

## Women In Product Podcast Episode 5 — Purposeful Product Management

Elizabeth:

Prashanthi, welcome to the Women in Product podcast. It's fabulous to have you here. And I really wanted to start today and have you tell me a little bit about how you got started in product, what was your path into product management and your first role?

Prashanthi:

Yeah. Thank you, Elizabeth. And thank you so much for having me here. My path's been very interesting. I actually never thought I am a product manager or wanted to be a product manager. Growing up I wanted to be a police officer, but in India because I thought that's a great way to bring impact to the communities I lived in. But then ended up in the technology track and for the first decade of my worker career, I was focused on building a career in data.

And I kept thinking data is my path towards impact again. However, at PayPal I got into this inaugural leadership program that was a rotational program and it gave us opportunities to try four different roles, six months each. And I had my first opportunity to work as a PM for six months during that program. Even then, while I had a lot of fun learning I ended the rotation not thinking that I would be a PM.

I was working towards going back to a role in data, but as I was coming towards the end of the program I spent a lot of time reflecting and thinking about how I wanted to reinvent my career that aligns more closely to myself and my true authentic self. And as I did that journey, I realized I was kind of living these two parallel lives, professional and personal.

My personal life was filled with ways to bring impact to those around me by helping, giving, volunteering and things like that, but in my professional career it was all about building data products, but still helping people around me. And as I ended the additional program, I started thinking about myself in the context of a Venn diagram. And the Venn diagram really had three aspects to it.

The first was really around what are my strengths? The second one's really around, what are my personal interests? And the third one's around, what's a gap in the industry or a problem that I care about that is worth focusing on for those around me? And something that you know you would get paid for as a career. And as I ended up in that, the problem spaces I went into required me to work as a PM, and that's why really, I ended up as a PM because I was pitching this problem of power.

We should be enabling more impact and improvement for a couple of segments and it took me the path to a leader who said, "I think you should come to the product management." And I kept saying, "No, no, no. I think I'm a technologist, I'm a data person now, I don't think I can do product." And then in that she challenged me and I took the PM role almost a decade ago now and I haven't looked back. And that's really my path to product management which is a little untraditional, but that said it's a new field. Everybody has very interesting paths to get there.



Elizabeth:

Yeah. It's always really interesting to hear how people have ended up in the field and as you know most people come to it in some indirect manner, right? Very few people come to it directly out of school. And so it's always really interesting to hear from people how they have stepped into it. I think your path is particularly interesting because it's with a purpose, right? It's a means to what you wanted to accomplish, right?

So that is very interesting and I don't think I've heard anyone else say that in terms of their path there. So I know that you worked on a number of products within PayPal that were sort of cause related products like nonprofit and donation related features and driving financial health and those things, were those kind of the first things that you worked on in your PM role, or were you still working as a technologist at the point of those?

Prashanthi:

Yeah. Those were actually all PM roles. So my first PM role was focused in the nonprofit space. It was billing products for nonprofits. But as you look at nonprofits, it was also connecting them to the millions of consumers that PayPal had. So that we're enabling consumers to donate to the causes they care about, but also building products so that nonprofits are able to better engage and respond to the realities in the world while serving the consumers as well. Yeah.

So that was my first PM role. Financial health products is all about product management, but calling it different titles, you know I called myself a product architect for a couple of years and then product manager and then a product leader, all leveraging product management aspects in improving financial health for our customers.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. And then I know that you are also the founder, maybe co-founder, I'm not sure, of Opportunity Hack. And so maybe you could kind of explain what that is and tell us a little bit about it and how that fit into that development and your focus on doing things for good, using technology for good.

Prashanthi:

Yeah, absolutely. So, yeah. I was the founder of Opportunity Hack, had a few co-founders, colleagues at PayPal who worked with me on it and then actually took it to much further heights now. But when I originally had the idea, they were really ideas that are not new ideas or novel ideas, but hackathons have been around all the time. And one of the things I noticed was: in hackathons developers or participants were having a lot of fun because they were building something that they really enjoyed.

