

Episode 30

Elizabeth Ames

Marie and Sparkle, welcome to the Women in Product podcast. It's great to have you both here. We're going to talk about Melissa Perry's book Escaping the Build Trap. So I wanted to start and talk by really describing what is the build trap and how exactly is this set up in the book? Because it seems like you have to kind of set that up in order to understand where she's going with it. So Marie, do you want to take that one to start?

Marie Chaisson ([02:28](#)):

Sure. So the way that the build trap is described, it's when an organization is stuck measuring their success by outputs, not by outcomes. And she kind of goes on to explain too that there is a challenge of conflating projects for products as the main vehicle of value. And what I loved about this book is that it's written in very approachable language, but Melissa Perry illustrates all the concepts in the book with this fictitious company called Marketly, which is a compilation of multiple companies that she's either worked at or consulted over the years. And so it's sprinkled with some real life stories that she then hides in this fictitious company called Marketly.

Elizabeth Ames

Nice. So Sparkle, do you have anything that you want to add relative to that?

Sparkle Joy Meadows

I think the only thing, and that's a wonderful summary. I think the one thing that I'd add that I found really fun and delightful is that you do have this fictional company that's going through all of these different experiences they're trying to build and having all these different conversations. And I think the thing that's really great is just I've seen some of these conversations happen before, so I do think it's a really great example to walk you through things that have happened multiple places, not just at this fictional company and not based solely on the author's experience. But I do, it's a fun book and I love that we have that as a centering throughline throughout the whole thing.

Elizabeth Ames

It kind of gives you that ability to go like, oh yeah, I've been there. I've heard that before. Doesn't seem so strange. So what symptoms have you observed when a company is stuck in a build trap? How do you know for yourself when that happens in the job that you are in or how does the book communicate that to people who are reading it?

Sparkle Joy Meadows

I can speak to some of the things that I have seen in my experience. She's really good about calling out, there are all of these different types of organizations that are led in different ways. One of them she talks about being sales led, where the sales team is talking to the different customers that are out and about and then they come back and they tell the product team like, okay, we're going to build this. And that is a situation that I've definitely been in before at an organization where our sales team came back and said like, oh, we promised this thing to this customer and so now we need you all to build it. And it has value

in certain environments. And the one that she calls out is a startup, which it's true a lot of times when you're very early, you do need to have that.

But in my experience, when it happens in more mature companies where you have an organization that is looking solely at meeting, a lot of times, certain metrics that aren't actually related to any vision or business goal. They may have a business goal, but what they're looking to measure isn't connected to that at all. And they're just asking folks to build features and ship things and then they're trying to figure out why this metric isn't correlating to the value that they're searching for. And so, one of the things that, a lot of the conversations I've had to have is helping organizations realign around what do we actually need to be measuring and how can we make sure that we're focused on value that ties to whatever those sort of overarching goals are?

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah, Marie?

Marie Chaisson

Well, like I mentioned, there's the tendency to prioritize your outcomes or outputs over outcomes. And where I've seen this kind of come to life is then product teams will say, well, I've set outcomes for each of my projects and so now I'm outcome driven. And what the book goes a step farther in saying is that it's not about individual outcomes for every single thing that you're working on. It's being able to unite your product efforts around common goals and a common of very solid product strategy.

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah. So in your particular situations for both of you, how do you go about helping people or making sure that your organizations are focused on those outcomes as opposed to the outputs without it being sort of reverse engineered? Well, I've got my project here and it's got an outcome. How do you keep that up a level so I would imagine that those outcomes then need to be attached to company strategic goals and market directions?

Marie Chaisson

I mean, I come from the perspective of leading large scale transformations. And what I loved about this book is that it's about product led organization. It's not about the PM practice and there's plenty of really great books about the PM practice. But this book in particular is about the organization and creating a product led organization. And so, in my experience, when you are working with individual PMs and trying to help them move from setting a goal for each of your individual projects to aligning what you're doing to a common goal, the response tends to be, well, I'm just doing what I was told. And so the work that we need to do is to align an organization and make sure the organization is set up for success. And that really needs to start at the top.

Elizabeth Ames

Sparkle?

