A KEVIN DUNCAN PLAYBOOK

The Multiplier Effect

Product managers don't generate value on their own. They multiply the value created by the people around them, if they take the time to understand them.

THE CORE PROBLEM

You are not the value generator

Product managers multiply value. They rarely create it alone.

It's tempting to think of the product manager as the person who makes the product happen. In practice, the actual value, the code that ships, the designs that resonate, the deals that close, the support that keeps customers, is generated by the cross-functional stakeholders around you: engineers, designers, sales, support, and a long list of others who never appear on a product roadmap.

Your job is to multiply what they produce. You do that by understanding the role each stakeholder plays well enough to make them more effective. There is a genuine loop here, not just a nice sentiment: when you understand your stakeholders, you make them more effective. When your stakeholders are more effective, you become more effective.

> **This is the same territory Marty Cagan and Chris Jones cover in *Empowered*.** The best product organisations are not built on individually brilliant product managers, they are built on empowered, cross-functional teams who trust each other enough to solve hard problems together.[1] Empathy for your stakeholders is the unglamorous groundwork that trust is actually built on.

WHO COUNTS

Who actually is a stakeholder?

A stakeholder is anyone in the organisation who has the influence to impact the product. That is a wider net than most product managers cast. It is not just your engineering team and your boss, it is everyone whose decisions, expertise or goodwill shape whether the product succeeds.

This is not a new idea. Management theorist Edward Freeman defined a stakeholder in almost identical terms back in 1984: "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives."[2] Forty years on, that definition still holds, and it is still routinely ignored in favour of a much shorter list.

The list is longer than you think

Product & Delivery — Engineers, Designers, User Researchers, Data Analysts, QAs

Go-to-Market — Business Line Leaders, Sales, Marketing, Services, Industry SMEs

Risk & Operations — Support, Operations, Legal, Compliance, Information Security

Finance — Finance, Accounting

> **Gaining empathy for a stakeholder starts the same way it does for a customer.** Interview them. Treat their needs as you would treat a customer's needs. Every stakeholder holds a unique role in the organisation, and it is vital to understand the role each one plays, so you can empower them to do it well.

A FRAMEWORK FOR FOCUS

Not every stakeholder needs the same attention

With that many stakeholders, treating everyone identically is a fast way to burn out and still leave the people who matter most under-served. A simple way to triage effort is Aubrey Mendelow's Power-Interest grid, developed in 1991 and still one of the most widely used stakeholder-mapping tools in management practice.[3] Plot each stakeholder by how much influence they have over the product, and how much they actually care, and a sensible engagement strategy falls out the other side.

	HIGH INTEREST	LOW INTEREST
HIGH POWER	**Manage Closely** Your key partners. Invest real time here, and involve them early.	**Keep Satisfied** Enough contact that they never feel blindsided by a decision.
LOW POWER	**Keep Informed** Engaged allies who rarely get enough attention. Worth the effort.	**Monitor** A light touch. Revisit if their power or interest shifts.

THREE WAYS TO BUILD IT

Building stakeholder empathy

Empathy is not gained through an annual survey. It is built the same way customer empathy is: through informal contact, structured research, and a regular rhythm of checking in. Treat all three the way you would treat customer interviews, and stakeholders stop being people who slow your roadmap down and start being the reason it works.

01 Informal Interactions

These are the unplanned moments: coffees, lunches, a five-minute chat in the corridor. Do not overthink them. Keep loose notes on goals and concerns as they come up, and when something interesting surfaces, probe with one or two "whys" rather than a full interrogation.

> **WHERE THIS COMES FROM**
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> That habit has a long track record: the Five Whys technique, developed by Sakichi Toyoda at Toyota in the 1930s and later formalised by Taiichi Ohno as part of the Toyota Production System.[4] You do not need all five here, one or two is usually enough to get past the first, generic answer. And do not over-analyse any single observation. It is exhausting for the stakeholder, and for you.

02 Formal Research

Treat this like a customer interview, because it is one. Know your objectives going in, respect the interviewee's time, and still leave room for spontaneity, the best insights usually arrive off-script.

