

Women In Product Podcast Episode 1 — Finding The Path Forward

Elizabeth Ames:

Welcome Deb. It's great to have you be on the podcast. The first one. So thanks for joining in. And I thought to get us started today that we could start by having you tell me a little bit about how you got started in product. Like, what was your first role, and what was your first experience with it?

Deb Liu:

So I stumbled into product management. I was graduating from Stanford Graduate School of Business, and I'd spent a couple of years there, worked in consulting before ANZ and my summer internship. And I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do next. I had some vague idea of wanting to move back to the south with my husband. We couldn't find jobs. The economy was terrible. We weren't sure what to do.

So in the end, I went to a career fair and I saw the table for a tech company, a tiny tech company called PayPal. It was a few hundred people at the time, and I was a huge user. So I had interned at eBay for a period during my first year. And I was debating kind of what to do next, and I was a seller on eBay. And so I went to the table and I said, "Hey, just want to tell you, I love your product." And they said, "Great, you want to interview?" And I said, "Not really. I'm actually moving south." And they said, "Well, you can come see our offices." And I had always wanted to see a startup offices. I said, "Sure, why not?"

And I remember Tim Wenzel, who put together a lot of the PayPal Mafia was the one who was there, and he said, "Okay, well I have jobs in marketing and I have jobs in product. What do you want to do?" And I had no idea what he was talking about. I'd taken a marketing class, but what is this thing called product? Well, it happens that Katherine Wu, which is one of the first product managers at PayPal was sitting there, she was also a year ahead of me at the GSB. And I said, "Well, what do you do?" She said, "Product." I'm like, "That sounds good." That was exactly how I went into product, which was having absolutely no idea what it was. And-

Elizabeth Ames:

Jumping in both feet and not really knowing at all.

Deb Liu:

Absolutely not. And the other thing that was very interesting though, was that during the interviews I asked them, they would ask me a bunch of questions, and I kept trying to figure out what is this product role? I agreed to do it, but so I would ask questions and they just kept asking me, well, what product would you build to do X? What features do you, and as a user, I was just a very avid user of eBay and PayPal. So I had a ton of ideas. And when I showed up the first day, I had to admit to the VP, I had no idea what the job was. And I said, so I interviewed with, it must have been like half a dozen, almost a dozen people, and I had no idea what I was doing. And I finally went to her and I said, "Hey, what do you actually do as a product person?" And she said, "Oh, all those ideas we asked you, you're supposed to build those." And I said, "How?" And that was my in auspicious beginning, but she taught me, and that's how I landed in product.

Elizabeth Ames:

That is great. So when you stepped into that role, I mean, despite not knowing what you were doing, at some point in time, you started to figure it out. I mean, did somebody train you or where you just sort of groping around, figuring it out as you went?

Deb Liu:

On the job training most of all. I think that the part which most people don't understand, back then, product wasn't necessarily the thing that it is today. And I think we forget that, right? Because we are so used to products being a function. Something that people have experience in, but back then, it was just not as well formed and was not, it was kind of a hybrid between kind of marketing and a little bit technical, but really it was kind of a hybrid role, and it was not super clear what it was supposed to be.

So in the end, when you were there, it was on the job training. You kind of did whatever was necessary to get the product out the door. Whether it was launch, some PMs would do launch marketing. Other PMs really wrote out tons of specs. Others just worked directly with the engineers and others actually helped architect products. And it was pretty unclear, because the role had kind of been undefined for so long.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah. And what about it during that job hooked you on it? Because your career kind of from there on is essentially in product, right? So what was it that in during that time you went like, yeah, this is for me?

Deb Liu:

The thing that I loved was building. So I actually as a kid wanted to be an architect. And so I studied civil engineering in college. So my degree is in civil engineering. And I love the idea of building things. But as an architect, really, it takes years to get the permits, the land rights to actually build anything. And so it was actually pretty challenging. And when I'd studied architectural engineering, and I thought about going to architecture school, I was just thinking, this is going to be really slow. I ended up going into consulting, not knowing what it was, you know, it's kind of a default job that I did for a few years, and I really enjoyed that, but I missed the actual building. Not telling people what we should, necessarily what the strategy should be, but actually doing it. And that's when I said, product is the perfect mix of the two things.