Sparkle Joy Meadows



Yeah. Yeah, I agree. You need to have that senior level buy in to run the organization that way for this to truly be successful. I think even when you're at an organization where maybe your leadership is not quite there yet, there's still a lot that you can take from this as a PM within that organization. So this is a good methodology for learning. I don't have to just accept everything that they've given me and just do what I've been told to do. I can push back and say, well actually I really think that we need to talk to this set of users to really understand what their problems are or to tie it to something else, something that matters to the company.

But you're allowed to push back. And I think sometimes we have PMs who feel like they don't really have the ability to push back and to go against what they're being told by senior leadership and senior folks in the company. But I think ultimately, if you do get that opportunity to push back and show the evidence of why it makes sense to try out this new thing this time, then you can start to build that buy in and get that trust and hopefully allow your senior leadership to start this transformation process of seeing the value in having an organization that's led this way.

Elizabeth Ames

It's such an interesting thing that you guys are bringing up here. A couple of weeks ago, a few weeks ago, I had a conversation with Martina Lauchengco about her book *Loved*, which is really about product marketing. But one of the things that she was really, really strong about was this notion of, if you don't understand specifically how something furthers the business goals, you need to ask. You can't continue to just go like, well, somebody told me, but I don't actually understand the underlying reasons. And I hear both of you saying that. That's sort of a little bit of a, I don't know, disease that's out there where people just go like, well, somebody told me but I don't really understand, which essentially means I don't really understand, or I've given up asking in some way, shape or form.

And so much about connecting those higher level business objectives with all the way through the organization and what people are doing is so critical. And that is such an essential part of what she is talking about here, how you make that connection all the way through the organization so that you're driving outcomes, not just outputting this or that or the other that may or may not have any impact on the business whatsoever.

And I love Sparkle your point there that this book illustrates that you do have the room to be able to push back and ask your leaders for more clarity. It also allows PMs to think how they can collaborate with other PMs in the absence of a broader corporate strategy or division strategy, to take that ownership and work with your peers in different domains or different areas so that together you're working on the same thing. So ideally, an organization is structured in the right way and that's primarily what the book is about. But if you're a PM who is reading this book and thinking our organization isn't set up this way, there's still opportunity for you to put some of these ideas into practice.

Sparkle Joy Meadows

Just to that point, I think two of the things that I think are most critical for folks who are operating in the product management space in general, but particularly within an organization, is having that transparency to just understand why we're doing the things we're doing. And even if you don't have it, to

your point, even if you don't necessarily get that from the top down, being able to have the communication across your peer groups is so critical. You don't always have to operate in a little isolated silo. You can have those conversations with other people to understand how their particular workflow fits into the overall picture.

Elizabeth Ames

Do you find that sometimes people, and maybe this is particularly true of people who are new in a particular position, feel a little bit like, well, I'm not really sure, so I'm not sure that I should go ask other people because then they might think I don't know what's going on, or I don't have the skills or knowledge or whatever. Do you find that to be one of those obstacles that people have there?

Marie Chaisson

I almost feel it's the opposite that people get the new person a kind of hall pass. I'm the new person, so I'm just asking. How does this all link together?

Elizabeth Ames

Oh, I love that. You've just given everybody who's new to a job permission now to just ask questions all over the place that they need to. Awesome. That's great. I just bring that up because sometimes I think one of the values of the Women in Product community is that people can come into the community and ask questions and not feel like an idiot and not feel like they're exposing themselves to being thought of as being not knowledgeable in some way, even though it might be a perfectly reasonable question. So a lot of time what they get is feedback, which is like, oh yeah, that's a good question. Go ahead. You're okay. So this discussion brings up the question for me, which is, who is this book really for? And who do you think in the organization would benefit the most by reading it? Or are there different levels that would get different things out of it?

