

Bring Product Thinking to Non-Product Teams

by

- [Jeff Gothelf](#)

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At its most basic definition, a product is the way an organization delivers and captures value. For teams doing daily product work, it can feel relatively easy to define the words *product* and *customer*. Whether it's a jet engine, an insurance policy, an online banking app, or mobile phone service there is an end customer who purchases and uses that product (although, occasionally, it's a different person). A product team will work hard to get to know that customer and how the organization's products and services can be continuously improved to make them more successful.

This is the core of organizational agility — shipping improvements to our products, observing and measuring customer behavior, determining whether we should continue to improve or move on to something else. The faster we learn, the faster we improve. Product teams — especially digital product teams — understand this fundamentally.

But what if you don't work in product? What if you work in Human Resources and are in charge of learning and development? What if you work in the legal department and your remit is cybersecurity policy for the company? Do you still make a product? Do you have customers? If you believe in bringing agility to the entire organization, the answer to both questions is yes.

The question then becomes, how do you know you've delivered value? Or captured it back? In a lot of cases these teams measure success by delivering on goals or initiatives. Did you launch the new learning management system? Success! Did you deliver the new cybersecurity policy to our vendors? Great job!

But do you know if this was really the best version of that policy or initiative?

To answer that question, I believe we have to apply product thinking to every project, initiative, and policy we create. In doing so we begin to move our non-product and tech disciplines — HR, Finance, Legal, Logistics, et al — away from an output-based mindset and closer to the agile, customer-centric view we're instilling in our product teams.

Here's an example: an HR business partner is charged with defining, evaluating, buying, and implementing a new learning management system (LMS) and training curriculums for the entire organization. They diligently go about this task getting bids, sitting through presentations, and ultimately hiring a vendor to build, integrate, and deploy the LMS.

Congratulations? Not so fast. What if no one uses the new system? What if staff only takes the mandatory courses but never explores the additional offerings the HR business partner spent weeks procuring and evaluating? What if the LMS itself is unusable and the email volume to the HR team triples with staff complaints?

Enter product thinking. If we're going to bring our non-product teams along with us on our journey to business agility we have to reframe their work with the language of products and customers. This begins by rethinking the initiative not as a set of boxes to tick but rather as a problem to solve for a specific set of customers. The measure of success for that problem is not the deployment of a product but instead a measurable positive change in the behavior of those customers. In other words, we're working towards outcomes, not outputs.

Let's reframe the LMS example above in this way. Instead of asking our HR team to research and deploy the system, the HR Business Partner or leader should position it like this: Our current professional development efforts are rarely used due to lack of staff awareness, difficult to find and use systems, and a catalog of offerings that are irrelevant for a modern, digital workforce. This is causing a spike in attrition of our most valuable employees, increasing our recruiting and hiring costs, and hurting organizational morale — not to mention the wasted cost of these systems. How might we deliver better professional development offerings to the entire staff and ensure they're up to date on the latest trends in digital business and feel like the organization is invested in their success? We will know we've succeeded when we see retention rates go up by 10% quarter over quarter, consumption of professional development content increase twofold, and cost of hiring decrease by 15%.

In reframing the work for our HR team in this way, we've done several things:

1. We've reframed the initiative from "launch an LMS" to "make our people more successful." This is inherently a customer-centric focus. In this case the customers are the employees of the company.
2. We've removed any mention of a solution from the assignment. This empowers our team to generate their own ideas, evaluate those ideas and determine the best course of action to make their "customers" more successful. In turn, they are more invested in the ideas they come up with and will look more broadly for innovative solutions.
3. We've set clear success criteria that ensure our teams take an active interest in understanding their customers and work to continuously improve the "product" they're putting into their hands. It's no longer enough to deploy an LMS. The HR team now has to ensure its usage and then assess whether that usage is indeed a key driver of retention, hiring costs and other metrics the organization cares about.

To reduce the risk of choosing a solution (or product) that won't achieve the intended results, the team now has to undertake a more iterative and exploratory approach. They have to generate hypotheses about how to best achieve the desired results articulated in their problem statement. They then have to test their hypotheses, get feedback from their customers or users, and iterate those ideas based on that feedback. Sound familiar? This is exactly what customer-facing product teams do to ensure they're always delivering and capturing as much value as possible.

The odds of deploying an unusable LMS with irrelevant content decrease dramatically when the HR team applies product thinking to their initiative. In fact, the end result may not end up being an LMS at all. For some companies such systems might be replaced by tactical, high-quality, in-person trainings, for example.

This idea is not limited to HR, obviously. If your legal team authors contracts, then those are their "products." Your vendors are the customers of those products. If a contract is irrelevant to a particular type of vendor your teams will spin multiple, costly cycles customizing their templates. To reduce those red-line cycles, the team needs to understand the needs of their customers and deliver the most relevant contracts for each customer type.

These concepts may not be common place yet in non-product disciplines and the organization may wonder where to begin. Inevitably, this kind of transformation, like any major change, requires leadership support and understanding. Training a team of leaders and individual contributors to put these new ways of working into action is a good place to start. Once they

understand how to frame the work, explore solutions, and most importantly, let go of ideas that solve the customer's problem, they can share and scale their learnings with the rest of the department.

Product thinking is popular with many organizations today because it brings the ideas of agility, not just a templated agile process, to the product teams. These ideas, however, are not limited to product and tech teams. Organizational agility is a welcome transformation in every department. By approaching the work you do as a product with specific customers, giving your teams problems to solve and measuring their success with outcomes, rather than outputs, you create a company-wide customer-centric culture and ensure that whether someone is buying a product from you, is employed by you, or contracts with your organization you're always maximizing both their success and yours.

[Jeff Gothelf](#) is an organizational designer and executive coach. He co-founded Neo Innovation in New York City and helped build it into one of the most recognized brands in modern product strategy, development and design. He is the co-author of [Sense and Respond](#) (HBR Press) and [Lean UX](#) (O'Reilly)