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A Product Leader's Guide to Building a Customer-Centric Product Organization

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The Customer-Centric Imperative

In today's rapidly evolving market, the difference between good and great products often comes down to one critical factor: a deep understanding of customer needs. Yet while 85% of product professionals acknowledge that customer-centric companies stand out by acting on feedback, only 34% say they've fully integrated user feedback into their development process.[1] This stark gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity for product leaders.

> **85% of product professionals** said that customer-centric companies stood out because they acted on customer feedback.[2]

The truth is, building a truly customer-centric product organization requires more than occasional customer interviews or feedback surveys. It demands a systematic approach that weaves customer insights into every aspect of product development—from strategic planning to daily decision-making. Product leaders must create an environment where customer evidence drives innovation, where feedback shapes roadmaps, and where every team member instinctively asks, "How does this benefit our customers?"

This guide provides a comprehensive framework for product leaders looking to build and scale customer-centric practices across their organizations. Drawing from successful product leaders and proven methodologies, we'll explore six essential pillars of customer-centric product leadership, from establishing foundational empathy to leveraging AI for scaled insights. Whether you're leading a growing product team or transforming an established organization, you'll find actionable strategies to elevate your customer-centric practice and drive measurable business results.

[1] Productboard, Customer-obsession survey [personal communication], January 2025.

[2] Productboard. (2024). 2024 product excellence report. Productboard.

At a glance...

1. **Building the right foundation for customer empathy**

   How to cultivate a common understanding across the organization through personas, segmentation, and more.

2. **Setting your standard for customer engagement**

   How to define your expectations for PMs around engaging with and listening to customers.

3. **Making customer evidence a habit**

   How to integrate customer feedback into your planning processes from monthly reviews to annual planning using a standard framework.

4. **Amplifying the voice of your customer across the organization**

   How to connect cross-functional stakeholders to your customer by sharing insights and clarifying strategic decision-making.

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   How to operationalize your customer-centric practices at scale through tooling and AI-powered analysis.

Building the right foundation for customer empathy

Common definitions and language are the foundation for meaningful team discussions during a successful product development cycle. Without them, there's no frame of reference for your team to put themselves in your customer's shoes. To create authentic customer empathy across your organization, build a shared vocabulary.

Tip 1: Define user personas according to jobs-to-be-done.

Ensure you have well-defined user personas that can be commonly understood by your entire product and design organization. Then, go a level deeper than a user's role and needs by leaning into the jobs-to-be-done (JTBD) framework.

The JTBD framework addresses the functional aspects of user needs but also emphasizes the emotional ones. It treats their need as a job they would hire your product to successfully complete. Instead of thinking about what your product does for a user, it becomes about what you can help a user achieve.

For a remote work collaboration tool, the JTBD for a mid-level manager customer segment might be: "Help me coordinate my distributed team efficiently while fostering a sense of belonging, so I can deliver projects on time without burning out my team members or myself."

It's important to have both the persona and the JTBD because a product manager doing a "VOC job" (trying to understand the voice of the customer) may be different from a UX researcher doing the VOC job, which will impact how your team approaches product decisions.

With customer aligned decision-making, your team can better meet customer needs, increase satisfaction, and build a foundation for successful product bets that increases your ROI.

For more on the JTBD framework, check out our guide [here](#).

Tip 2: Reminder: be precise about customer segmentation.

A product's customer segmentation is typically more precise than a company's ICP (ideal customer profile). That nuance can sometimes get lost when PMs make assumptions about who the customer is, only focusing on the company-level. Product leaders should guide PMs to think strategically about customer segmentation, so they don't get stuck thinking too broadly.

For example, your company might be going after a wide range of company sizes from small to large, but your advanced security offering might be aimed at larger enterprises.

Establishing the specific customer focus of different products or product elements helps PMs garner a deeper understanding of the immediate user and thus drive for a better, more personalized user experience. It may seem obvious to product leaders, but it's important to turn an unspoken understanding into a verbalized agreement.