Questions worth asking

- Why did you join this company, and what impact are you looking to make?
- How do you see yourself driving the company's success?
- What are your goals in 1 month, 3 months, 1 year, 5 years?
- How do your goals differ as an individual contributor, a manager, or a department lead?
- What do you fear the most? What obstacles slow you down the most?
- How do you usually interact with the product?
- What do you like about working with the product? What don't you?

Three rules make the difference between a good interview and a wasted hour. Learn to think the way they think, so you can faithfully represent them when they are not in the room. Stay objective and do not let internal politics creep into the conversation. And do not try to solve their problems on the spot, you are there to understand, not to fix.

03 Regular Checkpoints

Successful product managers set up regular checkpoints, for three specific reasons: they let stakeholders give you feedback so you can improve, they teach you how stakeholders actually perceive your processes and outputs, and over time they let you influence stakeholders to provide even more impact.

These should run one-to-one, and they should focus on process and relationship, not projects. Use your existing project review meetings for status updates; keep checkpoints for the relationship itself.

> **This only works if the stakeholder feels safe being honest.** Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety found that teams where people feel safe raising concerns learn faster and perform better than teams that merely feel confident.[5] A regular checkpoint is where you build that safety, one honest conversation at a time.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

A stakeholder empathy plan

Mapping a handful of real stakeholders against Mendelow's grid and a method turns the framework into a weekly habit rather than a slide you built once.

STAKEHOLDER	QUADRANT	PRIMARY METHOD	CADENCE
Engineering Lead	Manage Closely	Informal + regular checkpoint	Weekly 1:1
Head of Sales	Keep Satisfied	Formal interview + light-touch updates	Monthly
Compliance Lead	Keep Informed	Formal interview	Quarterly
Regional Support Rep	Monitor	Informal, opportunistic	As it comes up

Notice that "Manage Closely" does not mean "meet most often with the biggest agenda." The Engineering Lead gets a short, regular 1:1 focused on relationship, not a longer version of the sprint review that already exists elsewhere on the calendar.

WHERE THIS BREAKS DOWN

Common pitfalls

- × **Treating all stakeholders identically.** Manage Closely and Monitor deserve very different amounts of your time. Giving everyone the same amount shortchanges the people who actually move the product.
- × **Only ever meeting stakeholders about projects.** If every conversation is a status update, you will never learn how they actually perceive your process, only whether the latest deadline held.
- × **Trying to solve the problem in the interview.** You are there to understand their world, not to fix it on the spot. Solving too early trains people to stop telling you the whole story.
- × **Letting politics into the room.** The moment a conversation becomes about who is right, you stop learning anything useful about the stakeholder's actual goals and fears.
- × **Skipping the informal layer entirely.** A calendar full of only formal interviews and status meetings misses the corridor conversation where most real signal shows up.
- × **Running checkpoints without safety.** A regular 1:1 where honesty carries a cost is not a checkpoint. It is a status update with extra steps.

THE CANVAS

Map your own stakeholders

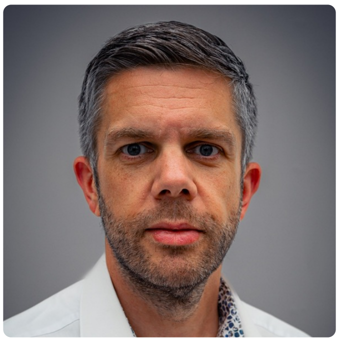
List four or five real stakeholders. Place each on the grid below, then commit to one method and one cadence for each on the table underneath.

	HIGH INTEREST	LOW INTEREST
HIGH POWER	Manage Closely	Keep Satisfied
LOW POWER	Keep Informed	Monitor

STAKEHOLDER	QUADRANT	PRIMARY METHOD	CADENCE

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 cross-functional trust that turns a roadmap into something the whole organisation actually delivers.

Want help building stakeholder empathy across your organisation?

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References

1. Cagan, M. and Jones, C. (2020) *Empowered: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Products*. Hoboken: Wiley.
2. Freeman, R.E. (1984) *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Boston: Pitman.
3. Mendelow, A. (1991) "Environmental Scanning: The Impact of the Stakeholder Concept." Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Information Systems, Cambridge, MA.
4. The Five Whys technique was developed by Sakichi Toyoda at Toyota in the 1930s and later formalised by Taiichi Ohno as part of the Toyota Production System.
5. Edmondson, A. (1999) "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), pp.350–383.