstrates how this would work:



Tip: Before placing the card on the Venn, encourage participants to do the following:

- A. Clarify if there are any questions about what the work entails. (As the facilitator, you may need to do this.)
- B. Consider if that work item applies to their product’s lifecycle, market, industry, and team culture. This question encourages a lot of discussions.

Continue selecting and placing Product Work cards on the diagram until all cards have been discussed.

7. Facilitate a debrief conversation. First debrief their results. Ask questions to reveal the following:
 - Similarities and differences across teams (if you have multiple groups participating)
 - Information such as which items they thought did not apply to their product
 - Which cards that can be easily agreed upon and items they struggled to place the “why” behind these findings.

Next, summarize the activity by asking probing retrospective questions like “What?”, “So What?”, and “Now What?”. [1] Another approach is to ask ORID (observational, reflective, interpretative, and decisional) questions. [2]

Leave the cards on the table. You will need them for part 2.

Notes:

Product and development people engage in deep and useful conversations every time I’ve facilitated an activity like this. The team deepens their understanding of the diversity and complexity of product work and on their mutual interdependence.

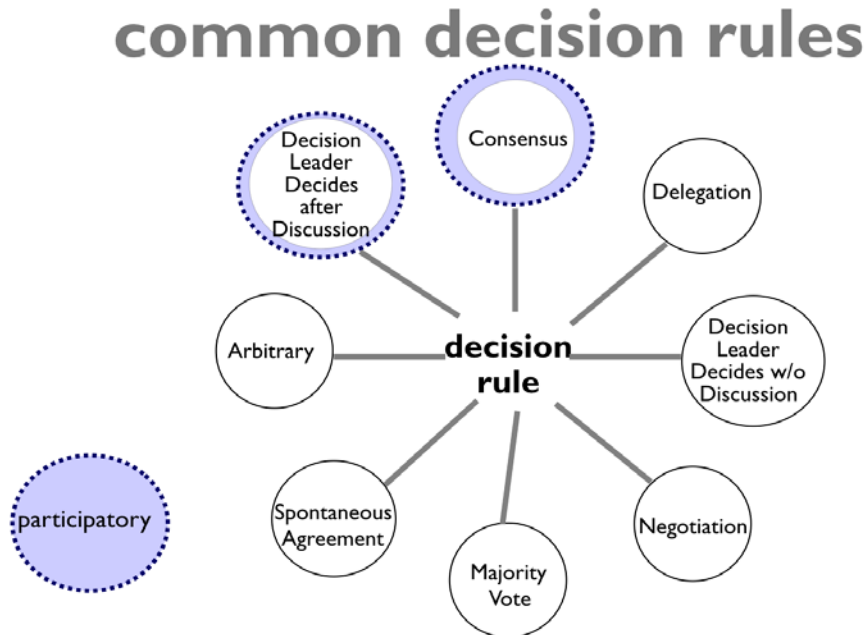
The “B” area on the Venn diagram refers to what is typically understood as the work of product ownership, a role described in “[The Scrum Guide](#).” This guide does not discuss the strategic work of product management (or use the word strategy) with regards to product ownership. And yet, that can be implied by the Product Owner’s responsibility for maximizing the work of the development team and managing the backlog. [3]

Part 2 Instructions: Decide How to Decide

Goal: Establish product-related decision rules and process.

Following part 1, the team needs to perform these activities to learn how to make decisions.

