

# One Knight in Product - E165 - Pooja Parthasarathy

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, Pooja Parthasarathy

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Jason Knight 00:00

Now if you're like me, you think product management a pretty stressful job, all that context switching and zooming in and out, but my guest tonight might have had one that was even harder. Speaking of our jobs, if you're looking for support and yours and seeking mentorship, why not check out My Mentor Path, a free mentorship platform, where product managers and product leaders can connect with each other and get the support they need to grow in their careers, you can head over to <https://www.mymentorpath.com> to find out more about the benefits of mentoring to both sides of the relationship to sign up to be a mentor and mentee or both. Why not check out the show notes for more details. All right back to the episode and our wide ranging discussion about transferring from high frequency trading to product leadership, how the old life and form the new some of the internal and external challenges you can have in product leadership, and how if you give me a place to stand on a long enough lever, and might even be able to move the CEO. For all this and much more stick with us on One Knight in Product.



Jason Knight 01:06

So my guest tonight is Pooja Parthasarathy. Pooja's a product leader who says all the jobs she's ever had have been awesome though she used to work at a hedge fund. So I'm already suspicious. Pooja says she knows more Bollywood gossip than anyone can reasonably expect and used to be able to deadlift one and a half times her own bodyweight. But these days, she's putting her back into it and trying to lift up product managers and inspire them to follow her non traditional route into product leadership says we all need a level of resilience, but also humility to get ahead. Hi Pooja, how are you tonight?



Pooja Parthasarathy 01:33

And well, Jason, how are you? Thank you for having me.



Jason Knight 01:35

No problem. It's good to have you here. And it's been a while getting this one. Yes. scheduled in and we've had a few false starts. I'm hoping we'll make it through to the end.



Pooja Parthasarathy 01:43

And we will, we will, we will, by hook or by crook, we will



Jason Knight 01:46

By hook or by crook, we're gonna get through it together. But before we get through it together first things first, you are the head of product at AbstractOps. So what problem does AbstractOps solve for the world?



Pooja Parthasarathy 01:59

Yeah, so hi, everyone, I'm I'm Pooja I'm head of product at a very early stage startup called AbstractOps. We are a SaaS company that's focused on helping distributed teams get 360 visibility into their entire team, hire compliantly across the 50 states and compensate fairly. I've been in this role for a little over a year and a half at this point. And prior to this, I was in a few different product roles at another SAS startup here in Chicago called Narrative Science, which, you know, got acquired by Salesforce. So happy outcomes for all involved. And then before that, you know, this is why, Jason, you and I started chatting initially, when I came into product from a pretty atypical background. So I started my career as a quant trader at a hedge fund here where, gosh, I was trading, equity futures, bond futures, commodity futures, some stocks, and I did that for a few years. And this was in the heyday of algorithmic trading. I transitioned from that into more traditional asset management where I was now doing research and portfolio management on G 10 debt and inflation linked debt, which I knew nothing about before, before I got into that job that actually made the leap into pm through business school and, you know, five years on I haven't looked back since and the products wonderful, because I'm still doing it. And I'm excited to talk more about it.



Jason Knight 03:31

Absolutely, we will definitely be talking about it. I think before we go into the hedge fund side of things, I'm curious because you say that AbstractOps is a fairly early stage company. Which kind of implies that it's either pretty small, or it's kind of so unicorn that it's already massive. But let's assume that it's reasonably small. But then if you're looking at your responsibilities, you're leading product, you're leading design, you're leading product operations. And yep, that last part is really interesting, because product operations is something which I'm sure you're aware, has somewhat of a woolly definition across various different types of company. And some people are sitting there saying, well, you don't need product operations. You don't need

process people, you just need everyone to be empowered and going in the same direction. So I guess at the size of company that your abstract ops, how does product ops help you and your team? Or your teams make products?

P

Pooja Parthasarathy 04:23

Yeah, it's a great question. And we've also sort of gone through that journey of like, what does products ops actually do? We need this role right now? And you know, shout out to John who's who's my one of my favourite people who's our product ops guy.



Jason Knight 04:37

Oh, I hope he's listening. I hope he's listening.