Sparkle Joy Meadows

Yeah, from my perspective, I think you get different things out of it depending on where you sit within the organization. For folks who are more at the associate level, this is great. This is a picture into little things like the difference between a product owner and a product manager and the importance of that strategy layer and understanding where your product fits in the larger ecosystem and how it's tied to things. If you're someone who's just getting started, seeing nuggets like that and being able to understand how all of those pieces fit together within the broader ecosystem, I think that helps those individuals as they're growing in their careers and they're sort of figuring out what are the skills that they need to continue building and what are the things they need to continue to learn. So I think it's great for people who are very early. But then on the opposite end, I think for folks who are more senior, it's also really helpful just to know that you may not necessarily be alone at your organization.

I've had some conversations with women who are in senior product roles at a lot of different types of companies, different sizes, and the number of times this has come up, I think it's really helpful knowing that this is honestly a relatively common problem that organizations face and really sort of puts you in a position to think through what are some of the different tools here that I can help bring to my organization to help shift the focus and help shift us and get us to where we need to be in order to be outcome driven versus just building things to build things.



Marie Chaisson

Yeah, I believe that for the members of the Women in Product community who are CPOs, first time CPOs, VPs of product, this book is prerequisite reading. I mean it talks all about how you set up your organization. And while I think that individual PMs will get a lot out of it as well, I would hope that our executive Women in Product are picking up this book and reading through it and taking avid notes.

Elizabeth Ames

It seems to me like, I'm going to go back to my conversation with Martina a little bit. And she talked about the gulf between people that are doing product marketing well and companies that aren't really. And she just said it was such a huge difference and talked about what those companies needed, who weren't really performing well, needed to do to get up to speed. And that's kind of what I hear you saying, Marie, is anybody stepping into a leadership role should have a good picture of thinking about how to really be a product driven organization, how to make sure you're focused on those outcomes, and that they're in alignment with the business, and that this is a really great roadmap for that. So both of you have read this book. And when it was brought up as one that we wanted to cover in this series, you both raised your hand and you said, "Yes, I read it." And that this book was important to you in some way. What about it was important to you? And Marie, maybe you'd like to start first on that one.

Marie Chaisson

Yeah, why this book is so important to me, again, I'm coming from the position of transforming organizations, helping product organizations be more product led, customer centric. And this was the first book. There's plenty of great books that are about the PM practice and how to best in class PM capabilities, but this book was really about the organization. And so it pulled together some of the pieces that were missing in other books such as what is the value of articulating your product versus a project and how some teams fall into the trap of conflating projects and products or teams and products. And so, for me, this kind of book really bridged the gap that I saw with some of the product management books that were out there today. And it was helpful for me and I hope it was helpful for our community.

Sparkle Joy Meadows

I thought this was a really great book. It was really cool. I think one of the things that I really appreciated about it was that it really kind of walked us through all of these scenarios that I've seen so many times before at all of these different organizations. And I see it a lot of times in the hiring process as we're doing hiring and people are coming into the organization and just the experiences that they've had. This is, I think, a really, it positions folks really well to understand how can we shift our organization to really be focused on having product lead? And it's not just about what you're shipping. It is to some extent, but how are we understanding the product? And I think just the emphasis on looking not only at the business value, but also understanding your users, actually talking to your users.

I think sometimes we can get in the mindset of product as this very sort of narrow specific thing, but understanding that there are all of these different ways that we incorporate design, the role of design. We're not design experts. We can do design, but these are key pieces of the puzzle. And to have all of that weave together, I think, in just such a seamless way, again with this sort of theme of this Marketly company going throughout the book, I think it just does a really great job of presenting a picture from start to finish of how you can achieve that transformation if you aren't currently experiencing that in your organization. So this is a book that I would love to recommend for folks who are just trying to



understand what does a product led organization actually look like? What are the pitfalls that we're falling into that we can avoid just as a really great way of laying those things out very clearly?

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah. So there's a little piece here about product versus service versus project, feature, team, et cetera. Do you guys want to speak to that? I mean, I think in this book she kind of puts all of those things in some context so that they're not necessarily interchangeable and that people understand how each piece fits in there. Do you want to comment on that?

