



Episode 41 Conference Podcast Ep

Elizabeth

We are wrapping up our 8th Annual Women In Product Conference today. Over the course of two days, thousands of determined and powerful product managers joined together to Build What's Next – whether that's the next product, the next role, the next level, or the next challenge, there are infinite possibilities and paths.

On today's episode, you'll hear some of our favorite clips from this year's keynote speakers – leaders that are helping to build what's next.

The conference kicked off with opening keynote Ami Vora, Chief Product Officer at Faire. Ami has 15 years of experience leading products for WhatsApp, Meta, and Microsoft. She reflected on those 15 years and shared the lessons she's learned to reach CPO.

Ami

You know, early on in my career, there was kind of a clear path for what career growth looked like. For example as a PM, first I was responsible for a feature, then a product area, and then a bigger domain, and then an entire product line. It wasn't easy to actually do those things, but I could look at my career ladder, I could look at those colleagues ahead of me, and I could get an idea of what the next level looked like.

But after I got to Director, I couldn't really see a clear path to follow anymore. I didn't know a lot of people at more senior levels, and I didn't know a lot of people who reminded me of me. I can tell you, especially all of the really senior women I met seemed like super woman. They were awake all the time. They were always well dressed. They had already done their workout by 4am every day. And I was like, I sleep a lot. And I don't really have a plan. And I haven't worn heels since the year 2009. So I kind of assumed that I'd never be successful. And I had to wonder, what does my growth look like, and how do I get there?

I had to learn that after a certain level of seniority, a. There is no mold for what will get my career to the next level. Our industry changes every day, our customers change every day, so I'm going to have to constantly reassess what's most needed now. And B. there's no mold for how I should operate as a leader.



There's not yet a cookie cutter career ladder for a senior technical woman who has three kids and likes puns and can eat cereal for three meals a day. I mean, if you know one, sign me up. But until then, I have to figure out what feels authentic to me. And so I've seen the most growth when I've said, ya know, no one's asking me to do this, but I'm going to do it because I think it's important. Whether that's making a tough change to a product direction or just telling a joke to kick off a weekly meeting.

Now this can be terrifying. It requires me to think about my understanding of the customer, what I think is important for the company, and how I choose to express myself. And then I actually have to put myself and my opinions out there, which can be even scarier. But I also try to see the freedom and empowerment in it. Since there aren't clear expectations I need to fit into, I have a chance to try on both what's important to the company and what's authentic to me. So I have control over how I show up as a leader.

Elizabeth: Ami's opening talk was followed by a panel conversation expanding on our podcast series the Path to CPO. Creator of the Path to CPO and product leader, Rashmi Ramesh, talked with Ketaki Rao, CPO of data.ai, and Malaika Paquiot, CPO of Avalanche Insights.

Rashmi

Malaika, in this whole process, what has been the hardest to break into being a chief product officer and why was it hard? Are there any specific challenges as a woman that you faced during this process of getting to being a chief product officer?

Malaika

Anytime people in a place of power or influence don't really see you as the prototype or the archetype of whatever it is, whether it's CPO or CTO or CEO, then it can be a challenge. I think of my experience to... Not only as a woman, right? I think all of us can recognize that we are intersections of being women and women of color, so there's that. Sometimes you don't know where the challenge is coming from. Is it because I'm a woman? Is it because I'm a person of color?

So that has definitely been a challenge. I would say people not seeing you as that archetype. The other challenge has been the typical challenges of people not necessarily listening and you having to sort of repeat yourself or spend time getting other people to say what it is that you are saying so that people will start to listen. All of that extra labor that goes into getting people to listen to you can be challenging. That said, life is challenging for a lot of people and we all push through and it's why communities like this are so important. ~~It's so important to...~~ Yes, it's good to have mentors and it's good to have advocates, but it's also good to have cheerleaders.



They may or may not be in product. Just your people who make you feel good when you're going through these challenges.

Rashmi

That's very well said, I think especially the power of community to really get you there. Yeah, absolutely loved it. Ketaki, if you want to add something there.