P

Pooja Parthasarathy 04:39

I hope so too. But product ops, right? I view the the role of product ops and I know it looks different at different companies similar to actually how a product looks different at different companies. I view the role of product ops effectively as ... so ultimately, right in support of how do we make well informed product decisions and activate our user base using data and using the right tools. So look, I mean, at our stage, you know, there's not a lot of data. There's there's a few different tools, right. But I think what's been really helpful for us is honestly, building like a data focused and a research focused mindset more than anything else. I think that's the discipline that having product ops brings inherently is, you know, we all know we're flying by the seat of our pants. But, you know, so much of early stages, having strong hypotheses, testing them, putting them out there iterating really quickly on them, right, and then closing the loop closing the loop closing the loop, I think this is something that I have found is really important to do, especially in early stage, because I think it's really tempting to just go down and do a little rabbit hole and just build, build, build, right? Without actually pressure testing your assumptions, like pressure testing, what are you actually seeing in market? And I think the discipline of saying, Okay, we are going to take a hypothesis driven approach to saying, what problem are we trying to solve? Over what timeframe? What does success look like? What are the different levers that we have to solve this problem? What are the most high leverage levers? Right? And importantly, once we put something out there, let's analyse let's figure out what success actually are success or failure, feed that all back into the machine? And then that's how you're basically iterating through early stage product.



Jason Knight 06:33

Oh, there you go. So everyone else should get put adopt teams as soon as possible to help them do the same?

P

Pooja Parthasarathy 06:39

I completely think so. Yes.



Jason Knight 06:42

But you've not always been a product manager, as you just said, and you've talked a little bit about the hedge funds and the financial services, adventures that you had. And I guess I, when I think of hedge funds, and algorithmic trading, as you've called out as well, starts to feel like a very stressful world, like a very high octane, high pressure, like in all the movies where everyone's always, you know, up all night and making billion dollar decisions all the time. And everyone's shouting each other. And I don't know if that's 100% true, or if it's all a little bit more sedate. But from your perspective, and from your experience here, was it all high octane, high power, everyone's shouting each other stuff? Or was it somewhere a little bit less than that?



Pooja Parthasarathy 07:22

It was mostly that the decisions I would say \$1 billion decisions, for sure. Because it was one of a smaller fund. But yeah, I mean, I will I will always run what's my first job? I was 21 years old. You know, I would get into work at like, 6am in the morning. And, you know, it was pitch dark. And we kept the rooms intentionally pitch dark, right? Because everyone had like, a tonne of different computer screens and monitors. And, you know, in many ways, right, as a trader, your status was measured by how many monitors you had in front of you, like some of our, our best traders have like eight or 10 monitors. So I found myself aspiring, I was like, Oh, how can I get an extra monitor? Like, I feel like that makes me look really cool. Right? But But no, so so. Yes to the high octane Yes to the high stress. I mean, look, it was, you know, so much of trading, right? Whether it's quant trading, I think I think trading in general is, is about thinking on your feet, right? It's about and specifically like thinking on your feet in very volatile, uncertain environments. So picture this, right, so the room was pitch dark, it's like 7am, central time, everyone's sort of, you know, on the edge of their seats, right, waiting for the CPI number, or the GDP number or the jobless claims number. My boss is in one corner of the room, sort of, you know, glued to his screen, because he's the one who shouts out the number, right? So seven on the dot, you hear seven Oh, above expectations, right? And then it's Pin drop silence. All you hear is just clicking, clicking, clicking, clicking cooking, because everyone's trying to trade. Right. And success in that environment is survival. And it's adapting, right? It's, you mean, of course, the market always has expectations going into any economic number, but at the end of the day, right, their expectations at best. And market moving numbers, especially like everything you'll see, like charts will just spike up like this or spike down like this. Right. And so it was an incredible experience. Right? And I think what that really taught me, I think so two things, one, thinking on your feet in that environment and thinking three steps ahead, right? Because you're not just making one trade, you're trying to think about what trades are other people going to put on and how do I get ahead of that. And you're doing that minute by minute every single day, day after day. And that's just you're living by your wits to a large extent. Now granted, we built like algo models and things like that as well. Right? But it was still a core component of that. And so when I equate that or sort of bring that back to early stage pm Jason like, as I'm sure your Pm listeners will already recognise right like thinking on your feet check volatile uncertain check adaptations, survival check rakers, at least HPM is literally just about survival until you get to product market fit. If right a big if you get to product market fit. So that was sort of a big one for me. And I think you're you're a second rate around everyone yelling at each other like, yes, you know. So like I said, I was 21, everyone was a lot older than I was, and everyone yelled at each other and in didn't mince any words, shall we

say, right? So talk about building or needing to build a very thick skin very early in my career, and not taking anything too hot or not taking anything more seriously than I should. But I think those two things have bought, you know, both sort of perfect skin and thriving in that environment, in many ways, right, I think set me up for success for eventually getting into early stage product.



