

A KEVIN DUNCAN PLAYBOOK

The Craft of Product Management

*Five practical skills that separate product managers who
react to their product from those who actually shape it.*

THE CORE PROBLEM

A job with no fixed job description

Product managers are responsible for guiding a product's success and leading the cross-functional team responsible for improving it. Nothing in that sentence tells you which skill to develop first.

A designer's craft is bounded by design. An engineer's craft is bounded by engineering. A product manager's craft is not bounded by much at all: it spans analysis, product instinct, time management, competitive awareness and leadership, each one borrowed from a different discipline entirely.

Master one of these and neglect the rest, and the gaps do not stay quiet. They show up as blind spots, in exactly the moments that need judgement most: the metric nobody checked, the feature nobody actually used themselves, the roadmap with no room left for the future, the wheel reinvented for the third time, the vision that means something different in every room.

Five skills, one role

- Data Analysis — basing decisions on numbers, not opinions
- Product Immersion — using the product like a real customer would
- Keeping the Balance — one eye on the present, one on the future
- Benchmarking — learning from problems someone else already solved
- People Management — leading a team you do not directly control

FIVE SKILLS, ONE ROLE

The five skills

01

Data Analysis

You only improve what you measure. Base every discussion on numbers, not opinions, and disagreements resolve themselves far faster than they would in a room full of strongly held views. The uncomfortable corollary: you only know the product is actually getting better if your success metric is getting better. A redesign everyone loves in the room, but which does not move the metric it was built to move, has not succeeded, whatever the room thought.

You've likely heard this attributed to Peter Drucker as "what gets measured gets managed." He never said it, the Drucker Institute itself has confirmed there is no record of it anywhere in his published work. The closest real source is a 1956 paper by V.F. Ridgway, and it was actually a warning: measuring the wrong thing manages the wrong behaviour just as reliably as measuring the right thing manages the right one.¹ Choose your metric with real care. It will get managed either way.

02

Product Immersion

Check in on your product every day, the way you would check in on family. Look at the metrics dashboard, yes, but also SEO performance and social presence, the signals that live outside your own analytics.

Then go further: use the product. Experience it as a customer would. A product manager should be customer number one, and should know the product better than anyone else in the building. Make this part of your routine, not an occasional audit. Block out diary time to actually explore it.

This has a name in tech circles: dogfooding. It traces to a 1988 Microsoft email titled "Eating our own Dogfood," sent by manager Paul Maritz to challenge a colleague into increasing internal use of the company's own product.² The instinct is decades old for a reason. No dashboard substitutes for using the thing yourself.

03

Keeping the Balance

Keep one eye on the present and one on the future. The present is today through the next few weeks: day-to-day delivery, how the team is actually shipping, whether your processes are still fit for purpose. The future is longer-term: not process, but the product itself. Instead of delivery, concentrate on planning, defining goals for next quarter and next year. Both need dedicated time, and neither will claim it for you.

PRESENT FOCUSES ON

- Day-to-day delivery
- How the team is shipping
- Whether processes still fit for purpose

FUTURE FOCUSES ON

- Product planning
- Goals for next quarter, next year
- The product itself, not the process

This is the same tension Eisenhower described in 1954: "the urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent." Stephen Covey later turned the distinction into the well-known urgent/important matrix.³ The present is usually urgent. The future rarely is, right up until it suddenly and expensively becomes so.

04

Benchmarking

Your users spend most of their time on other products, not yours. Whatever problem you are wrestling with, someone else has almost certainly had it already. Check how competitors and adjacent products solve the same issue before you start from a blank page. It saves time and money, and hands you a shortcut past mistakes someone else already made.

Context is everything, though. Different markets, different maturity levels, different strategic moments. Observe, but observe wisely: a solution that works for a mature market leader may be the wrong move for a young challenger.

This is a formalised discipline, not just good instinct. Xerox pioneered competitive benchmarking in 1979 after a manufacturing crisis, and Robert Camp's resulting book made it standard practice across the industry.⁴ The underlying logic has not changed: someone has already run the experiment you are about to run. Go and find out what happened.

05

People Management

You are responsible for the product's success, but you do not design it or develop it yourself. That gap, real accountability without direct control, is the entire job. You need to know how to sell the vision to your stakeholders, and that includes your own team.