Here are a few questions you can ask to get your team thinking:

- **How does our product-level segmentation differ from our company-level ICP, and why?**

- **What unique characteristics or needs define the users of this particular product?**

- **What are the distinct use cases for different customer segments?**

This is often defined in partnership with product marketing or others on your go-to-market team. It's an important cross-functional foundation to have. If it's not in place, define it and socialize it across EPD and beyond.

Once your team has a clearer view of the customers they need to be speaking to, then they can have truly impactful conversations.

Setting your standard for customer engagement

At a minimum, product managers should be meeting with customers weekly. In reality this doesn't always happen, especially at larger companies. Outside of a product discovery cycle, actively listening to customers becomes a passive occurrence when other work takes priority.

It's important to clarify your expectations of the team. And, there are many elements to consider: research types, depth of involvement, and level of behavior change needed.

Tip 3: Establish the type and frequency of your team's customer engagement activities.

Customer engagement is a spectrum. Whether your team spends one hour speaking with customers each week or has the OKR to give two executive briefs in a quarter, decide the best practice. This may vary by product lifecycle, the level of uncertainty, need for discovery, and so on.

Ask yourself these questions to gain an understanding of your current state and to craft a hypothesis for how to improve product development through listening:

- **How does the team currently spend time with customers?**

- **What challenges are we currently facing related to our customers?**

- **How can customer feedback help unblock or accelerate us at our current stage?**

- **What methods would get us the level or quality of feedback we need?**

- **How much time should be put into this on a monthly, weekly, or daily level?**

- **What level of behavior change is needed from the team to carry this out?**

- **What metrics or systems do we need to put in place to make this happen?**

We used existing quantitative data to understand past and current behavior.

We did qualitative — focus groups, one-on-ones, usability — to hear how people think and react to our work.

We executed surveys to capture who the customer is and how to think about them — by demographics, by competitive product usage, entertainment preferences, etc.

Then we AB tested the hypotheses formed via the above inputs to see what worked.[3]

Gibson Biddle
former VP of Product at Netflix

There's no substitute for speaking with customers, but how you implement that into your team structure is up to you. It's important to be intentional about the type of listening your team does, relative to your product's current lifecycle stage, your team's culture, and your customer's expectations.

By having consistent listening activities, your team will surface a wealth of customer knowledge that can then be integrated into your processes to aid planning and prioritization.

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[3] Biddle, G. (n.d.). How Netflix's Customer Obsession Created a Customer Obsession. Medium.

Making customer evidence a habit

Only 34% of product professionals say user feedback is fully or highly integrated into their development process.[4] Teams that don't integrate user evidence at every stage risk becoming misaligned with their customers and creating the wrong products. To truly deliver excellent products, product leaders and teams have to make a habit of putting the voice of the customer at the center of their processes, starting with planning. Because, as James Clear puts it, "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."

It comes down to how you communicate during planning, the review rhythm you set, and the importance you place on feedback.

Tip 4: Make customer evidence non-negotiable.

Make the voice of the customer a starting point for everything. This means ensuring your team ties their proposals, actions, and explanations to specific customer feedback.

Here are a few ways you can do this:

- **Require customer evidence in all product review meetings**

- **Set the expectation that major decisions need supporting customer data**

- **Create templates that include dedicated sections for customer insights**

- **Coach product managers to lead with customer evidence in their proposals**

You, as the product leader, asking your team what customer feedback informed their work, proposals, or decisions and showing that your decisions have customer evidence will be the most important accountability mechanism.

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[4] Productboard. (2024). 2024 product excellence report. Productboard.

Tip 5: Set your regular check points and don't deviate.

Habits solidify from routine. Product leaders should set the expectation for their team's processes around bringing in the voice of customer. This could look like...

Monthly reviews that...

- **Review customer feedback trends across product lines**

- **Assess how recent releases align with customer expectations**

- **Track progress on customer-centric OKRs**

- **Evaluate the quality and quantity of customer interactions**

Quarterly planning that...