But then at the maybe upwards of 90 plus percent of those ideas that were built were catching dust, right. Nothing was happening to them and it didn't leave anybody feeling great about it afterwards. So I



was like, "Okay, that's one aspect anyway." And then the other insight I also had was nonprofits that I was interacting with, working with didn't always have access to skills or talent that they would love to have especially in The Valley.

So then I started connecting those dots and said, "What if we brought in nonprofits, what specific problems they would help on and match them with participants or hackers or developers who would love to work on something, match them together and then by the end of the weekend or the hackathon, the developers that actually developing a fully usable piece of code that nonprofits are able to implement. That was really the intent behind it. And the seed idea for that was, there's only so much good any one person can do, and there's only so much good one piece of technology can do, what if we amplified that?"

What if we brought these nonprofits and hackers together, developers together, you amplify the impact of people learning about the cost space, people contributing to it. And now you're each hackathon at a time you're having hundreds of developers learning about nonprofits. Maybe a few of them will stick around and actually continue to help the nonprofits, maybe a few of them will change careers. You don't know, but that was really the seedling of the idea that we started with.

And now we started it in 2013, they asked us to continue in fact, one of the leaders of one of the locations we hosted one in Benoni last year with the support of PayPal, spun it off as a nonprofit and now Opportunity Hack, actually operates as a nonprofit and runs global hacks for a lot more broader impact. That's the power of great ideas and perceptions that take wing because of the passion of other people.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. I love that story because it's just such a great story of one individual or some people starting something and other people picking it up and taking it further, and how that sort of collaborative and community effort can really have a big impact. And sometimes you start things and you just think it's just this little thing, but through other people, it can become something bigger. It can have a bigger impact.

And maybe sometimes you start with that vision of having that huge impact and it's just too much, right. You kind of can't get there. Sometimes it's better you just start with some more manageable vision of things and then it can grow over time. Anyway, I think Opportunity Hack is a wonderful story. And I love this idea of collaboration and sort of community around doing good.

Prashanthi:

Yeah.



Elizabeth:

Yeah. So you've been involved in applying technology to do good, but it seems like you have over the past couple of years made this big transition to thinking about it in a bigger way, I guess, right. You and I had conversations early this year talking about justice by design and how do we really build products that have that kind of justice at its core? And I thought you might want to talk about even that expression, justice by design and how you came to think about that, and how we could apply that concept across the tech industry and have a pretty big impact.

Prashanthi:

Yeah, absolutely. Maybe I actually take a step back and share a couple of insights that probably were the building blocks to get to justice by design. I've always been aware of things around my communities. By that I mean are there a lot of disadvantages that happen with people. There are environments that are not conducive to developing everybody equally or providing equal opportunities to everybody. Growing up in India, looking at people around me this was actually in my face everyday.

You think about how people dress and if they look poor they're treated differently. People were treated differently because they're lighter skinned even in India. People were treated differently if they thought you were belonging to one particular caste or the other. And there were all sorts of these things that really made me care a lot about dignity. For me dignity has been very important, which means I feel very sad when there is mistreatment of a person because of their life situation or who they are versus just because.

And that's been really the thread that needle to everything I've done in my life. So over the years, I've really begun to focus a lot on poverty because I kept thinking, I read a few books like Abundance and others which made me realize well, let's look at the core problem of several of these issues. And if you could really level the playing field by removing poverty and uplift people that could be uplifting and remove a lot of the environmental issues that people might face.

So because of that I focused the last six to eight years on improving financial health for people and elevating people from their poverty. But then I thought I was doing a lot of inclusive work with my aperture widened a little bit, but then last year after the killing of George Floyd, the whole world got shaken, not because George Floyd was the first killing, he was one among many people who were killed before him and people continue to be killed after, but that I think became just the pivotal moment when everybody just had enough.

