

## Debunking Myths About Product Managers

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Title: Debunking Myths About Product Managers

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Abstract: Project teams quite often assume that the product manager is a true partner and when a project is under scrutiny or stress, the product manager can transform into a very tough adversary and oftentimes a combative stakeholder. Stop yer whining, and put yourself in a product manager's shoes for a change! Let's explore a couple of myths about product managers that should hopefully spark a new level of collaboration and success.

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### Myth: Product Managers Love Meetings

You might think that the sheer number of meetings that product managers want you and your development team to attend are necessary evils and part of everyone's job. Knowing that most software developers are introverted and love to work quietly on creative ambitions and problem solving, this punishment could be viewed as a product manager's way to keep you busy, engaged, and interacting. I witnessed one exchange that was all too typical:

Product manager: Hey, John. I'd like you to attend a special meeting today. There's some additional feature information that I'd like your input on. I plan on inviting the whole team and it may take a couple of hours of discussion before we agree to a plan.

John (the software developer): You mean in person?

Product manager: Why, yes. I think the interaction would help filter out the best approach.

John (the software developer): Why don't you email the problem and I'll respond with a solution in an email.

Product manager: You're kidding right?

John (the software developer): I think it would be a better use of my time.

Even though the product manager approach to problem solving is bi-directional interaction, the software developer believes that a simple one-to-one, request-response interaction works better.

We as project managers attempt to maximize value with the hope that the results of a project produce an on-time, on-budget outcome that delights the customer. To keep projects on track, we usually employ the use of regular meetings as vehicle to adjust work and resources. When a product manager participates in a meeting, the perception is for meetings that seem to never end. You, as the project manager can improve on that perception by following these simple rules:

1. ***Provide an agenda, invite the product manager, and share the expected outcome for every meeting.*** For ScrumMasters leading daily Scrums, it is always a good idea to remind the team of project goals in addition to the typical daily status of reviewing the completed tasks and remaining work. If due to other priorities, the product manager doesn't attend daily Scrums, the team can lose valuable perspective that helps relate how the work impacts the customer and, subsequently, the business. Having frequent access to the product manager at your meetings simply reinforces that trust between the team and the business need. And for just fifteen minutes a day, why not?
2. ***To keep meetings short, prepare, prepare, and prepare.*** By collaborating with the product manager outside of the meeting, actual meeting engagement should run better—especially anticipating business and customer concerns that the team may have when a project runs into trouble. For example, if the product manager is getting considerable pressure for early access to the product from key customers, gathering information in advance to present to the team will give them the awareness of the requests and illustrate the sense of urgency. This transparency provided in a proactive, paced manner should improve trust while eliminating the need for those last minute fire drills.
3. ***Are you meeting bound?*** Are you hearing the statements of exasperation from the team like, “with all of these product planning and status meetings, when am I supposed to get the actual work done?” I've walked into project situations where the team is in meetings all morning, five days a week. If so, you and your product manager are unknowingly minimizing the importance of the very thing you're paying your staff to focus on: the work. As a rule of thumb, I like keeping meetings for the team to no more than three or four hours per week. Just show your product manager that even with just two hours of meeting per day, your team loses at least 25% of their available time. Eliminate excess time dedicated to meetings!

## Myth: Product Managers Must Have Every Feature Included in the Project

Most projects start out with a product manager defining a set of features that are required to be completed by a certain time. Here's a typical interaction between a project team and the product manager:

Project team: Which of these features are most important?

Product manager: E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G IS IMPORTANT!

Project team: OK, which is more important: the schedule or the features?

Product manager: B-O-T-H! I need estimates for each and every feature.

Project team: That will take a long time and there's the risk that we won't be able to capture the work dependencies of related feature requests if you just want a menu selection.

Product manager: I don't care. I need to know the cost to develop each of them. Do the best you can.

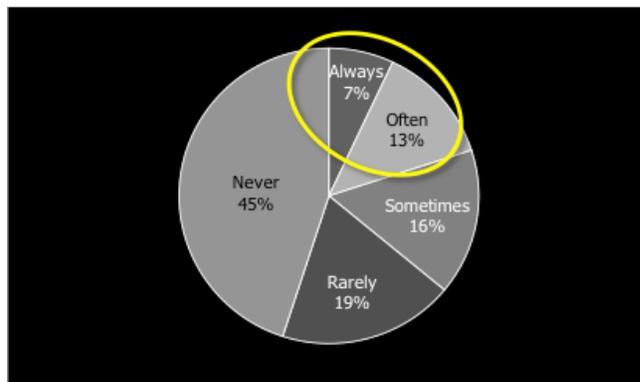
Talk about being set up for failure! Especially in the technology field, the ping-pong match that ensues between countless back and forth estimates are huge time wasters. And in the end, perhaps this comic strip summarizes the outcome best:



After a long negotiation, the product manager (the man on the left) and project team (represented by the project manager lady on the right) agrees to the final feature set that are always less than the set requested. What an exhausting process!