Ketaki

Yeah, I agree again with what Malaika mentioned here. I want to go a little bit deeper with this concept of unconscious bias. I don't think people are evil. They're not like, "I'm going to block all women or women of color." It's just they are subconsciously doing pattern matching. Like, "I've seen these CPOs. They look like this, they talk like this, and you don't look like that and you don't talk like it, so I don't think you can be a CPO."

I've got similar feedback to Malaika. I was told no executive presence, and what does that really mean? I didn't take it personally. I just said, "What does that mean? What do you want me to do that'll change the equation?" Really, the important thing was finding someone who could tell you what that was. What does it mean? So I'll give you one example. My current CEO, Ted Krantz has been an amazing mentor. He taught me the power of pausing and leaving the silence. So see right now, I've said something and then I just leave a moment of silence. People have the space to absorb it and your impact is felt.

That just changes you from saying something that you're expressing to becoming an executive presence, someone who people are listening to. Just being quiet for a couple of seconds. It's very hard to do. If you think about it, it's really hard to have silence. It can be awkward, especially with the board. To your point, Malaika, about part of the role is speaking to the board and you have to be comfortable with these silences. So finding someone who can take it from this subjective executive presence, you won't be a CPO, to specific behaviors is critical. So I too found it really hard to break into the CPO role because I'm a first time CPO.

So another challenge is everyone who's looking for a CPO wants someone who's done it before. Has to be first time. Someone who's willing to take a chance with you is very important. To me, what was key was once I had decided I wanted to be a CPO, and that was at Salesforce, I just didn't look at opportunities that were not a CPO opportunity. I was just very clear with any recruiter. "Not interested. Very happy at Salesforce. If you have a CPO role, I'm willing to change my mind." So that meant saying no to the thanks, saying no to some big money sometimes, but it was high enough on my priority to say, "This is it. This is what I want next and I won't accept anything else." That was key to break into the CPO role for me. It was hard. It was tough too.



Elizabeth: Day 2 opened with Natalia Castillejo, Group Product Manager at Duolingo who oversees the development of their language learning features. Natalia shared insights some of the lessons they learned at Duolingo while building products with generative AI.

Natalia

For those of you not familiar with Duolingo, we are the world's most popular language learning platform and the most downloaded educational app in the world. Our mission is to develop the best education in the world and make it universally available. Our app offers free bite sized lessons that help you learn, but feel like a game.

One of the first things we learned when integrating generative AI into our product is it can be so easy to get wrapped up is that it can be very easy to get so wrapped up in the tools capabilities that you lose track in the problem you're trying to solve. But we have found that taking a step back and thinking about the specific user problems that we're trying to solve helped us create a more focused valuable experience for our learners.

Last year, Duolingo got early access to gpt 4. A language model that enables anyone to have a realistic conversation in any language with a really knowledgeable chatbot. We could ask it to explain a grammar concept, or ask it to translate a sentence to a different language, and it did a pretty good job with it.

Naturally, one idea that we discussed was integrating this language model into the app in the form of a language tutor. Learners would be able to ask it any language question that they wanted or ask how to say a particular expression in a different language. But we soon realized that we had fallen into the trap of focusing too much on the technology and what it could do, instead of the problem that we're trying to solve.

There were a few issues with the idea of an AI tutor. First anyone could build a simple tutor chatbot with chat gpt, so our product wouldn't be very differentiated. In fact, you can go to chatgpt right now and ask questions like how do you say this in spanish or explain this grammar concept to me.

Second, we have learned from previous experiments that giving users too many choices, such as in the form of a freeform tutoring experience, often resulted in them feeling overwhelmed with options and not knowing where to start. In fact



learning research shows that people who learn a language or usually not so great at knowing what the most optimal thing to learn next is. Indeed most of our learners are used to coming to Duolingo to tell them what to focus on next, not the other way around. That's how we realized that an open ended AI tutor would not be the way to go. Even if GPT 4 allowed us to make that happen.

So we went back to the drawing board, and we asked ourselves what user problems have we always wanted to solve but have never attempted because of scalability concerns. This way of framing the problem drove the focus away from what generative ai would do and refocused in on the user problem to be solved. It helped us to think of generative ai as a means to the end, and not as the end itself.