Jason Knight 10:53

Yeah, that's obviously a really interesting point, this whole idea that you can transfer some of that stuff over, but also kind of feels like, you know, product managers, often. They'll be sitting there saying how, and I say this a lot as well, saying how product management is such a hard job, because all the context switching and the different zoom levels that you have to apply to that, and all of the different cats that you have to hurt sometimes, but it kind of feels like moving into product management for you was a bit of a bit of a break is, is that fair to say? Or was it just differently hard?



Pooja Parthasarathy 11:25

I wouldn't go that far. Product is really hard. I mean, I'm doing it. Like I said, I'm still doing it, because I love it. But it's still really hard. I will say though, I think I'm I'm really grateful. Right. So you know, I don't look and sound like many most tensor products, shall we say. But, you know, I'm really grateful that I've had the experiences that I've had in the past that I think have brought a level of perspective. And I think just well roundedness to how I approach product in my role, and honestly, I think have sort of been in really great stead in getting to a head of product role as quickly as I have.



Jason Knight 12:01

Yeah, and I think that roundedness is something that we'll probably come back to in a minute as well, because I think that it's really, really important. We see it a lot out there. A lot of people talk about it, I've talked about it, I've had people on the podcast talking about it, this idea that just getting the same old dudes in from Stanford computer science degree people isn't necessarily the best way to set up for success, you know, the, the world is growing and changing all the time. And we need to reflect that and we need to get people in that can understand that. But I guess another interesting point there, though, is that kind of feels like if we even just exclude your own personal background and just concentrate on the work background, the specifics of like, the environments you're working in, they feel like so far away from the kind of empowered cross functional teams, you know, bottom up innovation, it kind of feels almost like you've flipped that on its head by coming into product. Is that something that that meant that you had to really learn a lot of new things to thrive? I mean, you talked obviously, a lot about how that's helped you. But did it hinder you in any way coming from that kind of environment?



Pooja Parthasarathy 13:01

That's a good question that had hinder me. I mean, I certainly had bouts of imposter syndrome. And I think you know everybody does in in some shape or form because I wasn't the Stanford

And I think, you know, everybody does in, in some shape or form, because I wasn't the standard CS grad. Right. And I've worked with a few of them. And I mean, I learned a lot from them. Right. So I think that's probably the main one, Jason. But, you know, I'll say I'll say maybe a couple of things here. One is this, this, I was telling you about the thick skin that I built right as a consequence of having worked in trading. And one of the benefits of that read and I think that's again, really stood me in good stead is, at many points along the way. I've had many people told me I couldn't or shouldn't do certain things, again, as I think many of us have. And I have over time developed the ability to say i i, I understand, but I'm going to do it anyway. Right. And that's a thing that's helped me a tonne. And I think this the second thing I'll say, right is having like zigzag broken a few different types of roles. And interestingly, abstract Ops is actually the only role that I've had where I brought relevant experience into the role on day one. I still didn't have the domain expertise because I was getting it. They're brand new domain People Ops. But having zigzagged right between whether it's trading investment management, early stage product, well, Narrative Science was sort of more I would say, growth stage and, like super early stage, right. I think that taught me two things, or maybe sort of helped me bring two things to my work and do my craft as a product person. So one is a love of an almost an optimization for curiosity and learning, right? I've spent my entire career so far just going after opportunities where I felt like I could maximise on both those dimensions. And then the second is just mandatory first principles thinking, because guess what, I had no idea what I was getting myself into pretty much every single time and so you know, the the ability to ask really basic questions, and the muscle that I consequently built right to continue doing that just meant I never had the baggage that I think more experienced people did. Because it's just like, well, if I ask a basic question, people think I'm stupid. And it's like, well, for me, that was just what I had to do that to kind of get up and up to speed at the job, right? And so, if anything, I think actually, both those things, like I said, have stood me in in in in incredibly good stead and look like as an exec. I think it's particularly important because modelling those behaviours, right, so I'll tell you like as a as a head of product, to me, building a culture that is focused on that curiosity, that hunger for learning, the willingness right to ask really basic questions is really, really important. And secondly, right, I think that's the culture we've developed on the exec team at large. And the reason that's so important, aside from the obvious, right, because early stage product is all about just asking really basic questions, again, hypothesis and validating. It acts as a good example for younger team members as well. Because guess what, right if they see an exec asking a really, you know, okay, I know, I'm oversimplifying, but just so we're all on the same page, right? We're talking about X Y, Z, right? That goes a really long way in like empowering those people to ask similar questions, which I think again, lends itself to a really strong company culture as well.