First software moves tons faster than physical buildings, which is nice. And you could experiment, you could build new things, and I think it's so easy to think people say, well, it's easy to criticize. It's easy to say, well, why did someone build that feature? But what I loved about it was the hands-on shipping of the product. Seeing people use it, improving it. Looking at the metrics and all of that, and that's why I loved my career in product over the last 18 years.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah. So, you were there for awhile and you definitely sort of moved up the ladder while you were there at PayPal. Talk a little bit about what it took for you to take those next steps up from being a hands-on product manager to then being a group product manager, then being a director level. How did those transitions go, and how did you get yourself in line for them? Right?

Deb Liu:

Well, so when we first joined, there wasn't even a concept of levels. Everyone was either the head of a team, so there was a director of product management. There was one VP, and that was Amy Clement, and everybody else was a product manager. We had no idea what anyone else's experience was. There was no levels. There were some senior product manager, associate product manager. We just did our jobs. And they were kind of like, I think at that point, maybe 14 of us, or something. When we were acquired by eBay, and they had levels and group product managers and these concepts, they just weren't something that we actually thought that much about. And so, it was really hard to think about positioning yourself, because there wasn't a ladder. I guess you could run the team, in which case you could become the director at some point. But outside of that, and I was only a couple of years out of school, outside of a business school at that point.

And so, I think that it wasn't necessarily, I just loved the thrill of building. And suddenly the opportunity came where our team was getting a little bit bigger, and my manager said, "Hey, do you want to manage someone?" And I said, "That sounds interesting too. Something new to learn." And I tried that. At the same time when we were actually leveled against the folks at eBay after the acquisition, he said, "Well, congratulations, you're not going to get a raise, but you're basically a senior product manager." And I'm like, "Well, what's the difference?" He's like, "I don't know that there's a difference." So I said, "Okay, sounds good." I mean, what's the difference?

And so, that worked out fine. And then when it came time to really kind of figure out what's next, actually the most important thing, in any career by the way, is not what you're angling for. It's whether you have a sponsor to open that door, and David Lee was my manager at the time, he's had a storied career in Silicon Valley, and he opened a lot of doors, and Amy as well. And when David left the team, he said, "Hey, I'm leaving the team, leaving the company. We're going to put you in good hands." And I talked to Amy and she said, "Well, I want to interview somebody." This is our biggest business, the eBay business at PayPal. And she interviewed a ton of people. She actually, I think, made an offer to somebody and it fell through for some reason. And then she said, "You know what?" And I kind of, I didn't love that I was going to have a new manager. And finally she said, "Do you want to just be the interim lead for the team?" And I said, "Sure."

She was taking a chance on someone who was, I don't know, 27 at the time. Who didn't have any idea what I was doing, and had only like three years of product experience. And I'd only managed for maybe a year or so. And so, she took a huge risk of our own personal reputation to give me the opportunity to lead the team, and eventually led that team for awhile. And it was such a growing opportunity, because you could see so much of how decisions were made, what those relationships necessary, how to build a team, how to scale a team, how to recruit. And so I learned so much through that experience, and a lot of it was that she was willing to take a chance on somebody who was pretty green and pretty new. And to say, "You know what? I'm going to put my trust in you."

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah. And then, at some point in time you leave PayPal. What prompted you to make that decision? You stepped over to eBay, I believe. And then you were there for a little while, and then you went to Facebook. So how did you make those decisions to move to other companies? What drove that?

Deb Liu:

Well, I think there are a few seminal moments. One was, I went on maternity leave after I'd been leading, our team led the PayPal eBay integration, as well as the business. And I had a child and I realized

that the person who was my successor, did a great job while I was gone for six months. And so I wanted to give him that job. And so, I kind of went on to do kind of corporate strategy, working with Rajiv, who was the CEO of PayPal at the time, and there was a small team that did corporate strategy. Like M&A, product strategy, these types of things. But I really enjoyed it and I kind of explored some areas, and then I wanted to build the social commerce and the charitable donations team, and the two new verticals, which I did at PayPal. And at the time, I had a newborn and I kind of wanted to see what was next, and I wasn't a hundred percent sure I really loved where the company was going. It was scaling really fast. I mean, I loved the people, but it was just growing so fast, and it just didn't feel like I had a place.

And so I struggled with that for a long time and finally, I decided to quit. So I went to Dana Steller, who was, he wasn't even the VP I worked for. He was just a VP I really trusted, and I said, "Hey, just want to let you know, I'm going to quit. And I'm probably going to stay home with my son. I'm kind of out of this tech." And I think that in tech a lot of women face this moment in their career.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah.