1. Review common decision making rules in the illustration below:



Source: EBG Consulting | www.ebgconsulting.com

Based on Sam Kaner: *Participatory Decision Making* training
 Ref: *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision Making* by Sam Kaner



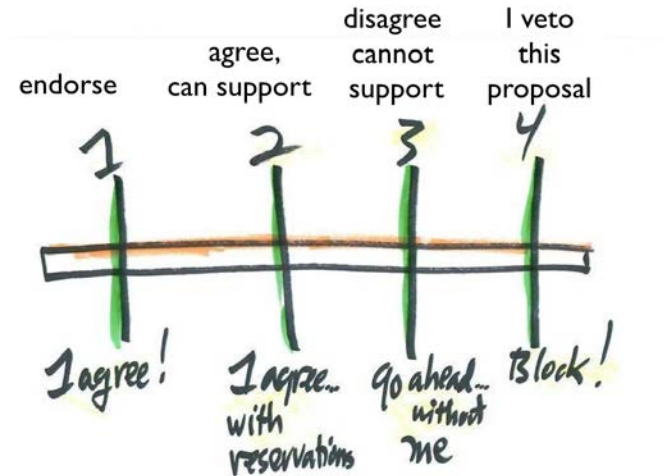
The table below summarizes each decision rule and its affect:

Decisions Rule	Explanation	Affects and Considerations for High Stakes Decisions
Consensus	Get unanimous agreement. Everyone participating believes the decision will not harm the organization, product, team or greater good.	<p>Anyone participating can block a decision.</p> <p>There is risk of groupthink.</p> <p>The effort may become overly time consuming (it requires integrating all perspectives).</p> <p>This enhances the ability to create innovative alternatives.</p>
Delegation	A decision leader assigns responsibly for decision making to somebody else.	<p>Can lead to poor decisions if the delegate is ill-informed or does not seek input from those who are well-informed.</p> <p>Some people may not be incentivized to provide needed information.</p> <p>Some people might strive to obtain—or avoid—the power being delegated to them.</p>
Decision Leader Decides Without Discussion	“Do what you are told, and it is ...”.	<p>Can lead to less than optimum decisions if the decision leader has blind spots or lacks of essential information.</p> <p>Results in low commitment by people who implement a decision they had little to no input into the decision-making process.</p>
Negotiation	Combines some losing and some winning of positions	<p>Can elongate the process.</p> <p>Can polarize people.</p> <p>Can result in a stalemate.</p>
Majority Vote	Count the votes where the choice with the highest number wins	<p>People don’t always vote for sound reasons.</p> <p>Can result in a battle for the undecided or an adversarial process.</p>

Decisions Rule	Explanation	Affects and Considerations for High Stakes Decisions
Spontaneous Agreement	“Lets’ do ...”, with no meaningful discussion	<p>Disempowers the person in charge.</p> <p>Is a disincentive for people to carry out the decision.</p> <p>Risks of groupthink or groupshift (moving to one extreme).</p> <p>You would be lucky to make the right decision!</p> <p>Communicates that the decision is not important.</p>
Arbitrary	Simple rule for deciding, such as flip a coin (“heads we pick this feature to deliver, tails we choice that feature”)	<p>Obviates meaningful conversations.</p> <p>Disempowers the decision leader.</p> <p>Degrades the importance of the topic being decided upon.</p>
Decision Leader Decides After Discussion	Decision leader seeks input, expanding her knowledge by discussing options with people with relevant information	<p>When combined with the Gradient of Agreement (see below), avoids groupthink.</p> <p>Can result in individuals separately trying to sway the decision leader, when discussion is not done collaboratively with all stakeholders engaged.</p>

2. Discuss the value of participatory rules and the usefulness of a tool like the Gradient of Agreement to test for agreement when using participatory decision rules:

gradient of agreement



Source: EBG Consulting | www.ebgconsulting.com



Adapted from Sam Kaner: *Participatory Decision Making* training
 Ref: *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making* by Sam Kaner

- Refer to [my blog](#) for more information on Gradient of Agreement. [4]
3. Ask participants to examine the sorted Product Work cards arranged on the table from part 1. Select a card with a “D” on it. These cards indicate product work that involves decision-making. Ask, “What decision rule will we use for this?” Have participants discuss which rule is appropriate, and why.
 4. Repeat the steps until all work items that involve decisions have been discussed and the decision rule is clarified. In step 3, you may also facilitate this by first asking, “what decision rule do we use now for this?” then ask, “What decision rule do we use moving forward?”

