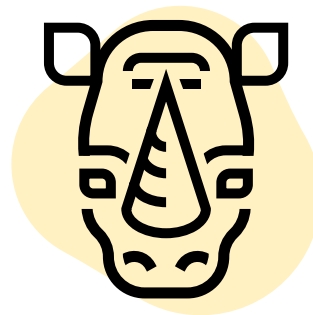
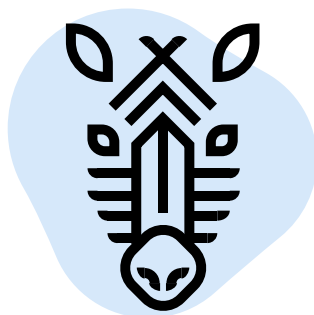
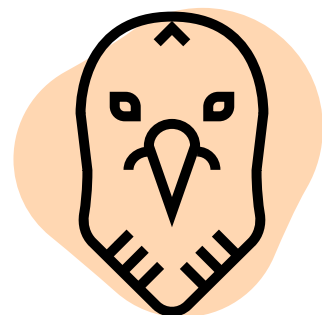
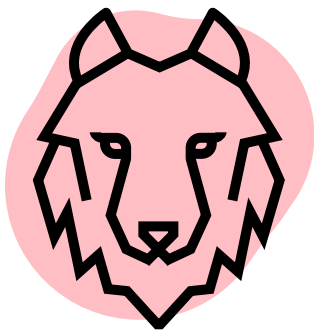


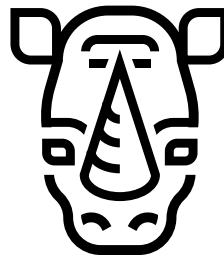
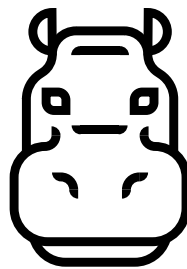
# The Dangerous Animals Of Product Management

The art of managing stakeholders & staying true to your product strategy



# The Dangerous Animals Of Product Management

The art of managing stakeholders & staying true to your product strategy



Written in partnership with **Dean Peters**

 **productboard**

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# Introduction

Picture this. You are a forward-thinking product manager with a clear product vision, a value-driven prioritization framework, and a context-rich roadmap. You make it a point to listen to customer needs and incorporate feedback from many different perspectives.

Yet, throughout the product management process, stakeholders come to the table with unvalidated requests. “This must be built,” they insist, “and right away.”

Introducing the dangerous animals of product management: stakeholders and situations that—if left untamed—can get in the way of your carefully planned product vision and strategy.

# The dangerous animals of product management



## **WoLF (Working on Latest Fire)**

When you neglect technical debt and issues like security and product functionality to focus solely on new features, you can end up with wildfires that require your immediate and complete attention. The WoLF's cycle of reactivity demands all your resources, seriously hindering productivity and innovation.



## **RHiNO (Really High-value New Opportunity)**

You can recognize a RHiNO by their call, "If we just had feature X, we'd be able to make this sale/land this particular customer." When you address the RHiNO's one-off requests too often, you are focusing on solutions rather than solving real problems for a broad range of customers.



## **HiPPO (Highest Paid Person's Opinion)**

It can be tempting to give in to HiPPOs (founders, CEOs, or other leaders). But letting HiPPOs make all the decisions can lead to products or features that haven't been validated. This can kill morale and introduce risk, making way for what product leader John Cutler calls a "Feature Factory".



## **ZEBRA (Zero Evidence But Really Arrogant)**

ZEBRAs think they know it all, but rely on their gut rather than any actual evidence. ZEBRAs might luck out and occasionally get things right—but not nearly as often as when you take the time to test assumptions and gather data to support your decisions.



## **Seagull Manager**

Seagull Managers tend to be a little bit removed from your day-to-day work. However, they occasionally swoop in, cause a ruckus, then swoop out again, leaving the team to clean up the mess. Their intentions are good, but they aren't always aware of the long-term effects of their proposed solutions.

Every business has these dangerous animals roaming wild. Implementing their suggestions can interrupt months of strategic planning and prioritization, impacting product performance and your team's morale.

The problem is that product managers often lack the authority to tame dangerous animals and cannot fence off the product to keep them out. To avoid being devoured, product managers instead have to excel at "dangerous animal husbandry"—the art of collaborating with key leaders and stakeholders in your business and getting them on the same page with your product vision and strategy.

This guide to taming the dangerous animals of product management first analyzes the different personalities and pain points you'll encounter. Then, with this insight, you'll discover how to use a combination of soft skills and hard frameworks to handle each animal and make them a productive part of your product management process.

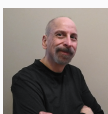
Let's go on a safari!

### **Written in partnership with Dean Peters, "zookeeper" of the dangerous animals**

An energetic and enthusiastic innovator delivering nearly three decades of delightful user experiences, Dean Peters is a product manager and recovering software engineer working across numerous domains and technologies. He is passionate and experienced in product management, agile, artificial intelligence, coaching, analytics, cultural transformation, mobile, natural language processing, search, software engineering, and team leadership.