Marie Chaisson

I'll add something. I think that what stood out to me was she's articulating the difference between a physical product, a pair of shoes, tube toothpaste, with technology services. And technology services need to be productized in order to be sold. And that takes some discipline, that takes some very articulate product marketing to put behind what is a product versus what is a feature. And so to me that, again, this was one of the books that kind of highlighted that, whereas when we typically talk about product manager best practices, it's about building, building, building, and building features, where right at the beginning of the book, Melissa Perry talks about, you really need to understand what are your vehicles of value and then organize around those vehicles of value and to put those strategy around those vehicles of value.

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah, yeah, I mean now I'm going to go back to my conversation with Martina again. But she talked about her experience at Microsoft where they had a release of Word and it was kind of forced on them so they actually had less features. And they had to figure out what they were going to do about that. And to that point, they ended up talking, sort of came across this notion that the things that they had changed were the things that people primarily did. So it could have the greatest impact on somebody's productivity using the product. And how that really completely changed how they thought about that product overall. And in that instance, they sort of stumbled upon it, but I thought that was such a fabulous example. I mean it's a great example of showing how they pivoted and managed to market the product, but it also in that moment helped them think about the product in a different way, which was really much more from the way people used it. Not just jamming more features in. That wasn't actually helpful.

Marie Chaisson

And one of the quotes that I loved and underlined a few times, which I'm sure that pretty much every product manager can relate to, she talks about how when she's going through seminars and she asked, typically asked a question to the organization, which is, or to the participants, which is, how many of you have gone back and iterated on the last thing you shipped? And only about 15 to 20% of the people in the audience raised their hand. And then our next question is, well, then how do you know it was successful?

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah.

Sparkle Joy Meadows



Yeah, I think it's a great quote. And I think both of those examples really, from my perspective at least, highlight the importance and the value of also getting that user feedback and using that to inform how you move forward. Because it's one thing to have whatever company metrics that you're trying to track and you build something and you ship something and then you move on to the next thing. But you really need to understand how that impacts the people you're serving. You really need to understand what the other line item metrics are that you're tracking. Did that change actually affect those things that you were trying to affect? And ultimately, if you were trying to solve a problem for people, whatever that problem area might be, did you do it? Have you just shipped a bunch of features that nobody's going to use? Or you've changed the product in such a way that it's not functional anymore?

And I love the examples she gave with the teachers when they went back and were looking at how the teachers were interacting with the portal and suddenly they discovered it's a completely different picture when they actually sit and watch how the teachers are interacting. Because up until that point, they didn't really understand what the pain points were. And so I think, to me that's a huge part of the iterative process. It's not just building and shipping, it's understanding what your users problem is, solving for that, making sure that's tied to your business case in some way. And then after you ship something, you need to go back, you need to make sure that you fully solve the problem. And sometimes it's enough to, there's a limit. You don't need to iterate forever. Sometimes you get to good enough, but you should always understand the impact of the features you've shipped or the product you've developed.

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah. So I want to kind of move on and talk a little bit about the strategy section. I know that it starts with two contrasting anecdotes about some different product things at Netflix and some other places. And Marie, do you want to talk about that and the insight that you got out of that in terms of thinking about strategy and how it aligns with the products?

Marie Chaisson

Sure. This section on strategy, it intros with this anecdote about Netflix. And the punchline there was that because Netflix had a very compelling strategy, it allowed the CEO to be able to make a last minute decision and cut a major project that they were about to launch. And the strategy was their guiding point in order to help them make decisions. Whereas in the case of our friends Marketly, there's a product team that's going through some very good, well thought discussions around, there was a conversion loss and so they were trying to troubleshoot that.

And a senior leader comes in and says, "Okay, I want a strategy from you. So by the end of this week you need to detail out for me a product delivery document and everything." And the team was left going, "What are you talking about?" And so the key takeaway just from the beginning of this section is that a good strategy is not a plan. A good strategy is a framework for making decisions. And again, it really helps when that comes from the top. It doesn't limit a team who doesn't have, who's working in an environment where there isn't a clear strategy to collaborate and develop your own strategy, but having a clear strategy is an important way to help the organization make those prioritization decisions.

Elizabeth Ames



Yeah, for sure. I mean, I personally have a story about a strategy thing where I was at a company and the CEO got up at an all hands and said, "Our strategy is to be a \$5 billion company." And everybody was like, what does that mean? That didn't help me make any decisions at all. Right? So yeah, it's always interesting people's perspective on what is strategy actually, right? So Sparkle, I think you were going to add something there.