- **Analyzes aggregate customer feedback patterns**

- **Reviews customer success metrics and adoption data**

- **Validates roadmap priorities against customer evidence**

- **Assesses strategic initiatives through a customer impact lens**

Annual strategic planning where the team...

- **Presents year-over-year analysis of customer needs evolution**

- **Reviews major customer segments' changing requirements**

- **Evaluates portfolio decisions based on customer evidence**

- **Sets customer-centric goals for the coming year**

At every stage, ensure you have consistent checkpoints that regularly facilitate engaging with customer feedback.

Tip 6: Clarify how your team should prioritize customer feedback.

Similar to creating a foundation of understanding, product leaders must narrow the lens through which they analyze feedback. At the enterprise-level, the breadth of feedback can create noise, distorting customer pain points that your product and future product innovations can uniquely address. To make decisions that drive your product forward and solve customer problems, your team needs to agree on how you will prioritize feedback from different customers at a given time.

> Your team will talk about customer quotes and concrete examples. But ones from really strategic or important customers should be weighted higher in terms of their impact on decision-making. There are many ways to look at it, from revenue impact to retention impact, etc. Clarifying that helps your team make smarter product decisions, faster.[5]
>
> **Christian Marek**
> VP of Product at Productboard

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[5] C. Marek, personal communication, January 27, 2025.

In addition to typical analysis based on customer segment and competitive gaps, here are a few approaches you can take:

Customer-Value Weighting

- **Revenue impact:**
  Prioritizing feedback from high-value customers (e.g., enterprise clients over free-tier users).

- **Customer Lifetime Value (CLV):**
  Assigning more weight to feedback from long-term or high-spending customers.

Engagement-Based Weighting

- **Product Usage:**
  Giving more weight to feedback from frequent or power users.

- **Feature Adoption:**
  Prioritizing feedback from users actively using a specific feature.

Volume-Based Weighting

- **Frequency of Feedback or Number of Similar Reports:**
  Weighting recurring issues or feedback higher.

Sentiment-Based Weighting

- **Emotion Analysis:**
  Using negative feedback to identify critical issues.

- **Urgency of Feedback:**
  Using high-frustration comments to uncover immediate or urgent problems.

Your approach may fluctuate based on business goals or product development stage. Make that difference clear to your team so they can analyze and interpret accordingly.

Working from the same set of information on a regular cadence with clear expectations for touchpoints helps your PMs build customer-centric habits and, ultimately, a product that maximizes customer impact and return on investment.

Amplifying the voice of the customer throughout the organization

A seamless path to customer centricity must be a cross-functional one. Customer-centric product leaders and teams succeed at scale when all teams—customer success, engineering, marketing, design, sales, etc.—are working with the voice of customer as their guide.

Product organizations have unparalleled access and insight into the customer and thus a unique opportunity to evangelize customer feedback to other teams. The product organization must act as a knowledge source for their company, sharing insights and connecting them to the business strategy.

Tip 7: Create channels to share customer insights with other departments.

Whether you have a dedicated user research team or a small PM team, it's important that product leaders spotlight the insights their organization gathers. Creating effective channels for sharing customer insights requires both structure and strategy.

Here are a few approaches that successful product leaders use:

REGULAR CUSTOMER INSIGHT NEWSLETTERS

Create a bi-weekly or monthly newsletter that highlights key customer feedback themes, surprising discoveries, and success stories. Keep it concise and actionable, focusing on insights that different departments can use:

- **Sales teams can learn about customer pain points and value propositions**
- **Marketing can gather authentic customer language and use cases**
- **Customer Success can anticipate common challenges and prepare solutions**
- **Engineering can better understand the impact of their work**

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL CUSTOMER FORUMS

Host monthly sessions where product teams share recent customer research findings and facilitate discussions about implications. These forums should:

- **Include representatives from all key departments**

- **Focus on specific themes or customer segments in each session**

- **Allow time for departments to share their own customer insights**

- **Result in clear action items for each team**

ACCESSIBLE CUSTOMER INSIGHT REPOSITORY

Maintain a centralized location where all departments can access customer feedback, research findings, and insights. This could be:

- **A dedicated section in your product management tool**

- **A well-organized shared drive with regular updates**

- **A customer insight portal with searchable content**

- **Regular summary reports of customer feedback themes**

CUSTOMER STORY SPOTLIGHTS

Share detailed customer stories in company all-hands meetings or through internal channels. These stories should:

- **Highlight both successes and challenges**

- **Include specific quotes and examples**

- **Draw clear connections to company objectives**

- **Rotate through different customer segments**

Determine your product organization's approach to sharing customer stories and data according to your company's culture and communication style.