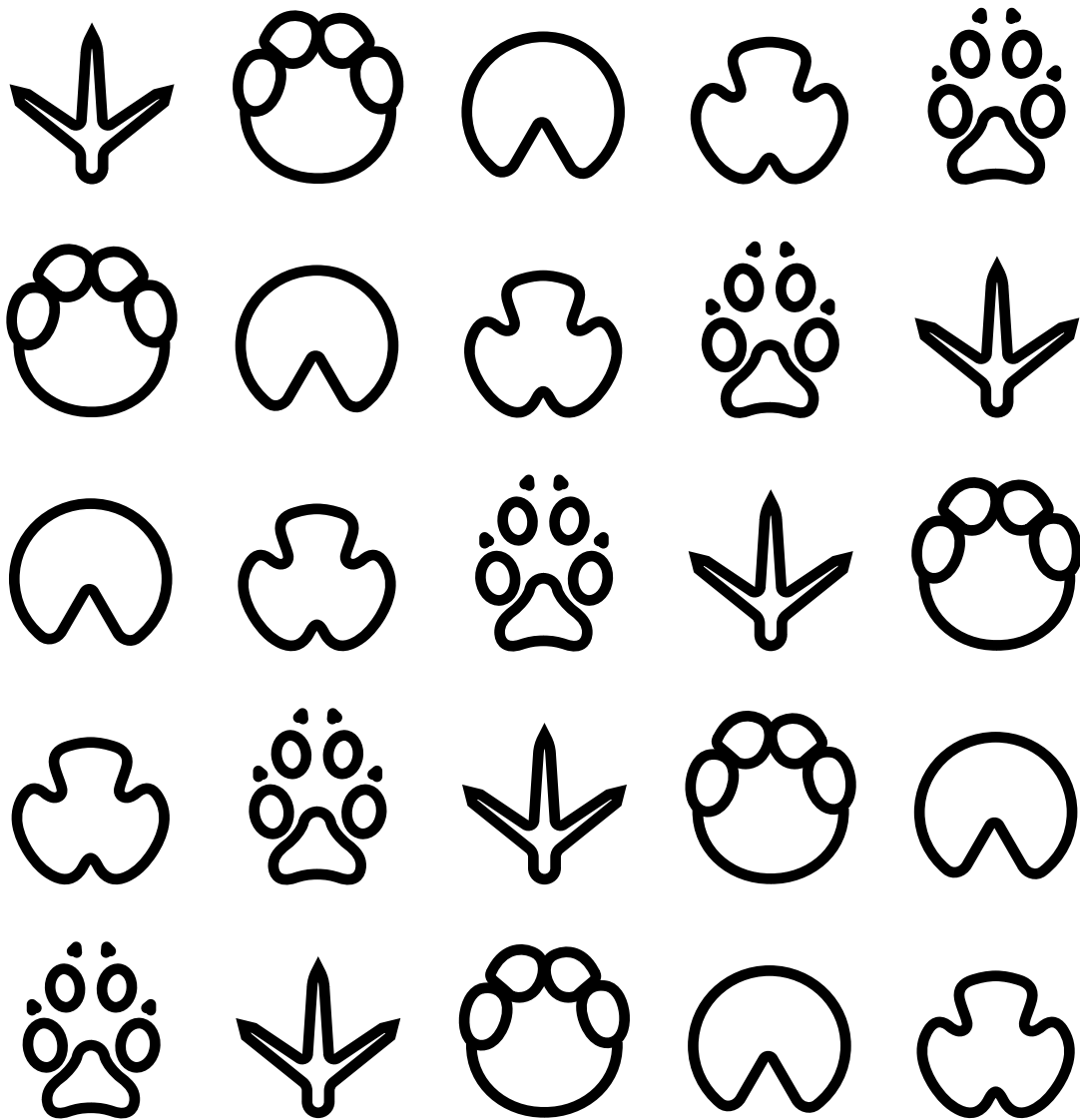
Dean offers innovative and out-of-the-box approaches to effectively cut through the chaos and bring people together. His superpower is servant-leadership that helps teams create effective solutions early and continuously—all while guarding and growing the underlying culture so critical to long-term success.

Dean enjoys spending time with his family, mountain biking, and gardening at scale while trying to leverage his secret past life as an opera singer and electronic music composer to launch a product management podcast. Dean always enjoys comments, questions, and constructive criticism at his blog [DeanOnDelivery.com](http://DeanOnDelivery.com), [Twitter](#), or [LinkedIn](#).



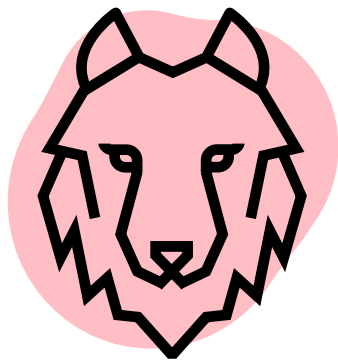
**Dean Peters**

Associate Product & Strategy  
Director at IQVIA



CHAPTER 1

# The dangerous animals of product management 101



## **WoLF: Works on Latest Fire**

### **What is a WoLF?**

The WoLF is not necessarily an individual, but a disruptive situation that requires product managers to drop everything and go into firefighting mode.

In the world of software development, there's always a negotiation between working on new features and addressing technical debt. Over-indexing on technical and security problems means you're not focusing enough attention on delivering new features and value. But the opposite—neglecting these issues to focus solely on new features—can lead to several types of fires that require your immediate and complete attention, whether it's the loss of data, security breaches, or an all-out product failure.



## Why are WoLFs dangerous?

The WoLF will jump from one fire to the next, even when it comes at the expense of value delivery. In this cycle of reactivity where all resources are dedicated to firefighting, you compromise productivity and a long-term, strategic approach to your product. Plus, you're making it impossible for your team to do anything truly new or innovative.

## WoLFs in the wild

When a WoLF is left to run wild, you can end up with a wildfire that destroys your business. Take the example of Knight Capital, a financial services firm that was brought to its knees by technical debt.

In 2003, Knight Capital introduced the Power Peg algorithm. Designed to “buy high and sell low” in the stock market (the opposition of conventional “buy low and sell high” wisdom), it was meant for use in a test environment. In just one trade, the loss of a few cents would be insignificant.

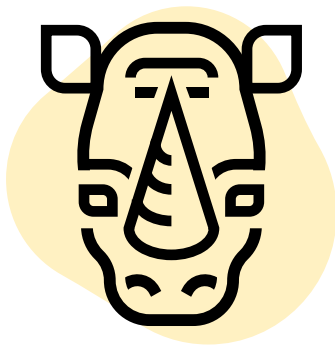
Power Peg was then left unused in Knight Capital's codebase for a very, very long time. Leaving it vulnerable to the prowling WoLF.

Nine years later, Power Peg was accidentally enabled during a software update. Thousands of “buy high sell low” trades were executed each second in the real world. And it quickly added up. Within 45 minutes, Knight Capital had lost \$460 million.

So, what caused this catastrophe?

- 1.** The flag that was used to enable Power Peg in the test environment was repurposed for use in a new functionality. Thus, the program believed it was still in the test environment and executed trades as quickly as possible.
- 2.** There was no formal code review or QA process, nothing in place to ensure the software had deployed correctly, and no thresholds to stop automated trading after a set amount of losses.
- 3.** There was no existing catalog or naming convention for feature flags, leading to a situation where engineers had no understanding of the true nature of the feature flag.
- 4.** There was no practice of removing old or unused feature flags.