Sparkle Joy Meadows

Yeah, I think one of the things that I've seen is teams, in a perfect world, we have strategy that comes from the top and then as you filter down the line into smaller and smaller groups, the direction that they have, it should all kind of bubble up into that top strategy in some way. And I think one of the things that I've seen just as a tool to help teams organize and tie into those goals is to just think through that problem statement of how might be. And that often is a good starting place to develop what your strategy is going to be because it kind of links it to a very specific, how might we do X, whatever that X is going to be. And then you can just make sure that the strategy is tied into that how might we statement?

Marie Chaisson

The other part of strategy is that one of the primary requests from product teams is they want to become more autonomous. And best practices tell us that autonomous teams are better at being innovators, they're better at moving faster, they're better at solving problems. And what Melissa Perry highlights is that a well constructed strategy that allows you to make decisions is the key to unlocking team autonomy. And so I think that there's perhaps limits to this. Sparkle, I would love to get your thoughts on what are really the unlocks for team autonomy?

Sparkle Joy Meadows

I mean, I think it starts with just trust. I've seen some situations where leadership doesn't trust the team and then it's kind of difficult because even when you have the autonomy to make decisions and to lay out your roadmap and your strategy, ultimately leadership might tell you that they don't want to follow through with what it is because they don't trust your team's ability to deliver, which is always really unfortunate. But I think ideally, when you have a solid team in place and you can clearly state how the objectives and the strategy that your team is developing are going to tie into whatever the next level goals are, whatever the company's goals are, whatever their strategy is, that gives you the space to automate, to operate a little more autonomously. Because if you have alignment around this is the strategy for our particular team and this is how the work that we are going to do is going to tie into the company's goals, you oftentimes can get a little bit of leeway to operate in whatever way makes the most sense for you.

Whether that's running some experiments, whether that's having your period of discovery and maybe it forces you to pivot because ultimately you feel like there's something else that comes up that's going to help you achieve whatever that strategy is that your team is aligned around. But I think having alignment and buy-in from senior stakeholders around the strategy that your particular product team or very large organizations, your sort of product silo, product org, when there's alignment around that, that kind of gives you the freedom to operate and to organize so that you can deliver on what's been agreed across the company.

Elizabeth Ames

I think what you guys are saying is really interesting. I mean, this idea that strategy isn't a rigid thing, it's really more of guidelines and a living, breathing thing. And also layering on that, Sparkle, your notion and pointing out the importance of trust. Because when you think about strategy within the organization, it's almost like a conversation where hopefully at the top they're saying, here's where we see us going. Here's our strategy because given what we know today, this looks like the best path forward. And then if you have trust in the teams, they can come back with interesting things. Sometimes those things, management up above may say like, no, that's a little too far out of what we had in mind, but that's part of the conversation.

That's where you maybe find innovation or things that people didn't expect or new breakout strategies. So it's really interesting because when you pair those two things, you can really see the dynamism in it and how you can focus on outcome and be connected throughout the organization. So there's a section on process and product manager roles. The question is organized by domain versus organized by value stream or life cycle or project. What are the challenges of organizing only by domain or feature and the challenges of organizing by value stream?

Sparkle Joy Meadows

I will start by saying every organization is different. Depending on how big you are, depending on how well you communicate with one another, depending on how your teams are organized. Sometimes you might have a team that it's horizontal, you're just kind of working across a number of different work streams and you're familiar with different parts of the product that you're building, but maybe you're focused on X today. Maybe you're organized by platform. Other times it might just be one team is going very deep in this one area and that's it. So I find that some of these organizations work better at different stages in a company life cycle. So if you're a really small startup, you should have a very different organizational structure than if you're a massive company like a Google or a Facebook or something like that.