Deb Liu:

You feel stuck. You kind of feel lost. You can keep going, but you just don't see a path to anything interesting. And so why not just quit? I was going to work on our side business that I had with my sister, and spend some time at home, and he said, "Wait, just give me a couple of days." And a couple of days later, Stephanie Tilenius called me from eBay. She'd gone over to eBay, and she was, I think, the head of North America, or the president. And she called me and she said, "Hey, I'm looking for a head of buyer experience. You want to come?" And I thought about it. And in the end I prayed about it, and it worked out, and I went and I spent a couple of years there and I had another child. And at that moment actually, after I had my second child is when I went to Facebook.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah. And how did you make the decision to go to Facebook? Did you just happen to know that there were positions there, and so you went and interviewed or did you consciously say like, no, that company, I want to be in that company? How did that-

Deb Liu:

Well I had seen the rise of Facebook, because I was working on social commerce at PayPal. So we had tried to do a deal from PayPal with Facebook. But we had done one with MySpace. We had done a few with other kind of networks. And we were trying to figure out how to get into social commerce from PayPal. And so, I had Facebook on my radar, I'd met a bunch of people there when we were trying to do the deal. And then a couple of years later, my engineering manager reached out. He had joined Facebook, and he said, "Hey, we have open roles. Are you interested?" And I thought, well, you know, and it was a product marketing role. And he said, "Why don't you come set up our consumer monetization strategy?" And so I said, "Well, I'm working part-time." I was literally on maternity leave in Hawaii with my family. And I was about to go back to work, and I got this email, out of the blue. And he said, "Would you like to come to Facebook?"

And I thought, this is crazy. I'm working part-time. I'm living life. I really enjoy my job. I love the company. And I thought, Facebook is growing like crazy. At the time it was 900 employees. And I thought,

it would be insane to say yes, but I thought, well, why not? At least it doesn't hurt to see my old friends who we'd worked together. And I saw him and he convinced me that this was going to be the rocket ship that I needed to get on. And so, I went, which was pretty insane. And actually, as I talked to my mentors and sponsors, I talked to a bunch of people, they were like, "You should go, this is going to be an adventure of a lifetime." And so even the folks who, like I talked to Amy, I talked to a bunch of folks and they were very, very supportive, because they knew that it would be an amazing ride. And it has been.

Elizabeth Ames:

And talk a little bit about mentors and sponsors, right? Because there's a difference between the two, and different people have different approaches with both. I mean, sponsors are usually more specific to the organization that you're in. They're the people behind the doors, the doors that are close to you who are saying, "What about Deb for this thing?" But how did you sort of assemble those? How did you use them? How did they fit into your advancement, if you will?

Deb Liu:

Well, so I think the mentors are people who can give you advice. I think every person needs a kind of personal board of directors, people who can give you advice. And those people are just people you've met throughout your life. So as you make life decisions, who do you call to get advice from? Who are the people you trust to give you guidance? That is really kind of outside of the role. I think often, if all your mentors work at the same company, they might not give you the same advice that someone outside would give you. And so it's important to kind of have your personal board of directors. That take a step back and says, "Here's what's best for you." Not necessarily company, not necessarily the industry. Not exactly your product, but here's what your path is taking you.

Sponsors tend to be someone within the organization, because usually it's somebody who opens doors in industry. So it has to be someone more senior, usually a couple of levels above you. And it could be someone in the industry as well, but what's important is those are the people who spot talent and say, "I want that. I want more of that. I want that person to come to my team. I want that person to work on this committee. I want this person to take on the stretch assignment. And that's a huge opportunity. And it is those moments that really change the trajectory of your career."

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah. It's really interesting. I've lived and worked in Silicon Valley, and the Bay Area for all my career, and you build these connections with companies that you work with, right? So like you worked at PayPal and I'm sure there are still people from then that you talk to regularly that would keep their eye open for you, that can advise you. And now you've been at Facebook, and you have those connections to. Then when you step out of there, those other people who have stepped out, those connections become so incredibly valuable. But I also know that it's difficult for people who are not in Silicon Valley to necessarily get those connections, right? It will be interesting to see how that evolves. I think it's very much the case here, but if you work in New York, it might be different. I don't know. Do you have an experience with that, or a sense of that?