The lesson is clear: neglecting technical debt in your product and letting a WoLF run wild can seriously cost your company.



## **RHiNO: Really High-value New Opportunity**

### **What is a RHiNO?**

Often, people outside of the product team—especially those in sales and marketing—can be motivated by a high-value new opportunity such as the possibility of making a sale or landing a particular customer. A RHiNO might say something like, “If we just had feature X, we’d be able to make this sale.” And while the RHiNO’s intentions are good, their approach can be myopic and disruptive.

## Why are RHiNOs dangerous?

There are a few potential problems with giving in to a RHiNO's requests. First, while they will often try to tell you that it's simple, that's rarely the case. Any new feature you build will take on a life of its own. It can introduce complexities to your codebase, may require modifications to your product training, or present support issues. These unintended consequences are costly and time-consuming.

Second, when you address too many unvalidated requests, you are focusing on solutions instead of identifying core problems experienced by broad range of customers. This clutters your product with features that very few customers use, impacting usability and perceived complexity. Rather than a unified set of products and features, strong go-to-market offerings, and unique differentiators, you'll have one-offs. Product managers, meet the Frankenstein product.

When all's said and done, there's no guarantee that you will even make the revenue that a RHiNO is promising in the first place.

Great software is a matter of focus. You start with a vision, come up with your strategy, and finally decide on your tactics. But giving in to a RHiNO flips that approach. It jumps straight into the tactics without testing your assumptions or attempting to get validation that it's the right direction. Follow the RHiNO and you'll end up with a wandering roadmap—or worse.

## RHiNOs in the wild

[ScaleFactor](#) offers a cautionary tale in what can go wrong when a RHiNO rules and you chase money instead of creating value for your customers.

In a single year, the company raised \$100 million while claiming to be developing sophisticated AI software that automated bookkeeping for their customers. Instead, they secretly employed accountants who would manually complete their customers' books. Not only were they failing to deliver what they promised, but their work was often full of errors. Customers then had to redo the work or hire someone else to correct the mistakes.

In June 2020, ScaleFactor announced that it would be closing, laying off its employees and returning cash to investors.



## HiPPO: Highest Paid Person's Opinion

### What is a HiPPO?

A common conundrum for product managers is figuring out how to influence without authority. Product managers can't hire or fire—they answer and report to stakeholders, and VPs or CEOs ultimately control the budget and business decisions.

When these VPs, CEOs, or other high-performing individuals listen to the product manager's perspective and engage in open dialogue about the direction of the product, this is the best-case scenario. But sometimes, leaders can turn into HiPPOs.

What does this mean? "HiPPOs are leaders who are so self-assured that they need neither others' ideas nor data to affirm the correctness of their instinctual beliefs. Relying on their experience and smarts, they are quick to shoot down contradictory positions and dismissive of underlings' input," writes Chris DeRose in [Forbes](#).

## Why are HiPPOs dangerous?

Since their jobs are on the line, product managers can find it hard to contradict HiPPOs. This leads to those with more budget and power always making the rules.

Working in an environment where HiPPOs rule is disheartening for product managers. And HiPPOs don't just hurt morale, they introduce risk by pushing through products or features that haven't been validated.

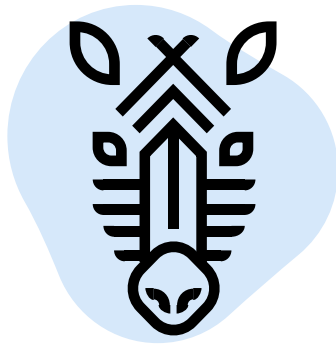
The situation might escalate into what John Cutler calls a "Feature Factory." In a Feature Factory, teams hyperfocus on output—the code and features they're shipping—without understanding or assessing the impact their work is having.

## HiPPOs in the wild

The story of Ron Johnson, former CEO of JC Penney, shows us what can happen in a worst-case HiPPO scenario. While Johnson had previously been highly successful in leadership roles at Apple and Target, he made some serious errors at JC Penney. As Forbes reports, "When making changes, Johnson trusted his gut rather than the data in front of him."

Although he reportedly was shown focus group results clearly indicating consumers' strong preference for discounts, Johnson pressed ahead with mandating a fixed pricing matrix for all merchants to follow. The ensuing confusion and consumer defections were at the heart of the company's 25 percent sales drop.

During Johnson's time at JC Penney, the company burned through \$1 billion in 17 months.



## **ZEbRA: Zero Evidence, but Really Arrogant**

### **What is a ZEbRA?**

It might be easy to look at some of these dangerous animals and say, “That would never be me. I don’t have the authority to be a HiPPO and I’m too clued in to be a RHiNO.” And that may be true. But we can all be guilty of being ZEBRAs from time to time—yes, even the product managers and engineers among us.

Sure, we theoretically understand the importance of having evidence to back up our opinions. But sometimes when we’re dealing in our areas of expertise, it can be tempting to skip over some of the validation process.

There are plenty of cognitive biases that can affect our decision-making:

- ◆ **Confirmation bias** leads us to focus on evidence that confirms our existing beliefs and downplay or ignore disconfirming evidence.
- ◆ **The escalation of commitment** means we don't want to give up on an idea we've already invested time and money into, even if the initial results indicate it won't be successful.
- ◆ **Optimism bias** can lead us to project a rosy picture of the future and fail to account for negative outcomes.

## Why are ZEBRAs dangerous?

When ZEBRAs take control, you risk building products or making decisions that aren't validated (sound familiar?). You might luck out occasionally and still get things right. But you could also lead the product in the wrong direction.

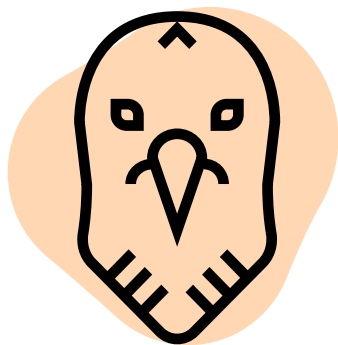
Maybe you build things that your customers don't need. Or you miss out on key market opportunities.

