

Episode 10: PM Your Career with Tara King Hughes

Elizabeth:

So Tara, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you here. I thought we could start today with you telling me a bit about how you got started in product. What was your path into PM? And what was your first role?

Tara:

That's a very good question. Well, in the beginning, I was a curious developer who wanted to connect the dots between the user experience, the business, and tech. I started to ask a lot of why and what questions and my dev lead, he pulled me to the side and he said, "I don't think it's your purpose to be a developer. You ask way too many questions." But his manager was looking for someone to serve as a liaison between tech, business, and our clients: to ask questions and to connect dots. So my first PM role was voluntold. Remember, at this time, I was just a developer. I was at a small startup building software for Telco companies: other com software for Telco companies. But it was kind of transforming into this PM role where I was conducting interviews, gathering requirements, prioritizing and building roadmaps, and writing PRDs and then monitoring the impact of product launches and then partnering with my fellow developers and other cross-functional team members to identify new opportunities for growth. Just like that, my career and product began simply because I was asking too many questions: too many why questions, too many what questions. It just began like that.

Elizabeth:

First of all, I love that term voluntold. I think we all have experienced that at some point in our career. But I also love that you got into this space because of asking questions. That's a theme that I hear from women in PM all the time. Like, "Well, I was curious, I was asking questions. I didn't understand." I think that's something we hear a lot and that sense of curiosity and wanting to understand things I think is also a big driver for women who move into this space.

Tara:

Yeah. I totally agree with you because you just can't build something and just get a user story and say, "Okay, this is it." I wanted to know how everything was connected. I wanted to understand the value that it was actually going to bring to our clients, to the product. By asking all those questions... landed me into the world of product management and I couldn't be happier.

Elizabeth:

That's great. So what kept you there? I always love to ask that question. Like, what did you love about it once you got there?

Tara:

I love solving problems. One of my favorite sayings is: fall in love with the problem, not the solution, which means fall madly in love with the problem and you will eliminate the pain points of your consumers, your business. But if you focus on the solution, you fail to connect with your business, KPIs,

your consumers, and you most likely will miss major opportunities. It's so important to solve the right problem. Being a lover of problem solvers, you go deep enough to understand kind of what some of the root causes are, what some of the pain points are: to really bubble that up into something that you and your other cross-functional teammates can solve.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. I think that's such a great point about finding what the real core problem is there, because I think that it's easy for people to get sort of that surface layer problem and solve that and then think like, "But nothing changed."

Tara:

Exactly.

Elizabeth:

It's like you do have to really dig and keep asking questions to get to that core problem. So talk about how that love for product management and your involvement with it has changed over the years. You've taken on more responsibility. You manage people and teams and all kinds of things. How does that change as you have a larger span of responsibility?

Tara:

Yeah. I still love solving problems. I still love being an explorer of a digital wild. But as a product leader it's not your responsibility to solve every single problem. As a product leader I want to guide my team towards data, user interviews, and other insights to help them identify the right problems to solve: be that influencer and provide... and be a coach and provide that advice. Also, as a leader, looking more ahead to see what disruptions are coming so I can better position my team to support those positive disruptions so that we can maybe parlay these things into the product so that we can be more competitive. But the day-to-day is not filled with problem solving as it was in the beginning. It's more of being a coach, an influencer, someone to bounce ideas off of. But there are those moments when I get to be that explorer of the digital wild and I still love it just like it was my first day on the job.

Elizabeth:

That's great. You bring up an interesting point here. I think so many people get into the field because they love that discovery, that finding things, that creating, and as you move up in your career you, by definition, move away from the front lines of that and your responsibilities change. How have you made that transition? And how did you sort of bridge that gap? What did you find to love about managing people and teams?

Tara:

I love helping people reach a goal that they didn't think that they could reach. I love to see people start in one place on January 1, the month of January, and be somewhere totally different by the end of the year and being a part of that growth and stretching them. That's what that's kind of my... The thing that gets me going is, "How can I best position the PMs on my team for success? How can I remove the roadblocks out of their way so that they can reach their goals and their potential?" So helping them reach their goals gives me the most satisfaction. Seeing them move the needle on the performance

dashboard helps me say, "Hey, you know what? They did it," and be very proud of them and be on the sideline for them giving them that high five or that kudos that they need to know that they're going in the right direction, and then also supporting them as they want to go up the PM career ladder and giving them a path to do so.

I so much enjoy being a people leader and being an influencer and helping them reach these goals that they set for themselves because product management is not an easy role. You play so many roles as a leader, someone to bounce innovative ideas that they have, someone to help them in their moments when they have doubts or challenges with engineering and they're trying to navigate... Being their support system, seeing them reach their goals, that's what brings me joy at this point in my career.