Deb Liu:

I think that's one of the reasons we built Women in Product is that it is a network. I mean, part of it is, it feels really alone. Actually, the reason we started Women in Product, the early version was that there were only four product managers who were women at Facebook. And I had worked with dozens of

amazing women over the years at PayPal and eBay. And I thought, why are there so few here? And so we decided to host a series of dinners where we would just bring together all the great women product leaders that we had met over the years. And everybody in the team got to invite some people and we would have dinner every quarter. And for four years we had these dinners where we just met people and got to know them. And it was just a way for people to kind of build those connections. And over the years I've met some amazing people. We would have these great conversations.

And eventually out of one of these dinners is actually how we started the conference and the nonprofit, and everything you see today. And a lot of it is that network. We created our own network in a lot of ways, in a way that I couldn't imagine. And so, part of it is if you don't have a built-in network, that's why we created Women in Products, but also the city chapters. So that, I can't help someone, for example, in London because I just have so few connections in London, or in Austin, but the women there can help one another.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yes.

Deb Liu:

And so it is really kind of building that community, that network, and having something to plug into. It's amazing. I go to the Women in Product group every day and I kind of just read what the top posts are, and it's so interesting when people say, "Hey, I have this problem." You see like a dozen people offer to help. And that kind of community that I wished for myself back in the day, and so I hope that we continue to pay that forward. And it's really wonderful that there is a place where women can connect with one another.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah, I think of that community as being so incredibly valuable for women who are in organizations. Maybe that person who's like you when you stepped into PayPal, but maybe the environment is a little less friendly. And so they don't want to say like, I don't know what to do here, but they have some safe place that they can go and say, here's the situation I'm in. I don't know what to do here. Can you help me? It's great to have that.

So do you mentor other women these days? I suspect that you, in your role at Facebook sponsored different women in different ways.

Deb Liu:

Well I mentored and sponsored a lot of people. And the thing that I'll miss the most is actually, they roasted me on my way out, and all of them told me all the hard feedback I've ever given them over the years, which is both kind of interesting and surprising how what I said impacted people's lives. But it's interesting because I think of the mentors and the people who've been in part of my career, and how some of their comments have really changed the course of my life too. And I hope I can continue to pay that forward. And the only thing I said to them was, I hope all of you pay this forward, for every person that hopefully I touched, the three to five people will be, you know, you're going to increase the size of the concentric circle of who you can touch, because I won't be here to do that anymore.

But I do think the other thing that I've done is, I really struggle with this, I didn't write for a long time. So I never wrote anything, and I remember talking to Boz, he runs Facebook Reality Labs, Oculus,

and those products. And he said, "You should just write down what you repeat. Like, you must mentor a bunch of people. You must repeat the thank-you's and the advice all the time, just write it down and then share it with people." That's not me. I'm not a writer. And he said, "No, I think you should do that because then you can point people to it and you can amplify, you can only have so many conversations in a day, but if you can actually point to people to what you've written, then they can see your advice. And then you can take the time that you do have with them and talk about it, as opposed to kind of giving them this advice."

And I think that that's really true, and it's really been amazing. I mean, what's really interesting is when I was thinking about joining Facebook in 2009, Cheryl gave me the lean in talk before she gave the lean in book in the talk, right? And say, this is 2009. I told her, I have a newborn and a toddler. I don't know. And she's like, "You have to lean in." She literally told me everything that's in the book that you read, but years before she published the book, and it really affected my decision. And so the same thing is, how do I pay that forward? And so, one of the things I do do is I do a lot of writing. I do post a lot in our groups and kind of comment on the groups, because I do think that if we can amplify that community, and that voice, that if 20 women can get that mentoring, not just the one I have 15 minutes or 30 minutes to meet with, hopefully that will touch a lot of people.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah. And I noticed now that you have a sub stack, so maybe we can post the link and people can subscribe to that if they want to get Deb's wisdom on things. So, yeah. You are, and have been for several years, in a position where you're hiring PMs, you are bringing PMs into Facebook. What do you look for? What do you think are kind of those essential things, right, that you look for that you would go like, yeah, that person, they're going to make it. Or they're a future leader, if you will.