Notes:

Don't be surprised to hear that some people may not be able to identify the current decision rule.

After many experiences of using it, I have adapted the original scale of 8 for the Gradient of Agreement that I first learned in a training class with Sam Kaner in 1996. [5]

Part 3 Instructions: Product Leadership using Delegation Poker

Goal: Explore and decide how to progressively increase the degree of freedom a product person allots to the product development team to make product-related decisions.

In part 1, the product team understands the breath of work that makes up product management, ownership, and development. In part 2, the product team identifies decision rules they will apply to product work. In part 3, Jurgen Appelo's [Delegation Poker](#) game is used to improve product leadership. I recommend you familiarize yourself with how this game works before proceeding.

This is what takes place in part 3:

1. Hand out a Delegation Poker deck, one per person (each deck has seven cards).
2. Select a Product Work card that uses either Decision Leader Decides after Discussion or Consensus as its decision rule (From Part 2). Read it out loud.
3. Have each person, holding their own set of Delegation Poker cards, select a card representing their preference for the decision style they think is appropriate for that Product Work item. Keep the card private and don't show it to the others. When the cards have been selected, everyone should simultaneously reveal their selected cards at the same time.



The table below shows an example of the delegation level (and corollary decision rule in italic) that a team might select for Product Work items:

Level of Delegation	Example of Product Work for using this Level of Delegation
Tell	Determine product development budget
Sell	Delineate metrics for product analytics
Consult (a.k.a <i>person in charge decides after discussion</i>)	Build, socialize and continually revise the product roadmap
Agree (a.k.a. <i>consensus</i>)	Define the definition of “done”
Advise (<i>delegate, and give advice</i>)	Specify a single improvement backlog item for delivery in the next iteration
Inquire (<i>delegate, and check in periodically advice</i>)	Identify backlog item acceptance criteria
Delegate (<i>delegate and let go!</i>)	Determine what attributes to track in in the product backlog

- Discuss the selections and ask, “Is it possible to increase the development team’s degree of freedom by delegating to them versus another decision rule?” Discuss what skills and knowledge the team needs for the product person to choose one of the delegation levels: advise, inquire, or delegate.
- Conduct a retrospective debrief of this activity, as you did for the prior two activities. Encourage product development teams to explore if they might increase the level of delegation. You can also encourage them to discuss how they might hold each other to be accountable for the delegation level they choose and how to make it explicit. For example, they might post decisions and degree of delegation on a [Delegation Board](#) in a visible team area to periodically revisit it.

Notes:

Shifting from a consultative decision-making style toward one with more delegation depends on the nature of the decision and the strength of the product development team’s business and domain expertise.

What You Should Have Accomplished With This Activity

Product Managers and Product Owners, along with their development team, should gain an appreciation of the breadth of strategic and tactical work needed to discover and deliver successful products. They will learn how to clarify decision-making rules and processes, reduce delays, and improve communications.

A product development team with strong technical practices, ability to deploy products on demand, rich domain experience, and a keen focus on outcomes will falter without greater autonomy. Product people demonstrate product leadership when they increase trust, build competence, and inspire confidence by affording their development team a greater degree of freedom for product-related decisions.

References:

1. Strachan, Dorothy. *Making Questions Work: A Guide to How and What to Ask for Facilitators, Consultants, Managers, Coaches, and Educators*. Jossey-Bass, 2006.
2. Stanfield, Brian. *The Art of The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace*. New Society Publishers, 2000.
3. Gottesdiener, Ellen. "Am I a Product Manager or a Product Owner? Part 1." EBG Blog. February 1, 2018. <https://www.ebgconsulting.com/blog/product-manager-product-owner>.
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5. Kaner, Sam. *The Facilitators Guide to Participatory Decision-Making. 3rd Edition*. Jossey-Bass, 2014.
6. Appelo, Jurgen. "Management 3.0 Product: Delegation Poker, How Do You Decide Who Does What." *Management 3.0* (blog). <https://management30.com/product/delegation-poker>.