Top 10 Tips for
New
Product
Owners

You're a new Product Owner! Now what?

Product Management expert Kevin Rosengren outlines 10 tips
to break down your next steps into more manageable choices.

Hello, New Product Owner!

Whether you've just taken a CSPO class or recently earned a new title and the team to go with it, building your first new product may feel like a '**paradox of choice**.'

While Scrum talks quite a bit about roles, events, and artifacts, it leaves a lot of room for you to decide just how to get there — how to arrive at a prioritized, well-developed Product Backlog, motivate the Scrum Team around the work to be done, and manage the myriad of stakeholders who may be interested in the work you and the Scrum Team are embarking upon.

Here are 10 tips to break down your next steps into more manageable choices. It's not a huge "How To" manual or PO for Dummies book — just a quick set of tips and a few frameworks to get you started.

1 **Define Your Product Vision**

2 **Communicate Your Vision ... Repeatedly!**

3 **Find Your Passion**

4 **Create a Roadmap — Together**

5 **Mind the Product Backlog**

6 **Focus on Outcomes, Not Output**

7 **Connect with Your Customers**

8 **Plan to Re-Plan**

9 **Take Care of Fellow Team Members**

10 **Have Fun and Enjoy Your Work**

Learn More →

1. Define Your Product Vision

Every Scrum Team and every product needs a vision; something that frames the problem to be solved, the people who have the problem, and how you are going to solve it. It's the foundation of context and one of the really important parts of your job as Product Owner. Maximizing value delivered by the Scrum Team often means rallying them around a compelling problem or idea. If an overall vision doesn't exist, it may be hard for the Scrum Team to understand the priority of an item or the context in which it should be delivered.

Your organization may have already identified the vision when building your Scrum Team or, your executive sponsor may have shared a high-level vision with you. If that is the case, a lot of work has been done for you. Congratulations! If not, it may be up to you to develop the vision. This, too, has it's benefits, as it allows you to collaborate on the vision together with your Scrum Team.

Framework:

Vision Statement through Product Differentiation

One quick way to develop a vision is to create a vision statement using a Product Vision by Differentiation framework. It is both a simple and powerful tool. If you have trouble with a section, set aside a time-box and use some supporting frameworks to develop an answer.

STEP 1: Define your target customers. Who has the problems you want to solve and will benefit from the product or service you are developing? Give them a name, say a few words about who they are. If you have personas, reference them to gain clarity or inspiration.

STEP 2: Identify the most important problems your customers have. If you are lucky, you might already have a well-defined and tested problem set. If not, you could leverage a quick Empathy Map or Customer Profile framework to identify a few.

STEP 3: In one sentence describe your product in a way that defines how it solves your customers' problem.
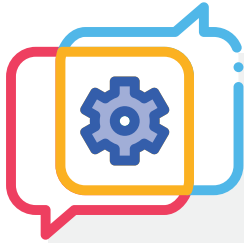
Bonus Tip:

Always tie your product or service back to your target customer and the problems you are solving. If they don't connect, that might be a sign that you're not truly solving your customer's problem.

STEP 4: Write down at least one alternative solution to your product — a competing product or some other solution.

_____

_____

_____

STEP 5: Write down two or three ways your product is different and/or better than the alternative solution.

_____

_____

_____

STEP 6: Go back to Step 3. Is your description defensible or unlike other solutions your customer may be using? In other words, can they easily replicate the solution your product is offering? If so, keep iterating to find the defensible, problem-solving capability unique to your product or service.

Now take the work you have done in the six steps above, and use that information to vision template below:

For

_____

[insert target customers from Step 1]

Who are dissatisfied with

_____

[insert problem from Step 2]

Our product is a

_____

[insert defensible, problem-solving description from Step 6]

Unlike

_____

[insert alternative solution from step 4]

Our product provides

_____

[insert the two or three key capabilities from step 5]

Voila!

