

On Product Management

How to Deal with Collaboration Breakdown

Is it just me or does the chorus of the Zeppelin song [“Communication Breakdown”](#) pop into your head every time you think of issues related to feedback management and communication in the workplace?

[Chorus]

Communication Breakdown, It's always the same,

I'm having a nervous breakdown, Drive me insane!

It's probably just me. I digress.

One of the key components of successful collaboration is sharing feedback. Naturally, we know the importance of directly collecting feedback from customers, but what about collecting insight from internal stakeholders like Sales, Customer Service and Marketing? These units also have many suggestions and ideas on how to improve products/services.

On the front lines, they interact with customers on many levels and at different touch points. They listen and respond to customer feedback and are strategically positioned to collect and communicate valuable insights on products and services. It is therefore essential to the development and delivery of more customer-centric products that a product manager actively collaborates with these key players.

Looking at the challenges of collaboration through the lens of the product manager we can attest to the complexity of teamwork. It's widely understood that product managers, often wear many different hats and the conflicting demands on their time are high. They are constantly fielding requests and questions from practically everyone. Sales pressures the design of new product components that meet customer demands and help them make their sales targets. Marketing needs detailed documentation to properly position the brand and products in the marketplace. Customer service sends a constant flow of questions and customer complaints that require immediate attention, and so on and so forth.

The reality is that all of this crucial information exchanged during this time often fails to get communicated or does not get to the people that need it most, in a timely way. This process breaks down even further when geographically dispersed teams are added to the mix. When information falls through the cracks or is received in an unusable format, opportunities are lost. Designing a feedback system based on the fundamental principles of collaboration between

departments or diverse teams can greatly improve the flow of information within the product development process.

4 ways to harness collaboration in your product development process

Here are four things you can do to increase the effectiveness of your organization's feedback system. The corresponding suggestions for tools help you improve collaboration in your organization:

Encourage sharing of product-related feedback across your organization

How often does Sales share critical feedback from customers? Does your Marketing team offer suggestions for product improvements? If your customer service team is receiving numerous complaints about a specific feature of your product, are you notified?

You owe it to yourself and the success of your next product launch, to take a minute and examine the entire process of sharing feedback throughout your organization. By doing so, you may uncover that the 'silo effect' is limiting your ability to respond quickly to important internal and external feedback. An antithesis to the principles of open collaboration across departmental boundaries, the silo effect stifles creativity and growth.

Use tools to gather and manage effective feedback

Are you buried in survey responses and complicated data from customer questionnaires? Do the tools you currently use really help you address every aspect of the feedback process? Web-based idea management tools are effective tools for capturing, organizing and elaborating on feedback. Requirements management tools help you translate large volumes of customer insight into actionable product requirements.

Tools must also be designed to facilitate bringing together internal and external stakeholders, such as business partners, employees and especially customers. This ensures everyone has a voice in the process and that feedback is accessible across departments such as Sales, Customer Support, Marketing, Product Development, Engineering and Production.

Centralize and organize product feedback

Busy defining product requirements for an upcoming product release? Having a centralized and well organized product feedback system will help ensure nothing falls to the wayside. Virtual workspaces are a great way to maintain requisite resources focused on particular topics and share their resources through collaboration.

Evaluating the effectiveness of how your product feedback is organized must be made from the perspective of the various departments and teams. Be sure to include them in establishing evaluation criteria and in performing the assessment. Everyone's needs must be considered and everyone must participate in the design of a well organized product feedback system.

Tie feedback to the entire product development process

One of the most important elements of the feedback process is taking the collected feedback and actually incorporating it into your product or service strategy. When you explore how the feedback you collect is used at different stages of the product development process, you can uncover bottlenecks that stifle the flow of information.

Product-related data must be seamlessly integrating into the product and service development and delivery processes. This means that information captured in one stage of the product workflow is moved downstream to affect change to development. After all, feedback is useless unless someone uses it to make improvements at every step of the development process.

While it may seem impossible at times, encouraging the sharing of ideas can help transform your products into great ones. By exploring these four questions, I am confident that you can find effective and perhaps innovative ways to harness the infinite power of collaboration and avoid major “collaboration breakdowns”.

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Oh...and she loves Led Zeppelin. 😊

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