Jason Knight 16:29

Now, I agree with that. And I think it's a fantastic thing to do not just with asking basic questions, but just across the board, like modelling behaviours that you want the rest of your team to exhibit as well, like, it's easier to get people to do that. Even things like taking holiday and stuff, if you're going to do it yourself, rather than just having Yeah, absolutely. Just thinking, Oh, God, the boss is still at work. So I have to still be at work, that sort of thing. Yeah. But I'm going to say that there are certainly points in my career where I felt that I couldn't be vulnerable, or say that I didn't know because everything was just as big show out. And everyone was, it's almost like everyone's posturing like, everyone wants to be the rooster. Yeah. Aside from the trading side, which I assume, maybe sometimes you had to kind of puff your chest out a bit. But are there times in your product career where you've maybe been unable to do that, and have been kind of looked at it, especially as you've been kind of

progressing through into leadership as well, where you felt maybe that having that openness and the honesty to ask questions and ask for things that you didn't know about that's actually harmed your career? Or have you always been pretty lucky?

P

Pooja Parthasarathy 17:32

I think I've been lucky. But then that's just how I think about things in general. It's true. I mean, look, I'll be the first person to say, Jason that, like, I've for sure had more access and more opportunities and a lot of other people. But, you know, by virtue of, again, having made a few different career changes at this point, and having to learn and again, wanting to learn right from the ground up every time. i Yeah, I actually, I think I've been really lucky. And I've worked with really great people. I've lucked out in terms of the bosses, I've had the mentors, I've had, you know, the companies I've worked at where I've always had one or more people who I've looked up to who have, you know, guided me along my way. And I am so grateful for that. Because to me, like when I think about the important stuff of mentorship, right. And, again, this is a whole other conversation. So I'll sort of take a slight detour.



Jason Knight 18:33

Go for it, it gives me a chance to pimp mentoring as well. So that's cool.

P

Pooja Parthasarathy 18:37

The ability to take... so one, I think it's important to have many mentors, I think a lot of sort of younger folks generally think I need to find this one mentor, and this person is going to be sort of the be all end all and open all these doors for me. That's not how it works, right? Because everyone's busy, right? Yep. But I think if you think about mentorship and mentoring, as there's a lot of different people who maybe you want to embody different aspects of them, right? Different people are really good at different things. And if you think of them almost like a collection of people you look up to whose traits and attributes you want to model. I think that's, that's an important and a healthy way to look at mentorship that doesn't sort of put too much pressure both on yourself or on the person that you're asking for advice. I've been, like I said, I've been so fortunate to work with incredible people where I've learned what you know, one of the things against as it says this is a slight detour. One of the things that one of my mentors said to me, that always stuck with me and drives me every day is at the end of the day, if you can look yourself in the mirror, and look yourself in the eye and feel good about the decisions you've made that day and the person you've been that day. That is success. Right. And thinking about the world that way. It's just it's it's so helpful, right? And that's something I'm trying to teach my kid to now but yeah, so yeah, so I'll close out sort of the your question by saying yes, I've been very Are you lucky? I've had phenomenal mentors. I think I would for the younger folks listening to this, I would encourage you go look for people where there are certain things you want to embody model that maybe that resonate with you, right? Maybe because they, they just have something in common with your background. And then the last thing, please, please, please make it easy for someone to say yes. Right. Like when you're asking somebody for their time, when you're asking somebody for anything, just do your homework, do your research, make it really easy for them to say yes. And guess what they're probably going to say yes. So that's the end of the tour.



