

Turning Competing Stakeholders Into Collaborating Product Partners

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On time. On budget. Error free. These are crucial delivery goals for any organization. Yet they are rendered almost meaningless if the product fails to deliver value.

That's why successful delivery teams work hand-in-hand with their stakeholders as product partners, defining value and then actively discovering — and delivering — high-value solutions. This goes beyond feature requests and requirements documents—beyond user stories and product backlogs—beyond the push-pull of competing interests. It's a partnership where the ideas, perspectives and experiences of three different stakeholder groups converge. The result? Product partners who collaborate to discover and deliver value.

Let's look more closely at these product partners: who they are, how they work together, and how they balance competing priorities.

First Ask *Who*

A product partnership includes people from three realms: customer, business, and technology. Each offers a unique perspective and has its own ideas of what is valuable.

The *customer* partners represent users, buyers, and advisers — people or systems that interface with the product, choose to buy it, or influence others to buy it. They tend to value improved productivity, heightened efficiency, greater speed, entertainment, and similar benefits.

Business partners represent the people in your organization who authorize, champion, or support the product or who provide subject matter expertise. They find value in improving market position, complying with regulations, achieving a business case, reducing overhead costs, enhancing internal performance, and so on.

Technology partners (your delivery team, internal or third parties) design, deliver, test, and support the product or advise those who do. They may value building a high-quality product, offering smooth, continual delivery, adopting a stable architecture, and the like.

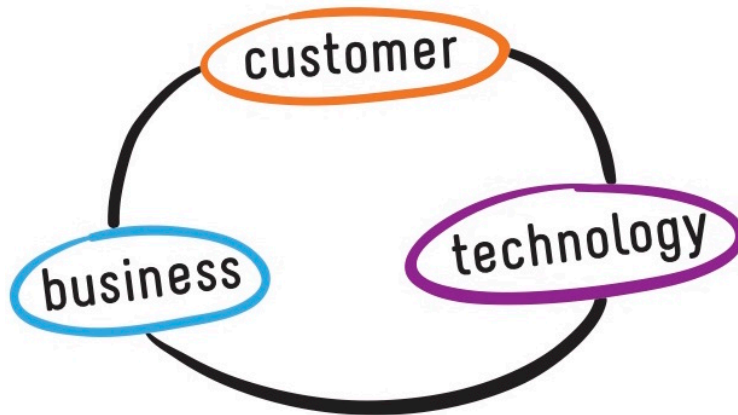


Figure 1: The Product Partners

Image Source: [Discover to Deliver: Agile Product Planning and Analysis](#), Gottesdiener and Gorman, 2012

This mix of partners and perspectives is essential, no matter what kind of delivery method you adopt (agile, traditional, hybrid, or another approach). For the partnership to work, these three disparate groups, with specific individual titles and roles, must collaborate to reach their shared goal: discover and deliver value.

Partners don't see themselves as dependent or independent. Instead, they're interdependent — mutually reliant on and responsible to each other to reach their shared goal. Acting as partners, they apply their skills and knowledge without regard to their title or role. The lines between product and project management, business analysis, testing, user experience, quality assurance, and development and operations blur.

To Discover, Ask *Why*

Once the product partner team is identified, the product partners work together to discover which product attributes will deliver value. The key to successful discovery is to keep the focus on value—the *why* behind each product option.

To ensure that all of the product partners understand what is important to each group—each partner's value considerations—we often find it helpful to write and post the different value considerations in the group space. Business partners, for example, often find that they identify with the acronym IRACIS (“ear ras cuss”). “IR” stands for “increase revenue,” “AC” is “avoid costs,” and “IS” means “improve service.”

When shared openly, IRACIS and other value considerations become a vital reference point as the partners weigh the value of the product options. As their perspectives and

value considerations diverge or compete, they use participatory decision making to reach closure.

To Decide, Ask *When*

One factor that has tremendous influence on this decision-making process is *when*. Asking *when* helps the partners decide the opportune time a product option will deliver its greatest value. We categorize the product’s planning horizons as the Big-View, the Pre-View, and the Now-View.

The *Big-View* is the long-term view or product roadmap (one or two years).
The *Pre-View* focuses on the next product iteration or release (a month or two).
The *Now-View* concentrates on the next product increment (a few days to a month).