So I tend to think, just in general, I think my general thought is that it does vary by your organization, but I really think it's important to have some degree of redundancy so that you never have somebody who just has all of the knowledge and when they leave there's no one who knows how to do whatever it was they were doing. And I think it's really important to be organized in a way that all of the different pieces are communicating. And so whether that's having meetings where everyone is coming together and talking about what they're doing, or again there's some kind of redundancy involved. I think just at a high level, having that communication that is freely flowing so that everyone has an idea of what's happening across the organization allows you to continue to be flexible. But again, I think it does kind of vary a little bit based on what kind of company you're at and what you're trying to build.

Elizabeth Ames

Kind of like stage and size in some ways. Yeah. Marie, did you want?

Marie

Age and size. And I think the type of product you're developing as well. If it's a technology company that has lots of individualized features or widgets that all can kind of work together, it may make sense to



organize in a certain way. But this has been honestly the eternal conversation for many of the product teams that I have supported. How do we organize? Is it by domain? Is it by value stream? Is it byproduct? Is it by project? And so I loved how she goes straight to the grain and says, "Here's what I think you should do."

That generally kind of best practice from her experience was that you kind of want to do both, have some domain coverage, enough domain coverage, but not over index and have your entire organization just spread out across different feature functionality or domains. But your primary focus should be on the value stream and how to put people behind the most important goals that your team is trying to tackle. So I love that she just kind of went out there and provided, it was a very strong point of view on that topic that from my perspective, it kind of goes around and around.

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah, it's always a little bit refreshing in that there's almost never any perfect answer, but it always helps when somebody puts a stake in the ground and says, "Think of it this way." So, I want to kind of close our conversation. We talked a little bit about who this book was for and what it covered. And I guess what I'd like to hear just in closing for the two of you is what impact this book had on you in particular? The first time that you read it, when you walked away, what did you go tackle right away or how did it change your thinking and your approach after you had read it?

Marie Chaisson

I think for me, what stood out was the importance of obviously the pretext of the book, which is if you're sending around your outputs, then you are falling into the build trap. And so that became part of the dialogue that I had with some of my product teams that it wasn't just a matter of how you organized your work, that the teams were really at risk of falling into this build trap and not being able to pull out if they didn't reorient their perspective and reorient where they were spending their energy, on customer outcomes, on business outcomes, on shared goals. And so for me it kind of validated some of the coaching and guidance that I was giving, which feels good, but it really emphasized the point to get clear about what your products are. And especially when we operate in technology products where they're really just services and so you have to be crisp about what the product is. That was kind of the key takeaway in where I took some of this work into my role.

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah, it sounds like you were able to really go back and really focus on that one key thing about reorienting people's perspective on what was really the most important thing for them to be thinking about as they did this. And that that sort of changed everything from that perspective.

Marie Chaisson

Absolutely. It was going back to fundamentals. We talk a lot about all these best practices and different ways that you can do customer empathy and problem discovery and solution discovery and product development life cycle. But it really brought the conversation back to the foundations, which is, what is your product? Who is your customer? What is the direction? What are you trying to achieve?

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah. Sparkle?



Sparkle Joy Meadows

I think for me, a lot of the teams that I work with work with other teams to try to help them figure out what to build, how to build, are we building? And I think this was really helpful in being able to double down on these are the ways that we can talk to these other groups. This is how we can sort of communicate where they're stuck. I think a lot of times, you hear that an organization is not really product led and they don't really have a desire to be product led, they don't even know what that really means. And I think this was really helpful because it just kind of provided some pictures of when you encounter this kind of organization, what are some of the ways that you can, what are some of the levers that you can pull? What are some of the things that you can think about as you're working with senior stakeholders to help them escape their own build trap and figure out what's going to work for their specific organization? Because obviously every organization is different.

Elizabeth Ames

Yeah. Sometimes it's really easy in life to be very focused on the activity of things without really thinking about what that activity, whether that activity is actually leading to something meaningful or if it's just activity. And I do think it's hard for people to make that switch and get their head away from, Oh, I have this list of things that I have to do and so I'm just checking off things on my list. All of us fall prey to that. Oh, it feels so good. I checked that off, I'm done with that. Yay. But is that really going to have the impact and deliver the outcome that you want? Yeah. Anyway, nice conversation ladies and thank you for taking the time to talk about this book a little bit and help people see how this book can help them and whether it's the right one for them to read at this point in time.