Jason Knight 20:35

Now, it's a good detour on I'm gonna try very hard not to do any kind of advertising or calling out for my own mentoring initiative. Maybe I'll put that in the intro. But I just have to add or reassure people that that was not a paid advertisement for mentorship.



Jason Knight 20:51

Right, bear with me for 10 seconds, it would be remiss of me right now not to call out My Mentor Path, a new free mentoring platform where you can get the support you need in your career. So check out the show notes, or head over to my <https://www.mymentorpath.com>, where you can sign up to be a mentor, and mentee, or both,. Right, back to the interview.



Jason Knight 21:10

But obviously, you've moved into leadership, as you've talked about along the way, you've, you've moved into that head of product role you're working on the leadership team in the company, I'm not sure if this is the first leadership role you've had here, or if you kind of had that in previous companies as well. But one of the things that you talked about before, this was how we or indeed, you can turn our perceived disadvantages into advantages in a head of product or Chief Product Officer role. So when you're talking about perceived disadvantages, I mean, you've talked a bit already about your kind of non traditional routine, into product and obviously into product leadership. But are you talking about also the imposter syndrome that you've also touched on? And the internal disadvantages or perceived disadvantages? Are you talking also about external perceptions? And maybe external disadvantages that have been kind of almost reflected onto you by people that you've worked with?

P

Pooja Parthasarathy 22:03

Hmm, that's an interesting question. I'd say a little bit of both, right? And here's how. So I'll take off from the from the external aspect or external side of things. So as you know, I am nine months pregnant with my second, and



Jason Knight 22:19

Yeah, we're all excited!

P

Pooja Parthasarathy 22:22

Yes, we're getting this recorded right in time. I have a two and a half year old and you know, I'm I work at a super early stage startup. So put those things together. And life was just auto auto auto chaos. Right? And I'll tell you, right, this is my second, but like, the first time, you know, I got I got pregnant, I really had a hard time with that. Right. And this is an interesting



mix of both, I think, external and internal perception. So there's, I've said that I've been fortunate enough to work with incredible people where that was never held against me in any way. And if anything, you know, I was able to, I think it turned into an asset in many ways, which I can, which I can speak to in a second. And the unfortunate reality, right, is that's not the case. For a lot of women out there. Like, it is really hard, like continuing your career when you become a mother. And what I'm saying sort of doesn't mitigate that in any way. But, you know, internally, sort of the narrative that I had going on was, I had spent my entire 20s just working great focused on my career, that's all I ever did. And, again, probably like a lot of your listeners, Jason, it's like you identify yourself with your work and with your career, right? And going from that to now suddenly, like, the level of unpredictability, not being able to plan anything. And very simply right, like, you're, you can't spend all your time thinking about work anymore, because you've got a small human to take care of. That was really hard. For me, that was extremely hard for me. And I was convinced that my career would face a setback by virtue of me, you know, becoming a parent and a mother specifically, I felt guilty all the time for not working as much as I used to previously. And I was very, very hard on myself thinking, I need to be better than this. Like, I know, I'm not I feel like shit right now. But I still need to power through this. And I need to work as hard as I used to, right. So that's a lot of the internal narrative that I had the first time I had my, my kid, my daughter. And it's, I feel sort of bad even thinking about those days, right? And so now when I talk to, you know, again, younger women who are in that stage of their careers in their lives, I tell them, like, be kinder to yourself, you know, what you're doing is really hard. And it's important that you recognise how hard this is and how hard you're working so so I think that's sort of the internal manifestation of it, Jason I think externally. Like I said, I felt like the people treated me differently but that actually wasn't really the case. I was working with just really great people. And I think that the last thing I'll say on this thread for now right is so much about this you are pointing around turning perceived disadvantages into advantages. So much of this is about the stories we tell ourselves, right. And the stories we tell ourselves end up being the stories we tell other people. And it's so important to be when I when I you know, when I say Be kind to yourself, it's be kind to yourself, even when the stories you tell yourself, because if you're not right, that's the story, you're going to tell somebody else. And don't do that great. be your champion, you need to be your champion, you cannot expect other people to be your champion.