While we didn't think that an open-ended AI tutor would work, we did know that learners crave explicit and personalized explanations on their mistakes on learning the lessons. That's why one of our teams started to develop explain my answer feature, which analyzes the mistakes that you make on duolingo lessons and then gives you a report on what you got wrong. If you translated a sentence incorrectly, you would get the option to see a detailed explanation of your mistake. Your ai tutor would tell you that in french adjectives like XX would be before the noun, not after it. We tried this feature and rolled it out to real learners, and people loved it. By providing personalized feedback in regular duolingo lessons, at the exact moment that a question about language learning came up, we both ended up solving a real user need and maximizing learner value.

Elizabeth: And to close out the day, Phyl Terry, author of *Never Search Alone* and Founder & CEO, Collaborative Gain joined in conversation with Allison H. Mnookin, Senior Lecturer of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

Phyl Terry

Everyone who's read the book, and has done the job search council and the methodology, they're so excited to meet you. You're Allison Mnookin of the Mnookin two pager.

You went on a listening tour to figure out your candidate market fit. But initially, you were kind of passive. Take us back to that important moment 13 years ago. What was going on?

Allison Mnookin

Sure. Yeah. I'd been at Intuit a long time, and had a couple different roles. I'd been a general manager of the QuickBooks business. I wanted to do something more



entrepreneurial. So I'd joined an internal startup, essentially, and was more or less the COO of that division.

We just were in the process of closing on a acquisition where we were buying a new company. The two teams were going to be merged. The new CEO that we'd hired was going to become the new leader of the division. It was one of those moments where it was really clear, at a minimum, my job would change. Whether it would be there, go away, it was all fuzzy. Honestly, I wasn't super focused yet on me or doing anything about it. I was focused on the business. That was the quick context of the moment.

Phyl Terry

Yeah. Can I think I add something?

Allison Mnookin

Sure.

Phyl Terry

It's really important to add, and I want ... Many of you watching this are in a job. This methodology is not just for those of you out of work and looking, but it's also for those of you who are in a job and thinking about your next steps in your current company. In fact, one of the key developers of this methodology, that's what she was doing.

Say more, Allison. Okay.

Allison Mnookin

Yeah. At that point, my job was still there, but a little unclear what the future was going to look like. I loved Intuit. I loved the company. I wasn't really looking to leave necessarily.

Anyway, I happened to have had, I don't remember, a coffee, a lunch, something with a woman I'd worked for many years earlier and was still a friend. I never had the capital M mentor, but if there ever was one, she would probably have been it. I was telling her a little bit about what was going on. She more or less was like, "Get off your tush." She was like, "What are you are you waiting for? Go start figuring out what you want to do next." That was the shove I needed, a bit, to say, "Yeah. Good point. It probably is going to change. Whether there's something there or not, I might as well explore what would be a good next." So that was the triggering moment.

Phyl Terry

Now, you did something ... You're going to hate me using this word, phenomenal, because you don't feel like that's ... But it really is. Because many people find it really



hard to do what you did next, which was sit down ... Why don't you say what you started to think about?

Allison Mnookin

Yeah. I started to draft a document and really put myself in reflection mode, which is if I was going to think about what's next, tried to think about, well, what did I love. When I got up in mornings, and I loved my job that day, what was that about? If there were days I hated, what was that about? Could I articulate for myself that description of me, more or less?

Because then if I was going to go be looking for something, I might as well ... I think you now coined it a far better way than I ever did, but this candidate market fit. But I think that instinct of it's only a win if it's a win-win, so I might as well start figuring out what I want and value, not just what's out there. That was the beginning.

Phyl Terry

This is so exciting. I love this because this is the beginning of the Mnookin two pager. This was the first ... This is the document we talk about in the book.

It's so fun, because I get to tell you, Allison, thousands of people are creating Mnookin two pagers. We have Slack channels where they're sharing their Mnookin two pagers with each other, getting feedback before they go out ...

Allison Mnookin

Well, you're giving me too much credit, but I hope it's helpful, because it was really helpful for me, the exercise I went along.

Elizabeth

I hope you leave feeling inspired after hearing clips from our 2023 Women In Product Speakers. I'm grateful to all of our speakers for sharing their wisdom, and I am grateful to our community and sponsors for making this conference possible.