Elizabeth:

That's great. It's interesting to hear you talk about it because there are a lot of different management styles in terms of what management... what people get out of it. Yours sounds very much like collaborative, supportive. I think that's an environment that a lot of women in particular like to be a part of. It feels like a great place to be: that they can find a place to shine in that kind of an environment.

Tara:

Absolutely. Because it's so important for me that all voices are heard. And if you are like... If you have members on my team who are an introvert, I provide them a way to communicate, whether that's putting their questions on a Google doc and giving those the other space in the meetings to convey their points of view. But I think it's so important as leaders to understand that everybody is different and give them a path and a channel to be successful. You have to create a path for everyone.

Elizabeth:

Last spring at the Women and Product Conference you gave a talk titled Creating the Best MVP Product colon You. I'd like to talk a bit about what you talked about in that talk because I think it's really relevant for a lot of women that are in product management today who may be taking a step back and thinking about where their careers are going and thinking about whether they should ask for that promotion now: whether they should consider moving up through to a different position at a different company. Lots of paths forward. So talk a bit about that talk and how you think that women... Well, I'll let you take it from there rather than putting words in your mouth.

Tara:

Oh, no worries. As a product manager, we love to move mountains to build products consumers love, but we fall short, especially women, in building a career. Most of us are not being plucked from our current role and magically dropped into our dream product role. The purpose of this framework was aiming to help PMs. This is something that I built for myself to build a sustainable career in product. Number one is acknowledging that navigating a career in product management is not easy. It's not easy at all because... Do you know that like 21% of products fail because they don't meet the needs of the customer? That is a lot of pressure on a PM to get it right.

To navigate the career and product management, leverage your superpowers, understanding your strengths, not your weaknesses, and turning those strengths into superpowers. My superpowers are active listening, negotiating, building collaborative product development teams, connecting dots, and solving complex problems. Leaning into your superpowers will help you build your reputation within

the company as well as outside of the company and it will also help set you apart from others who also looking for their dream job. If you can not worry about your weaknesses and really focus in on building up those superpowers, and if active listening, which is my thing... actually hearing people, whether that's internal stakeholders, whether that's somebody on my team, whether that's someone externally... using that to drive and propel my career forward, as well as build products.

You have to lean into your superpowers. And if you don't know what they are, you have to identify them and create a portable PM framework that you can take any and everywhere with you. Every company is going to have processes and procedures. Make sure your framework is something that can plug into that so that you can help eliminate risk very quickly, stop the storming between various different teams or even sometimes your senior leaders, something that will help you to accelerate clarity when you need to better understand the landscape so that you can decisions faster. The ability to make decisions faster as a PM is critical, to create a framework that will support your efforts in doing that.

I would say number four is build relationships and find allies. So many times we have doubt about our work day-to-day and we're failing to connect and build relationships. We have to build relationships both inside and outside of the office. This helps you expand your brand. This also helps you build your network with other PMs in various industries because sometimes you can be in the industry for a number of years and you want to do something different, but where do you go? Who could you talk to? If you don't take the time to build those relationships you can't have those one-to-one conversations. I go, "Tell me about this industry." Maybe I'll be interested in that. So when you're ready to make a change, you have no one to talk to and it is so important to have someone to talk to, especially as you're trying to assess what industry you want go into next, or if you want to think about, "Hmm, is this a good time to move up the PM ladder?" You need to have a network that you can just have a coffee with and bounce ideas off of.

I would say number five is map out your career just like a roadmap. You have your 18 month plan, your three year plan, and your five year plan. Create milestones and measure your performance by conducting a self assessment to ensure you have the right set of skills to compete and to attract new opportunities. And if you see gaps, it's okay to have gaps. Find ways to close them. Work with your manager to get stretch assignments or find webinars or books to read to help give you the knowledge to close those gaps. But you always have to make sure that you're leveling up because this field of product management is very competitive. It's disruptive and you almost have to be ready for anything.

Last, but definitely not least, always be in the driver's seat. Sometimes, especially women, we want to wait on the side of the road for someone to pick us up. Like, "You'll notice me because I'm working hard. You'll notice me." No one's ever going to give you those step by step instructions. You must always remain in control. You must also promote yourself, which this is is difficult. It was even difficult for me. And highlight your contributions because you don't want to necessarily sound like you're always bragging about yourself. But find ways to casually talk about... whether it's past experience or what you're currently doing when you're talking to your colleagues, and just find a way to naturally incorporate it into the conversation not as bragging but just as adding some additional value to whomever you're talking to. They'll be like, "Well, the last time I talked to Tara, she said, 'X, Y, Z.'" Now they'll see you as a resource for that particular topic. What you're doing is you're helping your colleagues to better understand when and how they can connect with you and what topics that you are possibly an expert on. And when you're talking outside of the company, that's like a wow. "She has a broad range of experience. Maybe I'll tap her for this particular opportunity." But if you don't say anything no one knows but you. That's not going to serve and grow your career.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. I worked for a woman several years ago and she had this saying which I loved. It kind of shook me up. It was, "It's not what you know, and it's not who you know, it's who knows what you know."