## ZEBRAs in the wild

Consider the case of Blockbuster CEO John Antioco, who had the opportunity to buy a small company called Netflix for \$50 million. His arrogance—based on confirmation and optimism biases—led him to laugh off Netflix executives' data-driven presentation and dismiss them by saying, "The dot-come hysteria is completely overblown."

Within ten years, Antioco would be ousted and Blockbuster would be filing for bankruptcy protection. And Netflix would ride into the sunset as the highly successful household name it is today.

An [Inc. article](#) describing this exchange sums up the problem with this classic ZEBRA behavior: "[This] story is one more tale of a scrappy startup disruptor mortally wounding a long-established industry, but there's also an important business lesson and this is it: Never, ever be arrogant. Even if the person sitting in front of you has said something that seems absurd, even if it makes you want to laugh, pause for a moment and give it your serious consideration."



## **Seagull Manager**

### **What is a Seagull Manager?**

There's no need to decode an acronym here—Seagull Managers are pretty much exactly what they sound like. They're people who tend to be a little bit removed from the day-to-day work on a project, so they occasionally swoop in, make a lot of noise, leave a big mess, then swoop out again, leaving the team to clean up after them.



## Why are Seagull Managers dangerous?

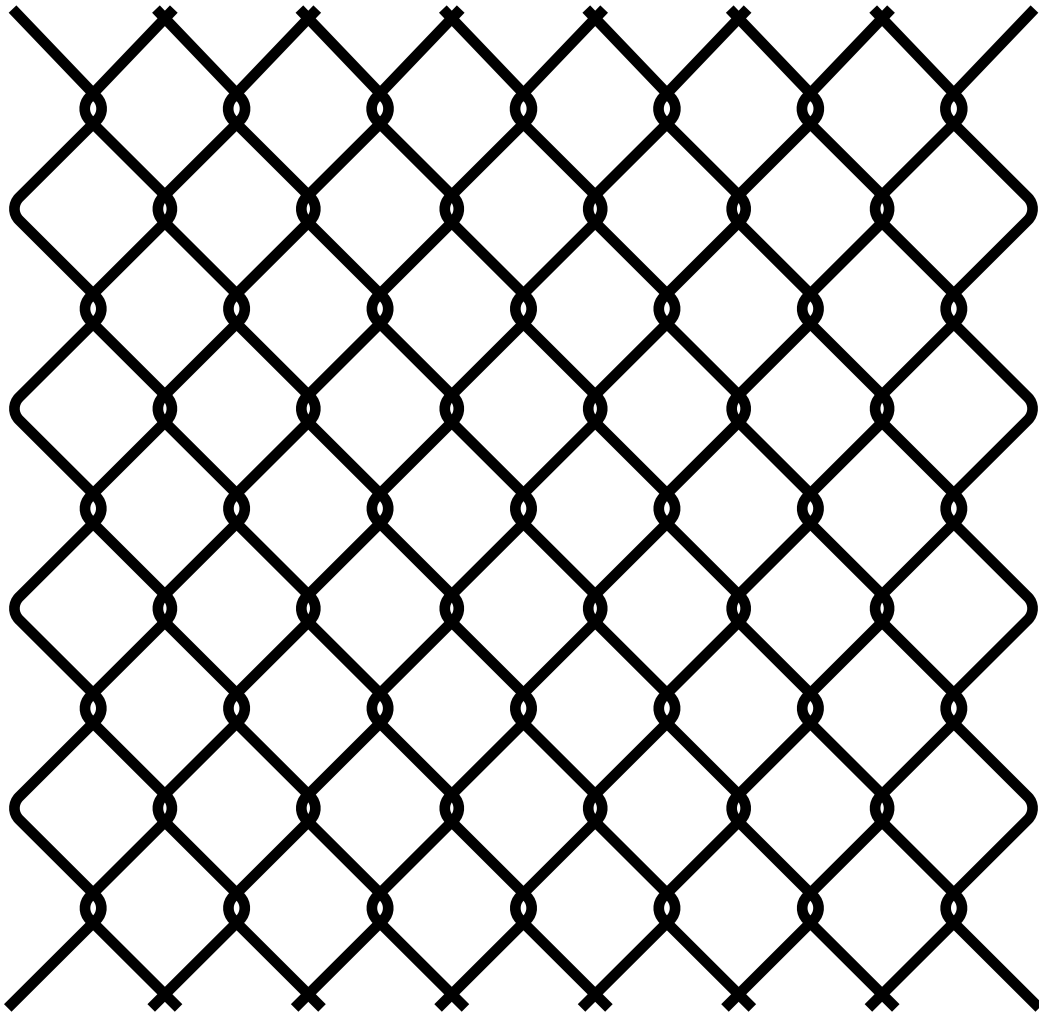
Like many other dangerous animals, Seagull Managers often have good intentions. When they swoop in, they're often trying to accelerate a process or "save the day" with their idea. The problem is that they often lack context and nuance. Plus, they're taking away the team's agency and ability to find solutions on their own. And because Seagull Managers aren't as involved in everyday work, they won't be the ones who have to deal with the long-term consequences or chaos that results.

## Seagull Managers in the wild

You might see a senior VP of engineering, for example, who walks in one day and tells the team, "I thought about this problem over the weekend and wrote some code for you."

Their goal is to help the team, but because they have the bird's-eye view rather than an on-the-ground perspective, they might be bringing in technology that doesn't work within your infrastructure. And if it doesn't work or causes other problems in the future, they won't be the ones who are responsible for cleaning it up.

Dr. Travis Bradberry, author of *The Seagull Manager*, reports there are real dangers to this type of management. Employees whose managers often use Seagull-type behavior are 30% more likely to develop coronary heart disease. Employee disengagement and dissatisfaction is directly tied to company performance since it takes considerable time and money to hire replacements for employees who leave. So much for those good intentions!



## CHAPTER 2

# The dangerous animal handler's toolbox

It's important to note that the dangerous animals of product management are usually well-intentioned. Still, when you give them too much power, it's easy to lose sight of your priorities. Or end up misaligned

To avoid being devoured, product managers must master *influence without authority*—an art that involves a mix of hard skills and soft skills. And while each animal requires a different approach, dealing with them usually involves using one or more of the following skills and tactics.

# Skills for managing the dangerous animals — an overview

## 1. Exercise your empathy

The best starting point for most interactions with a dangerous animal is to understand their perspective. Finding out where they're coming can help you better align their motivations with your product goals.

