

Emotional Intelligence

for

Product Excellence



Overview

“Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself” - Mohsin Hamid

- Product managers (PdM) exist in a role largely dependent on the action of others.
- Our ability to connect with others will impact our level of success.
- Emotional intelligence (EI) can help build connections.
- PdMs need EI skills to influence three key customers when building a product:
 - Executive management
 - Cross-functional team members
 - The end users

The following will help you, step by step, to connect with each of these customers.

First - some background.



Why EI? We're Naturally Anxious

We survived, and evolved, as a species because we ran away from trouble. It was really survival of the paranoid, and we live with those genes.

- Too relaxed and you were eaten by the tiger.
- Get rejected by the tribe, and you're kicked out to fend for yourself.

As a result, our brains register rejection as physical pain.

- It's reflected in the language we use:
 - You broke my heart.
 - You hurt my feelings.

Even *perceived* rejection triggers the fight or flight response.



You Can't Rationalize with a Caveman

If we want help from others, we need to keep them rational. In normal situations, our brain is highly functional - full of compassion, empathy, love, foresight, and contextual analysis.

When triggered, like during a conflict, the functional brain is hijacked by the amygdala leaving us with the “fight or flight” response of the “lizard brain.” The survival instinct takes over, and we're not making rational decisions.

And it's super easy to trigger the fight or flight response. Emotional Intelligence helps keep you, and others, in the functional brain.

- *Bonus!* How people manage their work relationships is closely linked to how they manage their personal ones. Take these lessons home with you!



EI for Product People

PdMs are largely dependent on the action of others.

- We often have no direct authority - allocated budget, shared resources
- But all the accountability - hit your numbers!
- We are constantly faced with EI challenges - addressing the fears of our manager, the conflict within our team, or the failure experienced by a key client.
- PdMs need a deep understanding of how the organization operates and must build social capital to influence the survival of their product, from obtaining budget & staffing to securing other key resources.

Emotional Intelligence Involves

1. Self-awareness - recognizing an emotion as it “happens”
2. Self-regulation - learning to control how long an emotion will be overwhelming
3. Motivation - creating the positive mindset needed to achieve goals
4. Empathy - the ability to recognize how people feel
5. Social skills - using interpersonal skills in order to influence, communicate, and lead



Customer 1: Managing Executives

PdMs have no authority and executives hold the power and budget.

Manage like a hostage situation -- earn their trust and then get buy-in

1. **Active listening:** We'll never get someone to see things our way until they first believe we can see things their way.
2. **Empathy:** Stop and ask "what's driving the question?" to ensure understanding before answering. Use phrases like "I hear you saying..." or "I can see why that makes you feel..." for assurance you're understanding their need. Before you share your thoughts, think about what this powerful person cares about — it may be the credibility of their team or getting a project done on time.
3. **Rapport:** Communicating understanding *does not* mean you agree. You're not telling them they're right, just that you "get it." They will know their viewpoint matters and was considered in your decisions. This builds trust, and cannot be rushed.
4. **Influence:** Trust gives you your turn to be heard.
5. **Behavioral change:** Then you can "ask for the sale." Ask for permission to disagree, "I like the idea of <executive opinion.> May I share a different scenario and solution?" Validate the original point.



Asking for Change

Don't make judgments

- When you express your point of view or concerns, watch your language carefully.
- Avoid *judgment words* such as “short-sighted,” “foolish,” or “hasty” that might set off your counterpart.
Expert tip - cut out all adjectives, they can be misinterpreted or taken personally.

Stay humble

- Emphasize that you're offering your opinion, not “gospel truth.” It may be a well-informed, well-researched opinion, but it's still an opinion.
- Remind the person this is your point of view, and invite critique like, “Does that make sense?” Be genuinely open to hearing other opinions. Demonstrate equal curiosity about other views.
- Talk tentatively & slightly understate your confidence. Instead of “If we set an end-of-quarter deadline, we'll never make it,” say, “This is just my opinion, but I don't see how we can make that deadline.”
- Use *guiding phrases* like “I'm thinking aloud here” to leave room for dialogue and assert your position as a position, not as a fact.