Here are some rules that may help ...

Even though you may choose not to believe it, customers rarely use all of their requested features packed into a product. In the software app development world, Jim Johnson of Standish Group surveyed customers in 2002 asking just how much of a software product's feature set do you use?



The results were staggering with only 20% using all (or most of) the features requested. (If you don't believe it, what percentage of the features in Microsoft Word do you use or even know how to use?)

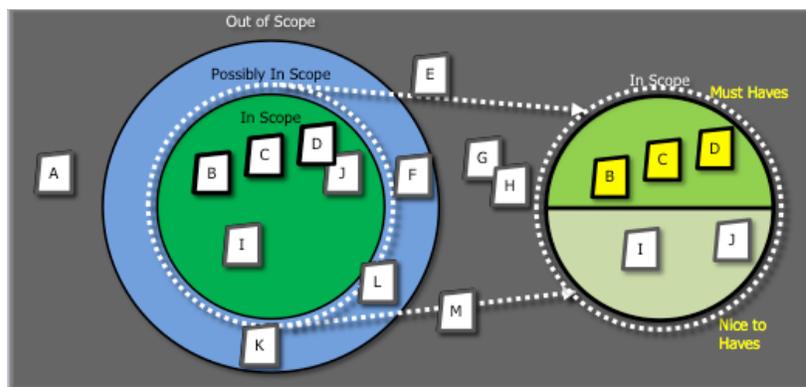
You may have missed this in your job description, but you can help the product manager understand how to distinguish between the *must have* and the *nice to have* features. The benefit is simple: reduce the time in negotiation and get those most important features in your customer's hands!

There are many approaches to break down which features a product manager should prioritize. In fact, the *PMBOK® Guide* offers several decision-making approaches in defining scope. Agile, in particular, prefers identifying those features that offer the highest business value. To help identify business value, consider adopting a has a very interesting approach from Steve Johnson, of [www.under10consulting.com](http://www.under10consulting.com). His blog post entitled "Quick Prioritization" relies on a value rating system. For every feature under consideration, the teams place a number between 1 and 5 for (A) value to us, (B) importance to our market, and (C) dissatisfaction with the current solution:

Idea	Value to us	Importance to our market	Dissatisfaction with current solution	Effort to deliver	Priority
<i>Legend: using (1-5) or Fibonacci</i>	<i>where 1=low importance</i>	<i>where 1=low importance</i>	<i>where 1=totally satisfied</i>	<i>where 1=easy (or small)</i>	<i>Value * importance * dissatisfaction / effort</i>
wolf	1	3	1	1	3
cheetah	5	2	3	5	6
lion	2	1	2	2	2
hippo	3	5	5	5	15

Each feature (shown as animal names in the Idea column) value ratings are used with a prorated formula to derive a priority number. In the above example, the “hippo” feature has the highest priority and is definitely a must have requirement for this release. The other feature requests, based on their lower calculated priorities, could be viewed as nice to haves.

Ultimately, you and your product manager need to present a united front to the project team to further refine the list of in-scope features (shown below each as a letters of the alphabet) as either must haves or nice to haves for this project:



Regardless what technique you use to separate the must haves from the nice to haves, there’s always the *next* release to incorporate those nice to have features!

## In Summary

This article shows two myths about product managers that you, as a project manager, can help dispel. For the common good of satisfying your customer, partnering with your product manager will result in better team results.

## Bio



Ken Whitaker of Leading Software Maniacs® (LSM) has more than twenty-five years of software development executive leadership and training experience in a variety of technology roles and industries. He has led commercial software teams at Software Publishing (remember

Harvard Graphics?), Data General, embedded systems software companies, and enterprise software suppliers. Ken is an active PMI® member, Project Management Professional (PMP)® certified, and a Certified ScrumMaster (CSM). Sources for LSM's material come from case studies, personal leadership experience, the PMI *Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, and Ken's leadership books: *Managing Software Maniacs*, *Principles of Software Development Leadership*, and *I'm Not God, I'm Just a Project Manager*.

Ken is the editor of *Better Software* magazine, and has created PM University™, <http://www.pmuniversity.com>, as a new addition to Leading Software Maniacs online, eLearning curriculum focused on pragmatic project management and software leadership courses. Ken is also the creator of PM Chalkboard®, <http://www.pmchalkboard.com>—the fastest way to learn basic project management principles with entertaining, no cost tutorial videos. Ken also is a frequent guest writer for <http://www.projectmanagement.com> (formerly, <http://www.gantthead.com>).

To help anyone needing to manage digital assets as versioned backups, Ken has developed the Spresso™ project versioning software, <http://www.VersionItWithSpresso.com>, (available for both Windows and OS X).

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