**Works best for:** HiPPOs, RHiNOs, and Seagull Managers



## 2. Embrace transparency

Alignment is easier when everyone understands not just the WHAT, but also the WHY of your product management process. Go the extra mile to provide visibility into your tradeoffs, decisions, customer insights, data, and more. Context like this can empower your dangerous animals to come to the table with more-informed ideas.

**Works best for:** All animals



## 3. Empower stakeholders with technical know-how

They say a little knowledge can be dangerous, but not having enough can be even worse. Giving your animals enough technical insight—especially about the impact of technical debt—can help them understand why an idea may not work or be the right choice for your product.

**Works best for:** WoLFS, HiPPOs, and RHiNOs



#### 4. Do “tiny acts of discovery”

“Tiny acts of discovery” is a concept coined by Dean Peters, the dangerous animal “zookeeper.” Whether you first release updates to a limited audience, use A/B tests to try out new ideas, or research what competitors are up to, simple acts of discovery can quickly support or challenge the assumptions made by your dangerous animals. You can also do tiny acts of discovery by regularly paying off your technical debt.

**Works best for:** All animals



#### 5. Train stakeholders to think like product managers

Develop and use simple frameworks to evaluate new ideas, then invite your dangerous animals to join in the exercise. These processes can feel more like objective assessments, taking the emotion and ego out of product decisions. It also helps to demonstrate what it looks like to seek underlying customer needs. Ideally, dangerous animals will start trying to understand customer needs themselves

**Works best for:** RHINOs, ZEBRAs, and Seagull Managers

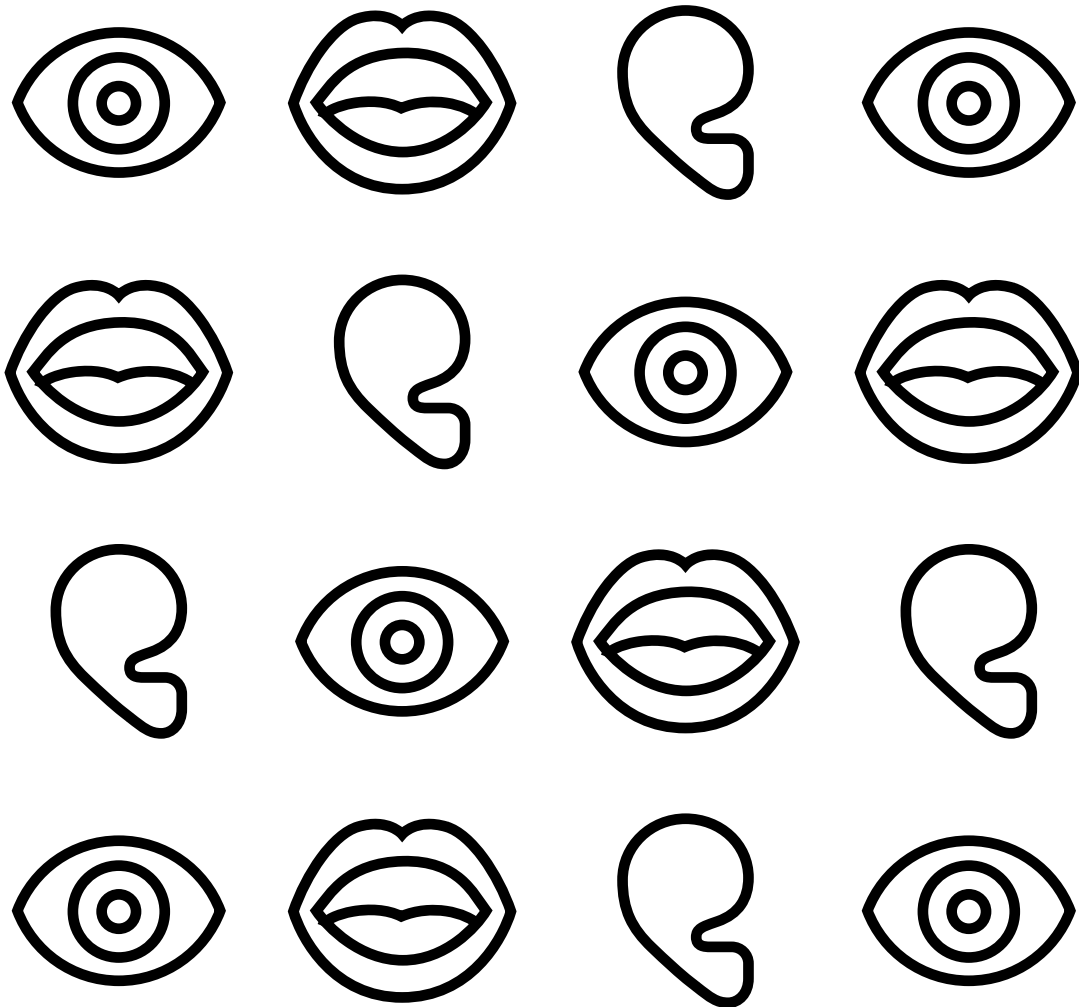


#### 6. Connect proof with purpose

Whatever arguments and evidence you or your dangerous animals put forward in favor of or against an idea, always tie them back to your company’s mission. If it doesn't fit with your business purpose, then it probably doesn't belong in your product.

**Works best for:** HiPPOs, RHINOs, and ZEBRAs

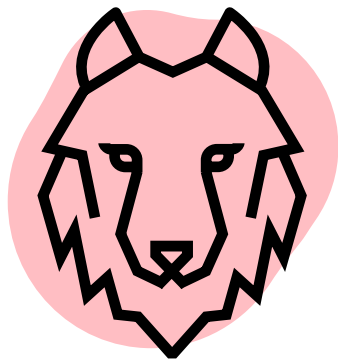




CHAPTER 3

# Soft skills for managing stakeholders

Mastering influence without authority



## **Two ways to keep the WoLF (Works on Latest Fire) from the door**

Remember, a pack of WoLFs howling about technical issues is usually a symptom of more systemic product issues. While the immediate challenge is to put out the latest blaze, your ultimate goal is to reduce both the number of future fires and their destructive power. Here are two ways to keep the WoLF from the door.