The length of the views may vary. One team’s Pre-View (release) might be 2 weeks; some teams (newer to agile and automated testing) have 3 or 4 month release cycles.

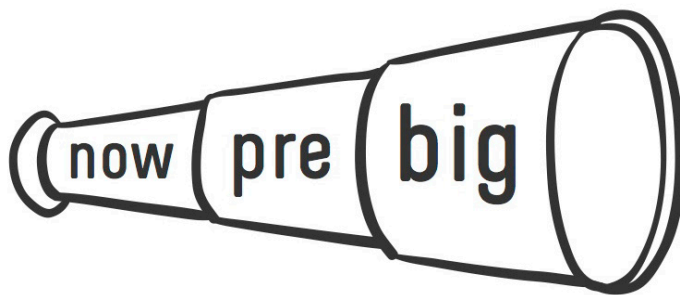


Figure 2: Planning Horizons
Image Source: [Discover to Deliver: Agile Product Planning and Analysis](#), Gottesdiener and Gorman, 2012

The product partners typically need the most the valuable options to be delivered early in the product’s lifecycle, so when weighing competing product options, they allocate higher priority ones to nearer-term planning horizons. Because the value of a product option can change over time, the partners benefit from having the flexibility to allocate and deliver options at the last responsible moment.

Choose *How* to Collaborate

It’s not enough to get the right people together and ask the right questions. To communicate efficiently and effectively about how to deliver, product partners need a focused way to communicate and make decisions together.

By far the most efficient and effective discovery mechanism is a collaborative approach called the “structured conversation”. In a structured conversation, the product partners first *explore* possible requirements (options) for their next increment. They then *evaluate* these many options in terms of value. Once they have narrowed the list of options

through the evaluation process, they *confirm* how they will verify and validate these candidate solutions with unambiguous acceptance criteria. The validation includes how to test that they delivered the right requirements, and that they achieved the anticipated value from each delivery.

You can learn more about structured conversations [here](#) and in this [7-minute video](#).

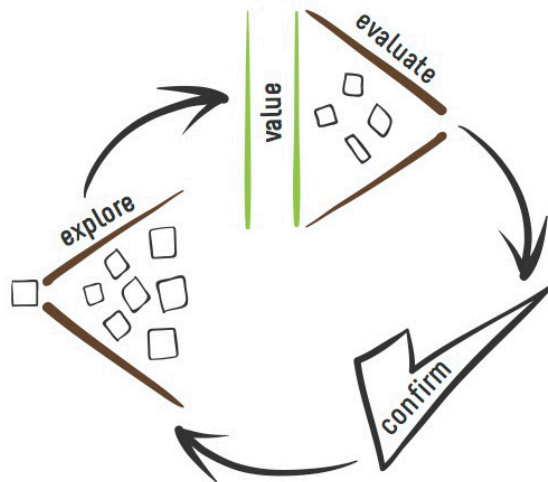


Figure 3: The Structured Conversation
Image Source: [Discover to Deliver: Agile Product Planning and Analysis](#), Gottesdiener and Gorman, 2012

A structured conversation is a lightweight yet disciplined approach to ensure that the team members learn from each delivery increment, gathering feedback and improving their product and process as they go. When the conversation’s scope is the longer-term aspects of the product, a facilitated workshop is a powerful way to discover the product’s big picture.

All Together Now

True success depends on discovering product value and delivering it. To do this most effectively, you must abandon the mindset of competing stakeholders and instead embrace the concept of collaborating product partnerships, where role and title take second place to perspective and value.

By actively engaging as product partners in structured conversations--exploring, evaluating and confirming product options--the stakeholders ensure every product increment delivers the highest value. Their active collaboration also yields a stronger community with effective communications, shared understanding, increased productivity and trust.

To maximize the effectiveness of your product partnership, keep these points in mind:

- Include people from the customer, business, and technology realms.
- Have each partner or group describe and share its value considerations.
- Frame value decisions within one planning horizon.
- Hold structured conversations to explore and evaluate product options, and to confirm candidate solutions.
- Promote interdependence among the product partners. Remember, it's the goal, not the role.