Jason Knight 25:30

Yeah, I think that's a really interesting point. And the whole idea that you've got to... Yeah, like you say, you got to be your champion, you've got to advocate for yourself, because everyone else is already thinking about all their own problems. And earlier in my career, I would sit there and think, Well, what do you mean, people aren't thinking about me? As much as I think that they're thinking about me? But actually, yeah, like you say, it's, everyone's got their own stuff to deal with. But it feels that you've, through a combination of support, and maybe good company choices have got through that. But do you feel that, in doing that, aside from obviously, the stuff that you've already talked about, like how working in trading has obviously shaped your approach to work? Do you feel that having come through that and gone through, presumably some level of doubt about as you say, whether you could even get this done? Do you think that that really informed how you approach problems at work? Or also how you deal with your team at work? Yeah. Has that really informed your approach as well?



Pooja Parthasarathy 26:24

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And let's say it's, it has in in a few different ways, right? One, so let's say three, three ways, right? Three key ways. One is I'm very comfortable, not having answers. I'm very comfortable not knowing we're in a room full of people. Because I've been in so many situations where I haven't, right. And so and the reason that's important trait as a as a product person, and I tell my team this all the time, I view the job of product as an investor in good ideas, right. And that's a lot of the thinking that I bring from my from my roots, if you will, a PMS job is not to have all the answers. It's not to have the ideas, it's to encourage people around you to bring those ideas to the table. And your job, right as the investor is to say, okay, here again, here's what success looks like, here's, here's what, here's where we're trying to go. And here are ideas that I think will sort of help us get there and fit that bill, right. And so what that frees you up to do right is not feel like you need to have the answers. And it frees you up to play the role of asking questions. So one of my one of my other favourite ways to describe the product job, and especially like the head of job is the Socratic policeman, if you will, right, which is asking a lot of just a lot of pointed questions. It's policing, different, different conversations. But I think that's sort of one thing that that I brought with me into this role. The second is, I love hiring people. And I love talking to people from non traditional backgrounds, right, because there's such a depth of knowledge, I think, there's such a breadth, I would say, of experience that they bring to the table, right, because again, tying it back sort of really tactically, when you're building a product for a user or a set of users, your users or people, right, they all have lives, they all have jobs, they all have worries and concerns. And having a team that comes from different backgrounds, helps you solve for a pretty, you know, let's say, very user base and helps you know, you put yourself in the shoes of somebody who's doesn't again, not doesn't look like you doesn't sound like you. And I think that's that's so critical to building great product is you know, TLDR user empathy. But I think the way you build that, right is by having those different experiences having a well rounded team that's able to embody that. The third thing I'll say, right, is something that is really important to me that again, this will be a slight detour, so bear with me, that I also, you know, price and prioritise and product and company culture is grit and the growth mindset. So slight detour, two books that I cannot recommend enough. One is called the growth mindset. It's by a psychologist called Carol Dweck. Have you read it, Jason?



Jason Knight 29:29

Yep.



Pooja Parthasarathy 29:30

So one and then two, is grit by another psychologist. At Penn, I think, Angela Duckworth is Conquering Fear, that one.



Jason Knight 29:40

I have. Yep.



Pooja Parthasarathy 29:40

So you know what I'm talking about. Right? But I think for your listeners, if I sort of really had to

So you know what I'm talking about. Right? But I think for your listeners, if I sort of really had to summarise the the premise of both the growth mindset book, so Carol Dweck talks about this idea of like the growth versus a fixed mindset, right? The fixed mindset is somebody who praises and identifies eyes with innate traits and innate capabilities. And that's just who they are. Right? I am so and so I am smart. I am X, I am Y. I am Z, That is who I am. The growth mindset or somebody with a growth mindset is somebody who approaches the world where they, I can learn anything, right? And I am capable of learning anything. The difference between those two, right is if you're somebody, let's say if you have that fixed mindset, and especially if you pride yourself on being the smart person in the room, you are more likely to put yourself in situations that will reinforce that smartness. And make you reaffirm right, the fact that you are smart, and again, consequently run away from situations that make you feel like you're not. And so guess what, you're probably going to be in stasis somewhere or the other because you're always looking for affirmation on how smart you are. In contrast, with the growth mindset, which you know, is all about, I think, as Satya Nadella puts it sort of really nicely just like being a learner at all right? The learners all mindset. No, there's, there's limitations to that too, right? Like, doesn't matter how hungry you are, and how willing you are to learn, like, Could I be an astronaut today? And like, probably not, right? There's got to be reasonable there. But I think that that's sort of a I, I'm open to learning. And I'm curious about the world mindset. So when you when you combine that right with Angela Duckworth work, which was on create, the premise of her work, again, is is when you incentivize, or when you praise or when you grow up? Yeah, let's say incentivize right? When you incentivize qualities of smartness of talent of genius, or let's say, if you hire if you solve for that when you're hiring, right? So a classic example of that is looking at your resume and saying, okay, this person has been to the best schools, they have the best grades. And so I know they're smart, I'm going to hire them. Right versus solving for grit and solving for hard work and solving for the person again, who looks maybe a little bit like the underdog, right? But has persisted possessive possessive to get to where they are. That person is much more likely to be successful in their in their personal life and their career than the you know, the Stanford CS grad, for instance. Vast generalisation right there lots of very successful Stanford CS grads out there.