Tara:

Oh, I love that.

Elizabeth:

I thought, "I never thought of it that way." But it stuck with me all these years because it is important, who knows what you know and that people understand sort of where you add value, what you... Like, you talked about understanding what your own superpowers are. You have to start there and understand yourself and what you bring to the table but then be able to share that with others.

Tara:

Absolutely.

Elizabeth:

And I know people feel like, "Ugh, I hate self-promotion." I mean, yes, there are some people that love promoting themselves and most of us don't like them. But there are ways to share what you know and share what you've done without sounding like a jerk. It's a little bit tricky. And maybe you can... Maybe you have some personal examples of how you did that. You said that was hard for you to learn how to do that.

Tara:

Yes, it absolutely was hard because I never bragged on myself. When I was in school, I just let the grades speak for myself. I got an A. My mom was like, "You're the only kid who would come home, put down a report card, and not scream, 'Hey, look at me! This is what I got.'" I said, "I worked hard. Here are the grades." That that was it. So it was never part of my personality. But as I got into corporate at America I realized that no one is really always watching what you're doing and what your contributions are, so if you don't ever promote yourself you won't get those opportunities that your colleagues are getting, who may even be doing less than you are. But because they know how to position themselves and highlight what they're bringing to the table they're easily plucked for those opportunities.

I had to read books about elevator pitch. I'm like, "How can I sum up something great about myself?" And then the elevator pitch I struggle with too because I'm in the elevator or having a conversation with someone for two minutes and it sounds like I am selling myself, but it is, but it didn't sound authentic to me. It was very hard for me to do that. So I said, "Okay, Tara, how can I promote my contributions in a way that's authentically going to work for me?" You know what? Just talk about it. Just have a conversation.

As I was talking to a particular SVP, he was going on about this particular challenge that he was having and I said, "You know what? That occurred at a company that I was a couple years ago and here's some things that we did to do that." I said I did this and I explained how I course-corrected that particular challenge. He was like, "That's very interesting," and we started having a conversation about it back and forth. So when he said, "Do you think you could solve that problem here?" It turned into a

stretch assignment. I said, "Okay, that worked." Then another time I was sitting there just having a conversation and just talking about how we could better select third party partners and he was like, "That's interesting." Then my boss and I was having a great conversation. He said, "You know what? You should go talk to my boss about it."

So it started to open doors for me just by naturally having a conversation. They didn't feel like I was just coming to them asking them for a job. They were talking about something and then I found something that was relatable to it so that we could have a good exchange and that exchange turned into exposure for me. So that's how I do it. That naturally works for me just by having the conversation, not the two minute elevator speech. I know that works for some people. It just doesn't work for me. But just having a natural conversation with someone, an exchange where we're just maybe talking about the industry, an issue or whatever, and being able to add and contribute to that conversation has highlighted my skillset and what I bring to the table and then, in turn, turn into exposure and advancement for me.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. I mean, one of the things that I think is so crucial here is to encourage women to try different things, and even if it's just like find somebody that is friendly with you and practice. Try something. Because it's never going to be right the first time you do it and you... it takes practice, like anything else, to get comfortable, to find that place where it's like, "Oh yeah, that's me. That's authentically me. I feel comfortable with that approach." But I think so many of us just avoid it because it's uncomfortable. So it's sort of like that's a muscle we have to all learn to use. Maybe go find some friendly people to try using it and you'll find your way to the right thing.

Tara:

Exactly. That comes with building those relationships and finding those allies: those trusted confidants you can practice and role play with, who are familiar with your industry or your particular role. Then they can help strengthen those muscles so that you can have those conversations with individuals that can help you move up the ladder or give you the exposure for new opportunities. That's why it's so very important to have those have those relationships because I lean on them quite frequently just to get insights or to kind of get advice about a particular point of view that I may have, because it's always good to solicit advice from multiple sources just to see whether or not you're on the right track. Granted, at the end of the day, the ultimate decision is mine, but I think it's... getting insights from others is always helpful.

Elizabeth:

Yeah, absolutely. It's like doing your product research, right?

Tara:

Exactly.

Sometimes I think we're so focused on building a product we forget about, "Hey, this is a career and we need to evolve and we need to grow." Sometimes we have to either get out of our own way to look at those opportunities and simply make a plan for ourselves. I was really excited when I saw the opportunity to be a part of this podcast and to speak about career because it's definitely something that I had to stop and make a priority for myself at some point in my career.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. I mean, I think it's so easy, especially for women... I can't speak for men here, but... that your life gets very busy, especially if you have family and other obligations and you think, "I'm just going to keep my head down and not rock the boat and just like do what I'm doing." Then you pop your head back up like four years later and think like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute."