Learn about team building, people management and leadership deliberately, they rarely arrive by accident. Your job is to bring people together around a shared vision, using different "hats" for different audiences: your team, your stakeholders and your customers each speak a different language and carry different experience. Feel comfortable speaking to all of them, and combine what each group gives you back into a single, coherent vision, rather than a different promise for each room.

Management theorist Robert Greenleaf described this exact shape of leadership in 1970: leading by serving, rather than leading by directing.⁵ A product manager's authority is almost entirely borrowed, from the vision, from the evidence, from the trust of the people doing the work. Spend it accordingly.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Turning five skills into five habits

None of the five skills survive as good intentions. Each one needs a specific, recurring slot on the calendar, or it quietly loses out to whatever is loudest that week.

SKILL	WEEKLY HABIT	WHAT IT PREVENTS	TIME
Data Analysis	Review the metrics dashboard every Monday	Decisions made on opinion, not evidence	15 min
Product Immersion	Use the product as a real customer, weekly	Drifting out of touch with what you ship	30 min
Keeping the Balance	Block time for planning, no matter how busy	A roadmap that's all delivery, no direction	2 hrs
Benchmarking	Review one competitor or adjacent product	Solving problems someone else already solved	1 hr
People Management	Run a real 1:1 with a stakeholder	A vision that means something different in every room	1 hr

WHERE THIS BREAKS DOWN

Common pitfalls

- ✗ **Mistaking activity for improvement.** A busy sprint and a moving metric are not the same thing. Only one of them tells you the product is actually getting better.
- ✗ **Skipping the product yourself.** Reading a dashboard is not the same as using what you ship. If you have not touched it this week, you do not actually know it.
- ✗ **Living entirely in the present.** A roadmap that is 100% delivery and 0% planning will ship efficiently toward nowhere in particular.
- ✗ **Benchmarking without context.** Copying a mature market leader's playbook when you are an early-stage challenger solves the wrong problem at the wrong time.
- ✗ **Selling one vision to your team and a different one to your stakeholders.** The gap between the two versions is where trust quietly leaks out.
- ✗ **Treating "no direct authority" as an excuse.** You do not get to design or build the product, but that is not a reason to stop being accountable for whether it works.

THE CANVAS

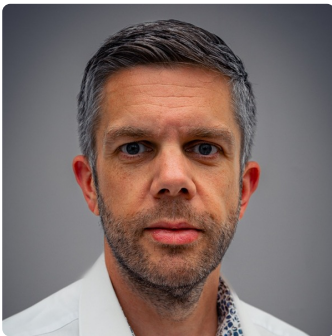
Build your own weekly rhythm

Fill in a specific habit, a time slot, and what it protects you from for each skill below. If a row stays blank, that is the skill quietly losing out to whatever is loudest this week.

SKILL	WEEKLY HABIT	WHAT IT PREVENTS	TIME
Data Analysis			
Product Immersion			
Keeping the Balance			
Benchmarking			
People Management			

THE AUTHOR

About Kevin Duncan



Kevin Duncan is a product and digital transformation leader with over a decade of experience delivering product strategy and large-scale change across financial services, government and consumer sectors in the UK.

He has led product and outcome-based planning for organisations including the UK Government, Yell and LMS, and currently leads product strategy and transformation for the UK mortgage and property ecosystem as Product Director at Novus Strategy & Consulting.

This playbook is drawn from workshops Kevin has run with product teams on building the range of skills the role actually demands, not just the ones that happen to be comfortable.

Want help developing these skills across your product team?

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References

1. Ridgway, V.F. (1956) "Dysfunctional Consequences of Performance Measurements." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1(2), pp.240–247. The maxim "what gets measured gets managed" is commonly misattributed to Peter Drucker; no record of it exists in his published work.
2. In 1988, Microsoft manager Paul Maritz sent an internal email titled "Eating our own Dogfood," coining the term now used across the tech industry for using your own product internally.
3. Eisenhower, D.D. (1954) address at Northwestern University. Later formalised into the urgent/important matrix by Covey, S.R. (1989) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Free Press.
4. Camp, R.C. (1989) *Benchmarking: The Search for Industry Best Practices That Lead to Superior Performance*. Milwaukee: ASQC Quality Press.
5. Greenleaf, R.K. (1970) *The Servant as Leader*. Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.