Everybody was reacting in different ways, but I think what also stuck was the video that got published too. People just couldn't take how badly his dignity was impacted. It was inhuman and all of that. That



also started widening my aperture even more saying, "Well, yes, I'm aware of all of these other issues, but this shows inequities, racism is very prevalent and not just in the U.S., this is a little bit throughout the whole world." And everybody was stepping up to do different things, right. People were volunteering for testing, donating, checking in on a friend. These were all people who were trying to step up and do something.

And of course some people were also paralyzed because this is such a hard issue to talk about and even acknowledge. But then at that moment as a product manager, I just had a question that I've posted on LinkedIn saying, how can we think about it from a product angle? What can we solve through our products to address the same issue on top of everything else people were already doing? PayPal as a company had also done a tremendous amount of work. They had just announced a fund, a \$30 million fund to support the Black Lives Matter movement and all of that.

On top of it, this was my question, a couple of people responded and then it translated into a conversation for me with our chief design officer, Daniela Jorge, and that's where I said, "Yes, there's a lot to be done here." So we got together as a group of people within PayPal and started learning together saying "Okay, what is this even? Can we do anything to product?" And then what we realized was there were a few concepts in the industry by then, it's nothing new like inclusive design, things like that were already existing in the industry we could learn from. Universal design, these were concepts.

And that's where we started digging even more and it found this image on the internet that we use stood out for us and based on that we called it justice by design, because our thinking in this image, it's an apple tree image that shows about four quarters of inequality, equality, equality and justice. And what struck for us was justice because in that view, the image showed not just providing equal opportunities to both the kids on both sides that we're trying to pick apples, but in the form of ladders, both of them were given ladders.

But then on top of it, there was systemic solutions in place, because the tree is actually tilting towards one end, which means one kid gets more apples than the other. So for a systemic solution or a system solution, there are pieces of wood propping the tree up away from the side that had too many apples and then there were ropes on the lighter side pulling the tree towards that end that where both kids on both sides have equal opportunity to equal number of apples in addition to getting equal tools.

So that is what struck for us as justice because it is no longer enough for us to say, "We'll be inclusive." It'll no longer be enough for us to say, "Let's give exactly the equal or same opportunities or tools to people." It no longer was enough to say, "Oh, well, there is inequality. Let's make sure we are giving more opportunities to those who are disadvantaged or more tools to those disadvantaged." What is really important is to level that playing field, but also changing the system around us. And that's really what stood out for us and with that we started calling it justice by design.



Elizabeth:

It's really interesting because it does require this complete transformation about how you think about these problems, right. I remember years ago I was talking with one of the women who leads the Clayman Center at Stanford, and she was talking about how once you see the bias you can't unsee it.

Prashanthi:

You're right.

Elizabeth:

And it requires this completely different lens because we walk around part of the culture and society that we live in and we take things for granted and all of the sudden you have to take this step back where you stop taking all of those things for granted, you start peeling them back and it makes you see things differently. And I think often times when we talk about diversity and equity and inclusion in these things, there's still this, I don't know exactly how to say this, but this, it's we're doing something to benefit these people. And somehow you have to switch it around and say, "Well, why aren't they part of the mix to start with, in a way?"

Prashanthi:

That's right.

Elizabeth:

And that's just a big mindset switch. Right. I often tell this story about how when I was at AnitaB.org very early on, and we'd get these reporters all the time that would say, I know this will sound so ridiculous now, but they would say, "Why do we need more women in tech? Tech seems to be doing fine?" And I just hated that question and I didn't feel like I could ever answer it very well.

And one day I had a conversation with a reporter and I just got asked that question for the 10th million time and I just blurted it out. Look, you're asking the wrong question here. That's not the question, the question is, why would this industry take half of the world's talent and set it on the sidelines? That just seems like a stupid decision. Right. And it was reframing that whole thing. I mean, what you're talking about is reframing this from every level, right. The systematic level.

Prashanthi:

That's right.

Elizabeth:

How we think about these issues. It's not just one issue, it's a whole bunch of them.

Prashanthi:

Yeah. Exactly. I love the reframe of your question to the reporter too by the way.