Deb Liu:

Right. So I led PM recruiting for about seven years at Facebook. And during that time we refined our interview process a lot. So we would test it, refine it. We would try different questions, try different things. And we found out that what really, really mattered were three areas. So one is leadership and drive. And leadership and drive is really the interview where we really suss out is this person introspective? Does this person take feedback well? Does this person take accountability when something goes wrong? So the kinds of questions are like, what is the most difficult situation that your team has been in, And what did you do about it? Name a time when you had to fight for something, and no one else believed in it. And name a time when you failed, and not the kind of like, I have this terrible weakness, I worked too hard kind of failure, but like, are people really deeply understanding where their gaps are, and what are the things are they doing to address it?

And so we worked on that, because part of it is the best PMs are the learning PMs. So they call it kind of a fixed mindset versus a learning mindset. So we're looking for the learning mindset, someone who's adaptable. Someone who takes feedback. Someone who's going to be flexible. Someone who takes accountability and someone who's getting exhibit the way that servant leadership works. And so we really look for that in that interview.

The second one is product sense. As one PM director had said to me, he's like, it's like fashion sense. It's something you can kind of learn, but some people are really born with it. So it is, product sense is really, do you have an intuition? You look at a product, a great product manager can look at a product and figure out what people were thinking, and what decisions they made. And what we ask people like, break down a problem and help us understand, what would you measure? What would you

prioritize? And it's really the sense of are you understanding the user job to be done? And can you design your product around that job that people are going to want?

And then the final interview is around execution, which is can you actually tactically do the day-to-day work of a PM, because you can come up with amazing strategies, but if you can't execute, it doesn't matter. Because strategies are cheap. Execution is where you win. And so a lot of it is, obviously you have to be smart enough to be able to figure out what direction to go in, but if you have no idea how you're going to get there, you can say, "Hey, we all need to get to New York." Well, that's awesome. How are you going to get there?

Elizabeth Ames:

Right.

Deb Liu:

Some PMs are like, well, we'll just figure it out. Like, we'll start with flying to Phoenix, and then we'll fly to Chicago, then we'll fly to Dallas, and we'll fly to New York. And you can get there that way, but you're talking the long way around. Or you can plan a little bit better and figure out if there's a direct flight, even if it starts a little later. And so, it really is about kind of do you have the ability to say, Hey, our metrics are down. How do we understand why the metrics are down? Or how do we trade off between two choices, and how do we understand the tactical changes that we need to make for growth? And each of those things are really important. The other thing is how it could fraud or integrity issues take down this product? Really adversarial product management. But if you're always looking at the green path on execution, you're going to miss a lot of things as well. And so I think each of these things, each of these elements are really important to kind of building a well-rounded PM.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah. Those are great points. And I suspected that somebody could also think about those as they put together their resume. Like, how do I demonstrate these three attributes which are really important? So that's a really great input.

So you're leaving your job at Facebook. I know that it's public and it's been announced, and you're stepping into a new role as the CEO of Ancestry. So I just thought we could finish up by you talking a little bit about, this new phase in your career. What prompted you to take on this new opportunity, and kind of how you're feeling about it as you step into this new role, or maybe what you wish for it? Right?

Deb Liu:

Well, I think, I have been a product leader and technology leader for a long, long time. And so this was going to be a whole new world for me. And it's extremely exciting to not only kind of work on the product strategy and execution, but also really understanding all the different functions it takes to make a company work. And so, I'm tremendously excited, I'm also tremendously excited with Ancestry, an amazing company with the great history of doing something that's really important to the world. It's really interesting too, in the beginning, I wasn't a hundred percent sure that I would ready for an opportunity like this, but as I kind of learned more about the company, I really fell in love with the mission and finding connections between people, finding your roots, really understanding where we come from as human beings. And I think that that's such an amazing mission. And so that's what really drew me to what ancestry is. But I also believe that the product has so much more to give. The product is

so great. And yet there's so much more, I hope that we could do with it as well. And so, it has both kind of honoring what the product is today and then charting the next chapter of what the product could be.

Elizabeth Ames:

Yeah. And really being in that position of seeing the company holistically and all of the things that go into moving it forward. Great products and great execution, and all of those different pieces. So I'm so excited for you. I think you're so ready for it. And I think you will do such a fantastic job. So, congratulations to you and thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I know that so many people will be happy to hear all of the things that you have to say. They see you as such an amazing leader, not just in the field of product, but as a woman in tech.

Deb Liu:

Thank you so much. And it is my honor. I wish for every product leader that we can all continue to build more equitable and accessible products for everybody and I hope we have more women in this field in the long term.

Elizabeth Ames:

I think we will. Thank you so much.