Tip 8: Create clear connections between customer insights and your business strategy.

Product leaders are responsible for moving the needle on wider business metrics—ARR, ROI, etc—even if they don't fully own those metrics. It's important to both ladder product initiatives up to those business metrics and ladder them down to the customer evidence behind those decisions. Not only does this ensure that every product person understands the meaning of their work, but it also clarifies to cross-functional stakeholders the evidence fueling your priorities.

> Alignment needs to come from the executive team. While some business objectives may be internally focused — like reducing costs by X% — the company's main strategy must resonate with the customer. It should be driven by a real customer problem and a market opportunity big enough to pursue. 'We're going in this direction because customers face this challenge, and we believe solving it will create meaningful business impact, generating X amount in revenue.[6]
>
> **Pedro Amaral**
> Chief Product Officer, Reachdesk

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[6] P. Amaral, personal communication, January 20, 2025.

Expand on your high-level objectives with the following:

Customer value impact

Quantitative or qualitative improvements to a customer's life.

- "We are going to add AI to our product because it'll help our customers save 15 hours of work per week. Time savings of this significance will help CFOs validate the ROI of investing in our tool…."

Customer evidence

Stats, quotes, or research that reinforce your direction.

- "Our goal is to increase ARR by 15%. The top 10 accounts in our enterprise segment, which account for 25% of our business, see a critical need for this feature. If we ship it, our retention of these critical customers will improve and thus we will have a path to drive further expansion within these accounts, increasing our ARR."

This connection ensures business metrics remain grounded in customer value while giving cross-functional teams clear context for their work.

Leading by example

As a product leader, your value goes beyond just supporting your team—it's about recognizing market trends and broader patterns to shape the direction.

While your product managers dive into feature-level details, you need to keep a high-level perspective to drive long-term strategy.

> Product leadership's focus should be noticing trends in the market and judiciously veering between problem A and problem B based on which way the winds are blowing. And really being able to forecast which way the market is growing. The ambiguity goes up significantly as you become a product leader.[7]
>
> **Ibrahim Bashir**
> Former VP of Product, Amplitude

Tip 9: Let systems run on their own. Set aside time for big picture thinking.

After integrating these voice of customer best practices, a product leader's greatest challenge is avoiding the pull of tactical work. Your team is responsible for bringing in customer evidence. You are responsible for forecasting evolving customer needs and subsequent market shifts.

To maintain strategic impact:

- **Block dedicated time weekly for high-level customer insight analysis**

- **Focus on patterns across product lines and market segments**

- **Look for emerging needs that could drive new product opportunities**

- **Identify strategic blind spots your organization may be missing**

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[7] Bashir, I. (2024, October 29). Breaking through plateaus in your product career [Product Excellence Summit]. Productboard.

Modern product leaders must anticipate where customer needs are heading:

- **Monitor changes in how customers adopt and use your technology**

- **Track emerging workflows and processes in your target industries**

- **Analyze how customer expectations are evolving based on broader technology trends**

- **Identify early signals of potential disruption in your market**

> Individual contributors get exposed to so much direct feedback that they become power users of the product. But when you're an executive, the operational rigor pulls you away from that. You have to carve out time to tear down your product, your competitor's product…to talk to people who study the space, get into customer meetings, and not just for demos, but regularly with happy customers and unhappy customers—so you can form a point of view on the market.
>
> Successful product led organizations have rituals around exposing people to customer feedback organically. When I worked at Box, we had an executive innovation center on the first floor. Every week there were a half dozen customers who would pass through and it was easy to get time with them. At Amazon, at a certain leadership level you were required to spend time in the customer service center to make sure that you never drifted away from the actual value proposition you were providing. The companies that create ways for leaders to stay connected to the customer feedback loop do well in the long run.[8]
>
> **Ibrahim Bashir**
> Former VP of Product, Amplitude

[8] Bashir, I. (2024, October 29). Breaking through plateaus in your product career [Product Excellence Summit]. Productboard.