Elizabeth:

Yeah, right? It did stop him in his tracks and he was like, "Oh, well, I never really thought of it that way. Yeah. Okay. There you go." So, at the conference this spring, you moderated a panel on this and we had a number of people on the panel. Different people came from different perspectives. And I won't remember everybody's name now, but there was a perspective in terms of looking at healthcare and as people develop products in the healthcare space to bring the point of view of and peel back how healthcare has not worked very well for a lot of different people.

So trying to reframe that so that we weren't building a set of products based on technology that brought those same problems to the table, right? There were people who were thinking about it in terms of people with hearing difficulties or visual difficulties or other types of challenges and how they interact with technology. Do you want to talk a little bit about that panel, that group of people, some of the issues that came up there and maybe talk a little bit about what you see being the key issues for product leaders to think about and start to develop this idea of justice by design.

Prashanthi:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So that was a wonderful panel by the way and thank you again for having that panel and this topic be part of Women In Product. It's a great way again, to amplify impact, right? Now we have thousands of product managers learning about this thinking. And like you said, once you see it you can't unsee it. You will at least have a percent of those PMs now thinking about their products from this angle. Some of the themes that really came up in that panel were, of course, all around.

We had panelists ranging from the health industry to looking at accessibility, to looking at living, right? So we had hosted panelists from Google, Salesforce and Airbnb, and they all had different angles to it. We spoke about: how do you think about accessible design so that products that we are building are relevant for people with all kinds of abilities. We had a panelist talking about healthcare. And of course we had the panelists from Airbnb talking about how she was leveraging data and how data is critical.

So in all of these things, the key themes for product leaders to remember is we can think about a point in time or a single solution, we can only think again, linking back to what I was saying earlier, bringing systems thinking to product management is very important because your product is a microcosm of a larger set of products that is a microcosm of a larger industry and then it interacts with other players in the ecosystem like public policy, dominant regulations and other things in the industry.

So what is very critical for PM's to think about is, of course you control what you can. So build a product that you can build, but then don't forget that we are interacting with other ecosystem players like government legal rules, nonprofits and others. So always think about how you interact with them to move forward. For example, if we say, "We want to do better in our product management and by being more inclusive."



But to do that, if you ask yourself how we will do that, one of the simplest things is talk to diverse customers in your research. That can seem like a very simple thing, but when you start doing it, what you realize is maybe it's not easy to talk about diverse customers, because legally you might not be allowed to ask for such data about people's diverse dimension.

Then while you can do what you can do within your control, can they change the system that will allow you to collect the data in a safe way so that you can use that for the right research purposes without causing more harm, because these rules exist in a place. So let's not just stop whenever the first rule stops us, but let's work on changing those rules slightly, that way in the safe space we can still achieve our goals of building through the design. Is that helpful?

Elizabeth:

Yes. It brings to my mind something that I think that we often do. Business people of all kinds do, which is to say, "Well, who is our target audience?" And so sometimes just in that moment, we start to narrow the aperture through which we look and it may be based on how much money people make or where they live and what markets or, and some of that is I'm sure necessary, but I wonder if there are ways for us to kind of tease out, are we unnecessarily making that narrow, right.

Are there opportunities to even in those cases, hold that aperture a little wider to make sure and really sort of interrogate the dimensions that we're defining the market by, that may arbitrarily constrain, who really uses the product or who could use it in some way.

Prashanthi:

So great question. The way to think about who we are learning from is absolutely critical and that's really where we begin as part of managers. But typically what happens is we almost follow a template on who we meet.

We will say, whenever we start thinking about customer research or any kind of customer feedback learning mechanisms we might naturally think about, "Oh, let's meet and cover the dimensions of gender, income, geography coverage maybe race, ethnicity, and things like that." This is almost like a template, but what I would encourage is we first have to actually step back a little bit and really understand before we even start, can we widen that aperture broader by saying these are the relevant dimensions for us and these might not be relevant and that's okay.