Jason Knight 32:16

We should stop picking on them, I guess!



Pooja Parthasarathy 32:20

Yes, we love you, you know that. Right. But so if you put those two things together, Jason, so you if you have, you know, somebody who is curious and wants to learn and is willing to work really hard to get there. That is magic. That's magic, right? And like, that's the person you want to hire. That's the team you want to build. That's the product person you want to be. And if you don't have those people in early stage companies, I honestly I would say of companies, any any stage, right, but of course, things changes as you grow mature. I would say if you don't have those traits, early stage, especially as a product person, you're just not going to get anywhere because of all the other things we talked about around flying by the seat of pants, hypothesis driven, no data volatile, uncertain. The best thing you can do is be curious and just work your butt off to figure out what you need to do.



Jason Knight 33:10



Jason Knight 33:10

There you go. I'm getting the feeling that Rocky Balboa would make a fantastic product manager.



Pooja Parthasarathy 33:15

Yes, yes, actually. Yes, absolutely. Yes. I agree with that.



Jason Knight 33:21

Okay, so when we originally caught up a little while back, talking about things that maybe we can do to get ahead in our careers, one of the things that you talked about is how to maintain a good relationship with the CEO, but also how to create leverage. Now, it's the unknown for product leaders to clash with visionary CEOs that still want to kind of drive everything from the top. But what do you mean, specifically by creating leverage with CEOs?



Pooja Parthasarathy 33:47

Yeah, that's a that's a really good question. So let me answer. Let me actually just quickly touch on what I think of as leverage, right. And I'll mention another one of my favourite books that I'm sure you've read recently. And I have everyone on my team read high output management by Andy Grove.



Jason Knight 34:02

Oh, yes



Pooja Parthasarathy 34:03

Yes, okay. So again, for folks who haven't read it, the the gist of that book is, you know, Andy Grove talks about sort of the pure people manager, right, and the idea of leverage coming from your team and your time specifically. And as product managers, like until we sort of get further, we're not managing people, but we're, we're managing products and stakeholders and all of that good stuff. Right. So this idea of leverage is around what leverage I think leverage and prioritisation sort of go hand in hand and very clearly so right, because leverage is all about what am I going to prioritise? What are things and problems that I'm going to solve that are high leverage for let's start with us as a company us as a team and for me as a PM. Right and taking that lens lends itself automatically to solving the most, let's say important problems. So with that said, right, when it sort of comes to the I would say the head of product or the CPO relationship With a CEO, look, I think it's probably the most important one. Especially, you know, I would say, again, at any stage, but especially in the early days, when so much of it is about just psychological safety, it's about trust, it's about rapport. It's about knowing, you know, when you hand the baton off to each other for different aspects of product building, I think the three things that I will say that I think have stood me in good stead that I would I would recommend, one is, when you come to the job, right, it doesn't matter what job you're in,