### **1. Use “firebreaks” to limit future damage**

Having rigorous code reviews and QA testing is essential to avoiding catastrophes like Knight Capital’s “45 minutes of hell” or more mundane bugs that frustrate users. But even the most thorough testing cannot replicate a live product environment. While you’ll never completely eliminate the possibility of technical problems, you *can* reduce their impact.

Firebreaks are a common fire management technique that involve creating empty spaces around vulnerable forest areas or buildings that can slow or even stop the spread of flames. When you first launch a new feature or release an update, look to contain it in a specific area so you can control the inferno should things go wrong.

Work with your DevOps and IT teams to understand which segments, regions, or other limiting factors you can use to restrict a new live deployment. This way you can be sure that it won't bring down the entire service. You could:

- ◆ Release new code to a limited segment of users
- ◆ Launch in an off-hours time zone where users are less likely to be online
- ◆ Share with a beta test group that will be more tolerant of bugs

The key is to release the update in a way that you can reverse it quickly if you notice an issue. Then you can work with DevOps and IT to analyze whether it was a problem with the new feature or if it was due to a knock-on effect to the rest of the product.

Meanwhile, you've limited the number of customers that get burned by the experience, which should keep the WoLF from your door.

## **2. Pay down your technical debt regularly**

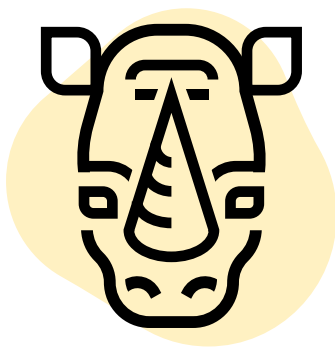
Every product manager is burdened by technical debt: the shortcuts, quick fixes, and duplications in existing code that make new updates harder to implement.

Technical debt is like borrowing money from a loan shark who charges an extremely high rate of interest that compounds dramatically with each passing week. One day, when the loan shark decides that it's payback time, your product ends up crippled by the amount of debt it has accrued.

In the case of Knight Capital, that \$460 million loss was all down to the mistaken deployment of an obsolete feature that was forgotten in the codebase for nine years.

To avoid unexpected combustions of built-up technical debt, build regular fixes into your workflow. Every release of exciting new features should include at least one dull but necessary fix of a long-standing issue.

Few people will understand the point of dedicating resources and budget to paying off technical debt. You'll need to explain how WoLFs are always on the prowl, ready to pounce. Unless you reinforce your weaknesses, the waiting pack can devour your product.



## **How to stop a charging RHiNO (Really High-value New Opportunity)**

A salesperson with a big client deal in their sights can be as unstoppable as a charging RHiNO. To avoid being trampled, work side-by-side with RHiNOs rather than trying to face them head-on. These three tactics can help turn charging RHiNOs into calmer, more collaborative creatures.

### **1. Serve a target market, not individual customers**

When you address one-off requests — like those from a RhiNO — you shift the focus to solutions. What you need to do is identify core problems that are experienced by a broad range of customers. After all, your job as a product manager is to meet the overlapping needs of your target market, not individuals.



## 2. Share your technical know-how

Salespeople often instinctively respond to a potential client's new feature suggestion with an assured "we can make that happen". Usually because they have no idea of what it would actually involve. Empowering RHiNOs with enough technical knowledge can give them a sense of the different complexities involved and help them be more realistic with customers. Not making a bold claim in the first place is much better than having to backtrack on it later.

## 3. Look for validation

Sales and marketing like to keep up with what the competition is doing. Assign your RHiNO the task of researching whether similar products offer the features or services they've requested. If it's industry table stakes or a potential differentiator, the idea might be worth pursuing.

Find quick and easy ways to assess the assumption your RHiNO and their client has made about the value of their requested feature—what "zookeeper" Dean Peters calls "tiny acts of discovery". Think simple A/B tests, interviewing current customers, getting feedback on hand-drawn wireframes, and more.

### **The \$100 million "tiny act of discovery"**

When a Microsoft employee had an idea for changing how Bing's ad headlines were displayed, it was just one of the hundreds of ideas under consideration. However, one engineer decided it could be trialed with very little effort and created a simple, controlled A/B test.

The results were extraordinary. The search engine's new headline format increased revenue by 12%, which was worth up to \$100 million a year in the US alone. This highlights the value of doing regular tiny acts of discovery to find out which ideas are worth chasing.



## **Satisfying a hungry HiPPO (Highest Paid Person's Opinion)**

Unfortunately, objecting to a HiPPO's idea is essentially telling a leader that their instincts are wrong — a no-no in most people's books. Instead, the key to satisfying HiPPOs is to get them to change their own mind.

Here are four ways to give them a taste of their suggestion in action and help them realize they're not that hungry after all.

### **1. Take their side**

You need to be the HiPPO's partner in discovery, not an adversary. Frame the next steps in affirmatory language like "confirming your hypothesis," then lay out a clear plan of quick and easy discovery activities. If the results do not back up the HiPPO's idea, they'll know that you considered their ideas and that your intentions were positive.

## 2. Amass a mixture of evidence

You can't always rely on one data source to change your HiPPO's mind. Remember that Ron Johnson, former CEO of JC Penney, backed his own instincts instead of the focus group results suggesting that his strategy for JC Penney was flawed.

Instaed, arm yourself with a mix of evidence, including customer testimonies and opinions from the broader business.

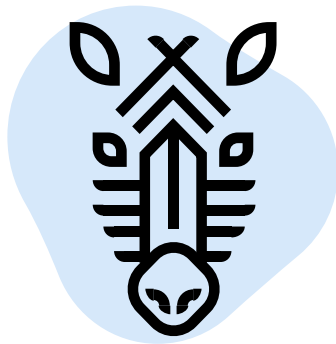
## 3. Start defining success

If your HiPPO is still chomping at the bit despite a lack of validation, try discussing what success looks like. Setting out specific targets of what this idea should achieve can help push the plan from a simple pipedream to an actual project with numbers to hit. Only an extremely bullish HiPPO will proceed with an idea when its success is in doubt.