Working from a single source of truth

All of the processes and frameworks recommended in this guide seek to do one thing—create a deep connection to your customer. With modern technology, from dedicated product management solutions to AI, product leaders can enable their team to stay connected with customers more easily than ever before by creating a single source of truth.

Tip 10: Consider software built for product management

A single source of truth for your product team makes sure everyone is aligned on what's happening, when, and why.

Modern product management tools add nuance that status quo tools (spreadsheets and slides), project management tools (Notion, Asana, etc.), and engineering workflow tools (Jira) can't.

80% of Productboard customers report building products that better meet customer needs.[9]

Productboard enables teams to...

- **Collect feedback from disparate channels through API integrations and store it in one place for everyone to access.**

- **Analyze customer feedback according to revenue impact, company size, and feature or update requests to influence strategic planning.**

- **Create an up-to-date, shareable roadmap with clear ties to customer feedback.**

- **Make product operations more effective through visibility into every stage of the development cycle and where things are getting stuck.**

[9] Productboard. (n.d.). How Productboard drives ROI for product teams. Productboard.

- **Share a product portal that allows customers to vote or comment on features, updates, or even new products they want to see.**

Consider adopting a tool specifically for product management that allows you to embed the voice of customer throughout all stages of your product development process.

Tip 11: Integrate AI into the flow of your work

The obvious: product teams make smart product decisions based on qualitative and quantitative feedback. But, enterprise product teams get huge amounts of feedback, turning analysis into a full time job.

AI-powered tools like Productboard Pulse can analyze thousands of qualitative customer inputs in minutes, immediately tying trends to features and creating shareable reports. Prioritize technologies that free up your PM's time while making faster, data-driven decisions.

> At Reachdesk, beyond discovery calls, we co-create solutions with design partners, giving them a front seat in shaping the product with us. They gain early access to validate functionality in real-world scenarios, providing feedback we capture in Productboard to refine before launch. We also use AI for feedback summarization, copywriting, and PRD creation, helping us move fast while staying aligned with customer needs.[10]
>
> **Pedro Amaral**
> Chief Product Officer, Reachdesk

See how Productboard Pulse analyzes feedback with speed and at scale [here](#).

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[10] P. Amaral, personal communication, January 20, 2025.

From Framework to Future

Charting the Future of Product Management

The journey to customer centricity is not a destination but a continuous evolution. And success requires more than good intentions—it demands systematic processes, clear expectations, and unwavering commitment from product leadership.

The six pillars we've discussed—building empathy foundations, setting clear customer engagement expectations, integrating evidence into planning, amplifying customer voice, providing strategic guidance, and leveraging modern tools—create a framework that can transform how your organization connects with and delivers value to customers.

But perhaps most importantly, these practices create a cycle. As teams become more attuned to customer needs, they make better decisions. Better decisions lead to better products, which in turn generate more meaningful customer feedback. This positive loop strengthens your competitive position while building deeper customer relationships.

In an era where product differentiation is increasingly challenging, your ability to truly understand and act on customer needs becomes your greatest advantage. By implementing the strategies outlined in this guide, you're not just improving your current products—you're charting the future of product management itself, building the muscle memory and setting the example for customer-centric product organizations.

The future belongs to organizations that can systematically translate customer insights into product innovation. Remember: customer centricity at scale doesn't happen by accident. It's the result of intentional leadership, clear processes, and the right supporting tools. Start now.

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Check out how Productboard Pulse can accelerate your move toward becoming a more customer centric-product organization. Learn more [here](#).