As a simple example, is it enough when you say you're meeting 10 people and you're saying, "I'm going to meet 50/50, because I want to be equal, I'm going to meet 50% men, 50% women." Great start, but then what about people who don't identify themselves as male or female? You're leaving an entire segment of people and insights into your problem discovery. So I think that's the kind of thoughtful questioning that teams should do and we should do. And that starts with us getting together hopefully as a diverse team, making sure we're doing upfront exercises to identify who are the people we might be relevant for.

Because the other extreme is you don't want to also necessarily include everybody who the product might not be relevant for too. As an example, if you're trying to teach investment, you're creating a tool that is going to teach how to invest better. Is it really necessary for you to learn from people who are less than five years old, right? It's an obvious answer that you are not interested in it and your age dimension could be narrowed or broadened based on that. So it goes back to thoughtfulness in how you're selecting the customers you want to learn from is critical.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. It's interesting. I think that a lot of times these days when we see problems that arise out of a particular product, sometimes we look at those and think, "Well, if they had been thoughtful they would have addressed that." But in some cases you sort of get surprising outcomes or outcomes that you really didn't anticipate. So I think one of the things that I've seen a lot lately is people just trying to do a little bit of sort of interrogating on trying to play out all of the ways that something might be used. Have you seen that happen much and is that helpful?

Prashanthi:

Yeah, absolutely. So there's actually a technique that is used in the industry called harms modeling. But if you think about harms modeling can actually reframe that also and think about justice modeling. And in that, the harms modeling comes from a perspective of can your product be used or misused in ways or be including or excluding people in a way that could cause harm for them intentionally or unintentionally. So when you think about that ahead of your definition of a product, that's really helpful.

Let's leverage that and let's actually widen that even more and say, "Well, let's think it from the justice lens and start with thinking about, for the product to be operating a certain way." And when the way you design, will it be inclusive of the people that are relevant by, are there any requirements, for example, you're setting for your product that might be excluding people, by defining a product a certain way, will your customers end up using it in a way that might not be helpful and it might actually cause harm for them, are all questions that we can ask ourselves as we think through that.

It's one kind of pre-mortem, but slightly from a different angle. Pre-mortem could be thinking about a broad range of topics and the justice model. It's one way of using that exercise, but all about thinking about the customers and the dimensions in play.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. One of the things that comes to my mind right now is PMs usually have different sets of tool kits to assist in their role in doing a variety of different things. And I wonder, do you see kind of a set of tools that are emerging that really start to provide frameworks that PMs can use in thinking about justice by design. And just talking about this harms modeling that's kind of one kind of a tool or pre-mortems and I don't really know, are there sort of a set of things that you would recommend that people go and look at along those lines?

Prashanthi:

Yeah, definitely. So I think the good thing is there are a few companies that are doing some really good work and then actually publishing externally to do the frameworks that they're using. But as a product management function, I haven't seen too much come out collectively. However, there are books like *Mismatch or Building For Everyone*, or *Weapons of Math Destruction*, these are some good books that have recommended certain ways of working certain aspects or principles that you have to weave into how you build your products.

Microsoft has done some really good work in publishing all of their internal handbooks. And this harms modeling is actually something that they have published about rules, these are frameworks you can look at. It's a great point to bring up though. There is no single place where you can go leverage all of these, even within PayPal, we are almost creating or recreating some of these frameworks because the frameworks that exist are either light or don't really work in this new age, digital product management world as well, but that could be a great resource. We can collectively create Elizabeth and start publishing.

Elizabeth:

You mentioned a couple of books and there are definitely a number of women who are doing a significant amount of work and are out front in terms of addressing issues that are coming up. I mean, you mentioned Cathy O'Neil, who wrote *Weapons of Math Destruction*, Joy Buolamwini who leads the Algorithmic Justice League and has been very outspoken on some of the issues related with AI, in particular in facial recognition and some of those types of things.

And then you also mentioned Annie Jean-Baptiste book *Building for Everyone*. I think that there is a lot of activity in this space right now. And a lot of interest in it because of that, because we've seen so many if you will, product failures in some ways on these fronts. So I don't know if there's any ones in particular that you want to bring up or mention, or maybe the question here is, what are kind of top two books or sources that you would recommend that people might go take a look at related to these things?