Tara:

Wait a minute. Exactly. I've missed everything. And then everyone around you has gotten promoted. It's like, "Wait a minute. What's happened?" And then you realize that how much you've contributed to things but you didn't necessarily highlight your own contributions. You were not your own self promoter. That's another thing that women do because we keep our heads down, we do our job, then we go home and we do another job. It's just like this constant cycle of work. And then it hits you one day; you're not moving. It's like, "Wait a minute. This isn't right. I should be moving. Why am I still here when this person just came in and did this one thing and is considered a superhero?" That's why you just have to always keep your eye on your career along with all the wonderful other things that we have going on in our life, especially if this is an area and space that you want to be in because it is highly competitive and you do have to self promote. That is something that I'd never done ever and I think women should have self promotion classes, how to get yourself out there, because that's something that I had to teach myself and to read a lot about: about how to self promote, how to do it in a way that I didn't feel like I was bragging on myself but just having conversations about my contributions.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. Do you go back regularly in assessing your career? I think you talked earlier about doing a check in every 18 months. Is that generally the frequency that you do that?

Tara:

I plan... When I do my career plan, I have an 18 month plan, a three year plan, and a five year plan. SVP told me that long time ago, because I was doing a three year plan and she was like, "Why not 18 months? Don't you think you should have some movement at 18 months?" And I was like, oh, okay. Then I started incorporating 18 month plan into my 18 month, three year, and five year plan. But I evaluate my career every quarter. I look at my plan to see if I'm making progress. As long as I'm making progress big or small it's all good. But if there's a quarter where progress has halted or has slowed due to things completely out of my control, like if I have new leadership or if there's a reorg going on, I say it's time to pause and reassess. I want to make sure that where I currently am is still aligned with my plan overall whether it's my 18 month or three year plan. If I feel that alignment is off I discuss the situation with a colleague outside of the company to just gain a neutral point of view about the state of my PM career. From there I can decide whether I maybe need to tweak things a bit because the new leadership or reorg or do I need to completely make a change.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. How do you sort of set your sights in terms of where you think your next level is, or the what you want to accomplish, where you want to go in the long run? I'm asking this because one of the things that I see a lot is I see women underestimate themselves and how far they can go. Sometimes I feel like they set goals that are, I guess for lack of a better word, easy for them to attain and not necessarily maximizing or having that ambition of where they could go. How do you try and balance that out?

Tara:

That's a very good question. I had the fortune of receiving some really good advice from a woman I worked for years ago, [Kathleen 00:32:12], and she told me, "Once you get a role you then set goals for yourself for two roles ahead of you. Those are the goals that you set for yourself." As you're in your current role, you do not... You got the role, so of course you can fulfill the job description there. That's the easy part. Next, you go two roles ahead of yourself. Look at what's required for that. Those are the goals that you set for yourself. She said, "You don't even go one step ahead. You go two steps ahead so that she can be prepared for absolutely everything." I was like, "Whoa, that's..." But I listened to her. And she said, "That way you're prepared, because you never know if you have an opportunity to move up one level or two and so you should always be prepared and stretch yourself. So look at the skills that it's going to take you to get to two roles ahead of where you are. Those are the skills and the qualifications you should be focused on in your current role."

I've always done that so when opportunities came along I wasn't just prepared for the next level, I was prepared for the next two levels. That gave me a stretch assignment personally for personal career goals to hit. It is hard to hit it because it's like, "Whoa, I'm here and that's way up there," but she said, "If we don't stretch ourselves as women we have a tendency to give ourselves imposter syndrome or feel like we're not prepared. But if you kind of be overly prepared then you can walk more comfortably in and confidently in those spaces."

Elizabeth:

Yeah. Women do definitely tend to over prepare, which has some benefits and also some...

Tara:

Downsides.

Elizabeth:

I think it would be great to just, as we wrap up, kind of reiterate what those key points are that you brought up. Maybe you can say them again. I think it was around superpower, etc.

Tara:

Leverage your superpowers because that will help accelerate definitely your career and build your reputation. Create that portable PM framework that allows you to make decisions faster and really understand the landscape of your business and your product teams. Build relationships and find allies both inside and outside of the office to expand your PM brand and build your network. And map out your career, just like a roadmap. As easy as we can create a product roadmap, we can do it for ourselves and for our career. And always, always be in the driver's seat. Don't wait on the side of the road for some step-by-step instructions, You always must remain in control and promote yourself. Find a way to do that that feels natural and authentic to you.

Elizabeth:

I think that those are such good recommendations as we walk into this new year and people really start to think about where they are and where they want to go. Thank you, Tara, for spending time with me. It was great. I think those are such great words of wisdom. I totally appreciate it.

Tara:

Thank you so much, Elizabeth, for having me. This was wonderful.