what role you're in with, with the mindset of, I'm solving for what's best for the company, and what's best for the team. I think that makes it self evident in every interaction you have, how you approach problems, I think, how you communicate, why some problems are more important to work on. And I think is really core to building that trust and rapport, especially with the CEO, and especially with the executive, right? Because it says that you're coming at this from the right place. And so when there's disagreement, it's not personal. It's not ego driven. It is about how can we push the company forward? So I think that's number one. And number two, right, is, is I think, setting clear expectations on who owns what and who drives what, right. So Rich Mironov, who we both know and who's just amazing, human amazing product person. So I really leverage, yeah, taught me this right, which is like thinking about it and time horizons, which is, you know, as CPO, or as head of product, let's say you own now an early stage, because everything's basically weeks, not years, or even months, sometimes. It's about okay, what is sort of the time horizon that you own in terms of decision making in terms of planning in terms of strategy? And what are things that the CEO on what time horizon is the CEO, right. And I think having clarity on that on both sides helps a great deal, because you know, where the buck stops, essentially, and you're both informing each other. So let's say if your as a head of product, you know, driving the six month or the 12 month, or whatever that looks like at a slightly mature company, the CEO is more the toilet, 24 months sort of horizon, you know that you have to inform each other? Because you're how you're thinking about the tall 24 month, obviously, in form six trauma strategy and vice versa. Right. So I think that's number two. And then number three, right is, I think it it can be hard thinking of the CEO as a point of leverage, right. So I think to one of your initial questions. And the reason is right, most product people I know myself included, I think when you're early career, especially if you're a sort of one of those eager beaver PMS, which I absolutely was, you think that it's you, you have to do everything, right? Like, I am accountable, I am responsible. I worked for a CPO who, again, I love and was one of my mentors, but who sort of really drilled us into me, which is as a PM, you are accountable for everything, right? If there's if something fails, you're it's your failure. If something succeeds, it's a team success. So that's sort of the mindset. Yes, that's the Extreme Ownership mindset that I, let's say, grew up in, in my product career, right. And again, I think it's an important one. But I think it's important to recognise its boundaries as well, right? Meaning in that mindset, it can often be hard to delegate to other people, and especially delegating to your peers and to the exec team and to the CEO. But I think if you start to shift that to say, okay, you know, I so coming back to this, this idea of like the it's not the product person's job to have all the answers or even all the questions sometimes. It's in many ways, right. So again, this is maybe my third description of product in this one conversation. This one is from Adam Grant, who I also love. He doesn't say it in the context of product, but I think it's very applicable, which is, you know, it's not important to be the smartest person in the room, it's important to be the wisest person in the room was able to take all the smart people thinking and come up with something cohesive and coherent. Right. So if you believe that right, then it becomes really important to say, okay, what are things that the CEO is naturally really good at? And some CEOs tend to be very technically inclined, some are sort of very, you know, revenue inclined? And how do you leverage them to drive projects forward to drive strategy forward, and it's taken me a while to get there to literally be like, Hey, can you please go around this? Can you figure this out? And can you back brief me after it just it felt so uncomfortable doing it the first time, the first few times? But guess what, right? It's actually it works beautifully. It's good. It frees me up to sort of focus on more high leverage things that I can push forward and coming back again, coming full circle to building trust and rapport. It creates that level of trust. to say, Okay, we're both sort of, we're doing this together, you're delegating to me, I'm telling you I, things that I need help with. We're both sort of back briefing each other. And again, now the full circle. That's what drives the company forward.



Jason Knight 40:14

Absolutely some fantastic advice there that hopefully will inspire a few people to have some better relations with their CEOs as well. And where can people find you after this, if they want to hear some more war stories about your time at the sharp end of finance, check out the latest Bollywood gossip, get some advice on their career, or maybe getting some deadlifting tips.



Pooja Parthasarathy 40:34

So I'm not very... actually, I'm barely on social media. I think LinkedIn is probably the best place to find me. Just, you know, send me a message. And I'm happy to happy to chat. And you know, I'll say probably obvious from this conversation I've had so many people helped me so much along the way. So if I can do that for somebody, I will be very, very happy to do that.



Jason Knight 40:54

Absolutely... hear ,hear! Well, I made sure to link that all into the show notes. And hopefully you get a few people heading your direction. Find out more. Well, obviously that's been a fantastic chat. Really glad we could finally get this one over the line and actually chat after speaking about chatting for so long. Obviously wish you all the best for the impending arrival, will hopefully stay in touch but as for now, thanks for taking the time.



Pooja Parthasarathy 41:16

Thank you. Yes. Thanks for having me.



Jason Knight 41:20

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to <https://www.oneknightinproduct.com>, check out some of my other fantastic guests sign up to the mailing list, subscribe on your favourite podcast app and make sure you share your friends so you and they can never miss another episode again. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest but as for now, thanks and good night.