Prashanthi:



Yeah, absolutely. Maybe a couple, Mismatch is definitely a great read for us to get grounded on because for somebody starting from scratch I think that's a great book. Building for Everyone gives teams and people an insight into how you do it from within your company. Let's say your company is not yet on this path, how do you bring about that change? How do you leverage leaders?

Prashanthi:

In addition to the tools on how to actually build the products for everyone. Weapons of Math Destruction is also a pep talk. So Cathy O'Neil, it gives you an insight into, actually Joy is highlighted in it too. It's a short video that you can watch. There's one other talk by [Benjamin Evans](#), who was head of Inclusive Design at Airbnb, but actually now is actually leading product inclusion at PayPal. He's the head of their PayPal product inclusion.

And his talk is called The Challenge of Designing for Everyone. The 22 minute talk again, is I think quick ways where you learn. The thing is that this whole space is moving at such a fast pace, I think by the time a book is published we probably end up having a lot more learning. So keep an eye out for actual videos of tech talks that come on this topic, that's a great way to keep learning.

Elizabeth:

Yeah, that's all great. I don't know if there's anything else that you would like to in particular recommend to people who are listening to us today or say to them about this space. It seems to me I'll need to check in with you again next year sometime and hopefully as a community, we will have gathered some of these resources and hopefully the field will have progressed. In thinking about our audience, what are some of the things that you would want to say to them and kind of seeds that you would like to plant in terms of their thinking?

Prashanthi:

Yeah. And thank you for that opportunity. So I believe product management is an amazing field because PMs have a lot of good power to directly or indirectly build or influence the way the world is shaped. So PMs can keep an eye out for what are not just the problems that are going to bring immense business value to ourselves and our companies, but what are these business problems that also can enable large-scale impact for the world, that's a great lens to have.

So the more product managers have that lens, I think the better they are at solving the world's problems. If you see some of the biggest social entrepreneurs or large-scale impact organizations or nonprofits, founders, a lot of these folks actually can call themselves founders or change makers, but I actually see them as really great product leaders because they found a problem that is very unique, very hard to solve and they went after it to problem solve it. They might not be knowing they are applying product management best practices, but they are.

So think about yourself as the change maker in everything you do and balance between, I think what you said is balance between having this grand vision of what you want to have, but you should absolutely have as your North Star, but balance it with the bias to action. Because any small action you can take will go in that path towards that vision. Leverage other people on your journey towards that because one of the biggest roles a PM plays is really the power of storytelling.

You can paint a picture of a beautiful vision of the world, you will inspire more people to follow you, not just the engineering design and other partners in your teams, but you'll inspire the organizations, the communities to follow you against the problem. And Women In Product is one such example, right? You identify the gap in the industry, you went after it, but through that you're enabling so much for women in product.

The same applies to justice by design thinking or any other purpose you might have. Maybe justice doesn't speak to you, maybe world hunger speaks to you, maybe poetry speaks to you, whatever that is, apply your product management skills, take the first action, learn from diverse customers within your space and look at what the evolution of that visual will come about.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. I think that, that is a wonderful vision of things. And I really appreciate your commentary about sort of collaboration and thinking about things very broadly, I find that sometimes you have people who think about things only in terms of sort of nonprofits and some people that only want to think about things in terms of the commercial world.

And I think that it's a really broad playing field and it would be nice to see kind of the collaboration and integration between those in different ways where it makes sense. I mean, it doesn't always make sense, but when you have that lens kind of wide different opportunities show up. So yeah.

Prashanthi:

Absolutely.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. Well, Prashanthi, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. And I think this is an area that both you and I are very, very interested in, and care a great deal about, so hopefully we'll see some progress in this area over the next year and hopefully we'll be able to catch up and share those advances. But it's definitely an area that I think has a lot of opportunity for people to come up with new products and services and new ways to impact the world in a positive way.

Prashanthi:

Yeah, absolutely. And thank you Elizabeth, for spreading this word and opening the aperture for several people around this. Thank you.