Customer 2: Ensuring Team Chemistry

Strengthen relationships with partners, peers and staff through:

- Nonviolent communication - teams that feel safe to share their thoughts have better outcomes.
- Getting to win:win - not victor or victim. To be right, you make the other person wrong.
- Staying calm with active listening – sets up understanding, and shows they matter.
- Hearing other ideas also provides a Plan B. When things go wrong, and they will, we want options.

Look for all the ways you can say “yes”

- A good relationship sprinkles yeses through interactions. Say, “yes, that’s a good idea.” “Yes, that’s a great point, I never thought of that.” “Yes, let’s do that if you think it’s important.”
- Especially for men, whose ability to accept influence from women is one of the most critical issues in a relationship. (Marriages where the men say to their partners, “Gee, that’s a good point” or “Yeah, I guess we could do that” are much more likely to succeed.)
- Yes is not simple compliance. *Agreement* is not the same as compliance. If you’re giving in all the time, then the relationship is never going to work.



4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse

There are 4 danger signs for your relationships, according to John Gottman who's studied marriage and divorce for the past 35 years (and the data works in workplace relationships too).

1. **Criticism:** Can be big and outrageous or “death by a thousand cuts,” the opposite of a safe environment.
2. **Defensiveness:** Easy to slip into, assumes a negative, and it felt as a physical pain. You, or your customer, is no longer an active listener.
3. **Stonewalling:** Refusing to listen or participate. “Fine, whatever.”
4. **Contempt:** The eye roll. Tells them, I don't like you as a person. “You always do this...”

I rode one of these horses. I burned lots of goodwill & social capital, and it's not easy to earn back that level of trust.



An Easy Remedy

Avoid the “Harsh Startup”

- **One rule to learn:** soften the beginning of your conversation
- 96% chance of predicting how a conversation will end is based on how it starts up
- It’s all in the first 3 minutes!

We are hardwired to have a negativity bias

- We remember and retain the negative much more
- It takes 5 positive interactions to 1 negative interaction for a healthy relationship.
- Think of it as a relationship bank account. Positive interactions make a deposit. Bad interactions make a withdrawal. Don’t bounce a check with your relationships!



Customer 3: Show Your End User Empathy

When we apply empathy to our product, we demonstrate:

- Focus on the user - we understand their emotions and concerns.
- We're solving a significant pain - people do not make change without big motivation.
- Ease the job to be done and make the customer feel good.

Bad product design is rejection and triggers the lizard brain

- Why doesn't this work for me?
- I'm not technical?
- I give up.

When customers experience trouble with our product...

- Show compassion.
- Take responsibility and don't blame.
- Stay out of judgment. Assume we don't fully understand the situation, so we need to really listen.
 - Everyone wants their plan A, not a product that doesn't meet expectations.



Takeaways

Understanding ≠ Agreement: Demonstrate you care enough about them to really understand their concern. You can still have different opinions. Seek first to understand, then be understood.

Provide validation and empathy: Go above and beyond, to demonstrate your customer matters - “I can see how that would feel awful!”

The relationship bank account: Positive interactions and experiences make a deposit. Bad interactions and experiences make a withdrawal. Don't bounce a check with your relationships!

Remember: People want to know they matter.



Tools You Can Use

1. Mindfulness - <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/mindfulness/research/>
2. John Gottman - <https://psychcentral.com/blog/7-research-based-principles-for-making-marriage-work/>
3. Making Relationships Work (Gottman HBR interview) - <https://hbr.org/2007/12/making-relationships-work>
4. Great Product Management - <https://hbr.org/2017/12/what-it-takes-to-become-a-great-product-manager>
5. 5-Step Hostage Strategy - <https://www.inc.com/thomas-koulopoulos/how-to-negotiate-using-the-fbis-5-step-hostage-strategy.html>
6. How to Disagree with Someone More Powerful than You - <https://hbr.org/2016/03/how-to-disagree-with-someone-more-powerful-than-you>
7. Empathetic Product Design - <https://hbr.org/2015/04/a-process-for-empathetic-product-design>

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