## 4. Show them the big picture

Michelle Monaco is Principal Product Manager at digital health platform Limelight Health. She believes that sometimes HiPPOs just need a reminder of the broader product vision:

*"It's hard to resist if an executive or other senior leader in the business is championing the cause of a specific feature. We always show stakeholders the big picture of what we're trying to achieve. When people can see the entire roadmap, they understand how their specific area of interest connects to our overall strategy."*



## **Make ZEBRAs (Zero Evidence, but Really Arrogant) earn their stripes**

So far, one of the keys to dealing with the dangerous animals of product management has been the ability to see the world through their eyes. However, empathizing with a ZEBRA can be challenging because they don't bring any backup of their plans to the table.

As empathy is less likely to help, challenging a ZEBRA can require a slightly more confrontational stance. Try these three tactics to make them earn their stripes.

### **1. Produce your own evidence**

When ZEBRAs submit suggestions that aren't validated, your first step is to ask them to provide evidence of their claims. If they have none, bring your own. The burden of proof then shifts to them if they want to stay part of the discussion.

## **2. Gather more voices**

ZEBRAs can easily assume their opinion is better than that of one other person. But as more voices chime in to contradict them, you can chip away at their sense of superiority. If the situation is important enough, elevate the conversation to senior levels. After all, stripes are very important to ZEBRAs.

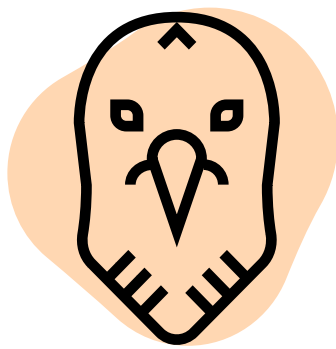
## **3. Shift the suggestion**

If possible, try to move the ZEBRA's idea towards something that's more in line with your strategy. Instead of challenging their ego, you'll need to feed it by making them think the new suggestion is still essentially their request.

It's not the most satisfying way of taking on a ZEBRA, but as long as you're doing right by your product vision, it will be worth it.

### **"Let's not be Blockbuster"**

If you find a ZEBRA is blocking a potentially innovative idea without a good reason, try directly referencing the example of Blockbuster failing to take Netflix seriously. It's a story that resonates with most people and can push ZEBRAs towards re-examining their position.



## Turn Seagull Managers from pest to partner

Unlike the other dangerous animals, your goal is not necessarily to stop a Seagull Manager from helping out. However, you will need to optimize their value.

Here are two ways to ensure that your Seagull Manager is giving direction, not directives.

### 1. Validate their proposals

Seagull Managers typically have strong domain knowledge, which is why they assume that coming to you with a ready-made solution is helpful. What is truly useful to your team is the insight that led them to that specific suggestion.

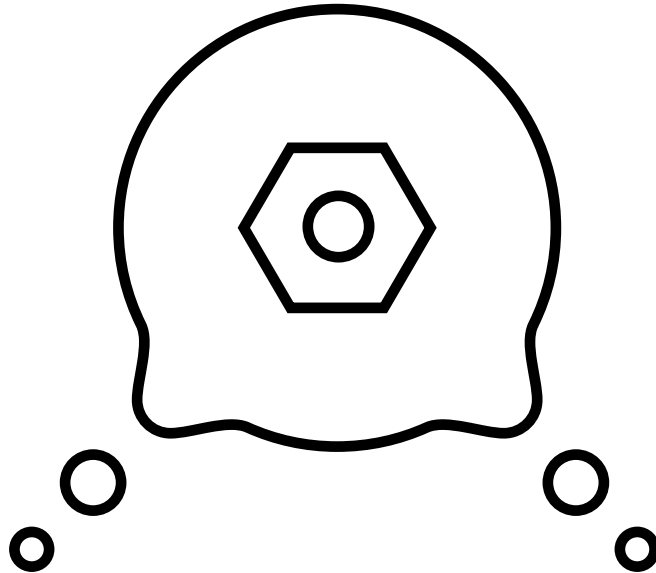
Ask Seagull Managers about the problem they envision solving with their idea. Once you validate that their area of focus is aligned with your product strategy, collaborate *together* on a context-rich solution.

## **2. Slow the swoop rate**

Over the long-term, you can reduce how often your Seagull Manager feels it necessary to swoop in. You just need to provide the right amount of transparency.

Find ways to connect them with the day-to-day of product development so they retain critical context and nuance. Then you can regularly access those gems of experience and insight that will help your team create the right solutions.

It's a win-win for everyone.



## CHAPTER 4

# Processes & frameworks

## Training dangerous animals to think like product people

While empathy, evidence, and experiments go a long way in controlling the occasional dangerous animal rampage, the best long-term strategy is to help them think more like product managers. When executives, salespeople, and other stakeholders have a clear understanding of how your team assesses and prioritizes new ideas, they may begin to evaluate their own thoughts before suggesting them to you.

To train dangerous animals to think like product people, invite them to take part in short sessions where you use some simple processes to evaluate new ideas as a team.

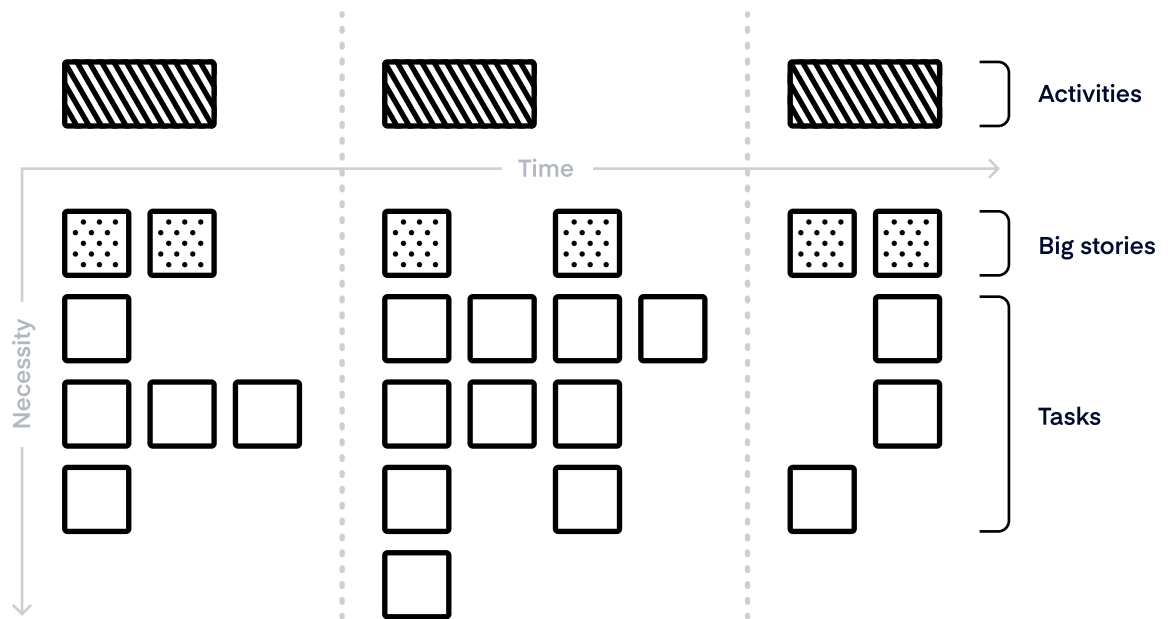
The following four frameworks all give structure to conversations about feature requests and facilitate objective decision-making based on clear prioritization criteria.



# 1. Story mapping

Looking at the world from the perspective of your users and the outcomes they want and need can often clarify what your product should be. The key is for everyone at your business to develop a shared understanding of what those needs and pain points actually are.

Story mapping is the process of externalizing this thinking, usually with a blank wall and a lot of post-it notes, but now often using virtual whiteboarding tools like Miro. Having this shared view of what you're trying to achieve gets everyone on the same page and makes it easier to integrate and refine ideas from a range of stakeholders.



Adapted from [Folding Burritos](#)

## 2. Cynefin

Whether you're trying to solve a problem or integrate new ideas, it's not always easy to know what needs to be done. Sometimes things can be confusing and your next step is unclear. Other times, they can feel too complex to know where to begin.

Cynefin is an exercise that helps bring clarity to these situations by categorizing where you currently stand, from Clear to Confusion and Complex to Chaos. Once you establish your category, the process defines what types of action to take next, which is especially useful in more difficult scenarios.

### **Complex** \_\_\_\_\_

- ◆ Enabling constraints
- ◆ Loosely coupled
- ◆ probe-sense-respond

**Emergent practice**

### **Complicated** \_\_\_\_\_

- ◆ Governing constraints
- ◆ Tightly coupled
- ◆ sense-analyze-respond

**Good Practice**

### **Chaotic** \_\_\_\_\_

- ◆ Lacking constraint
- ◆ De-coupled
- ◆ act-sense-respond

**Novel practice**

### **Obvious** \_\_\_\_\_

- ◆ Tightly constrained
- ◆ No degrees of freedom
- ◆ sense-categorize-respond

**Best practice**

Adapted from [Wikipedia](#)

### 3. IDEA/E

Standardized scoring systems can bring more rigor to decision-making and reduce the possibility of bruised egos when ideas are refined or rejected. The simpler the system, the better. IDEA/E can work by just answering YES or NO to five questions:

- I**M PACT                      How does this issue affect customers?
- D**ISSATISFACTION        Is it a big deal rather than just a minor annoyance?
- E**VIDENCE                    Does the data show that it impacts a lot of our customers?
- A**DVANTAGE                Will a solution benefit us?
- E**FFORT                        Can we achieve this quickly?

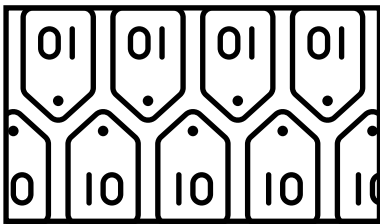
	MARKET			ORGANIZATION		
	Impact of problem	Dissatisfaction with current situation	Evidence	Advantage to us	Effort to deliver	PRIORITY
Use 1-5 or Fibonacci sequence	Where 1 = low importance	Where 1 = totally satisfied	Where 1 = few; 5 = all	Where 1 = low advantage	Where 1 = easy (or small)	I*D*A/E

Adapted from [Steve Johnson, Under10 Consulting](#)

#### 4. Buy a Feature

It's often useful to remind product stakeholders of the very real trade-off between chasing opportunities and managing resources. Buy a Feature is a fun and effective way to tease out the true value of competing ideas.

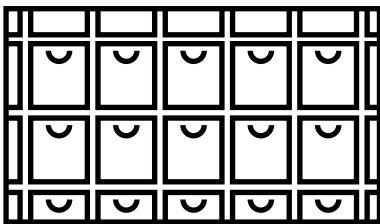
The game involves putting a price on each potential feature, then giving each stakeholder a set budget to purchase their favorites. Pooling their money helps them afford more expensive features but requires negotiation and compromise over how to optimize their limited resources so everyone gets what they need.



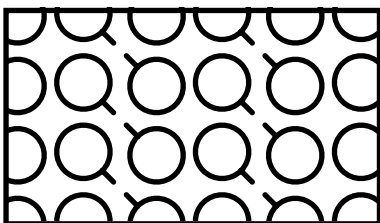
Make a list and price each item. Your list can be about anything.



Give your players some money and invite them to the game.



Players then collaboratively purchase the items they think are most important



After the game, you can review the players' purchases to learn how they prioritized your list and why.

Adapted from [InnovationGames.com](http://InnovationGames.com)

# Conclusion

Unlike facing down a real-life beast, the key to handling the dangerous animals of product management is always a conversation. Only by creating a shared understanding around the opportunities and challenges of each new idea can product managers continue to do what's right for the product and its users — without leaving a trail of disgruntled stakeholders.

The best conversations generate empathy. Even if there is disagreement about the value of an idea, each party should end up with an understanding of why one wants it done or the other does not believe it's a priority.

All of these conversations, disputes, experiments, and frameworks can finally be resolved by your product's ultimate arbitrator. If a suggested new feature or fix does not fit with the overall vision for what your users want and need, it does not belong in the product.

At the end of the day, the dangerous animals of product management should never be more powerful than your customers.



## About Productboard

Productboard is a customer-driven product management system that empowers teams to get the right products to market, faster. It provides a complete solution for product teams to understand user needs, prioritize what to build next, align everyone on the roadmap, and engage with their customers. Productboard is easy to use, enables company-wide collaboration, and integrates into existing workflows. Over 4,000 organizations around the world use Productboard to build excellent products.

Learn more at [productboard.com](https://productboard.com)