In a few simple steps, you have just created a clear product vision that you can leverage with your team. Staring at the task of creating a vision may sound daunting, but by leveraging a framework with a few simple steps, you can quickly create a clear and useful Product Vision. Now you're ready for the next tip: communicating your vision.
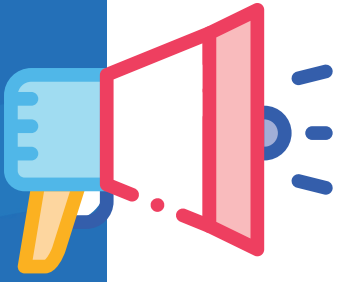
2.Communicate Your Vision ... Repeatedly!

Now that you have a vision defined, review it with your sponsor and as many stakeholders as you can. Edit it, improve it, and refine it again. Then, take it to your Developers and ScrumMaster. Review it with them and answer their questions.

Once you're happy with it, share it widely. Be proud of the work you are doing. Post your vision prominently on a wall in your team room or on your shared online workspace — a wiki or some other central repository.

You're not done yet. You are now the vision keeper. You will probably encounter stakeholders you haven't met yet and you'll need to share the vision with them, too. Use your vision to introduce new team members to what your team solving and align them with what your team is building.

You may find you'll need to remind team members and stakeholders about the vision from time to time. This includes what it is and what it is not. You may also be able to filter some requests from others because they do not align with your product vision.

3. **Find Your Passion**

The Product Owner role is demanding. It comes with long hours and requires working with many different people; the Developers, customers, internal and external stakeholders, and so on. If you have a passion for the product on which you are working, it will fuel you along the way.

Framework:

Articulating Your Purpose

Passion *can* be cultivated but sometimes it's hard. If passion doesn't work for you, consider finding a personal purpose in your work. There are many ways to do this, but is one way to frame up the purpose for your work using the following easy format.

Our product improves the lives of:

_____

... and that's important to me because:

_____

Example: "*Our product improves the work-lives of first responders, and that is important to me because my grandmother was saved by the quick response of the fire department.*"

When things get tough, and from time to time they will, passion for your work will keep you going. You will need it during those late nights you are wrapping up development or working hard to prepare your Product Backlog for Sprint Planning the next day.

4. Create a Roadmap — Together

By far, the most effective roadmaps are built through collaboration – with customers, sponsors, stakeholders, Developers... you name it. Roadmaps developed in a silo are dead on arrival. Collaboration helps to center on the needs of the customer and goals of your organization, while planning for incremental delivery of value in reasonable time frames.

You will find a myriad of formats for product roadmaps, but the best are rooted in collaboration. Here is a quick framework for building a collaborative roadmap.

Framework:

Collaborative Roadmapping

Step 1: Do your research. Whatever format you choose, your first job is to gather real customer information about problems they are trying to solve by using your product. One simple way to do this is by talking to them. Jump ahead to Tip #7 for some help on how to do that.

Step 2: Bring others together. Invite people from across your company to collaborate on building the product roadmap together — engineering, architecture, sales, marketing, customer support,

training, professional services...anyone that wants to participate. The key here is to be inclusive, not exclusive.

Step 3: Lay it all out. When you get together with everyone, lay out your initial assessment of the prioritized features over the next six to twelve months of work, as informed by your customer research. Ask sales for input and adjustments. Next, ask engineering if there is anything they need to support delivering those features. Then talk about market windows by asking marketing about the planned activities for the next few months. See if any of the marketing activities like trade shows align to a market window for a release.

Invite customer support to add their input to the feature list, and perhaps product features they need to serve customers. Include all of these to the roadmap.

Step 4: Do it all again. While this sounds like a step-by-step meeting, in reality, it's a dynamic interaction between the many people who bring different points of view to the product. Listen to what they have to say and facilitate the conversation to bring out all the salient points. The goal of the collaboration is to seek alignment and to create a clear plan for the next few months.

Aim to spend a full day with the group iterating on roadmap items and talking about the plan. If you can't get a full day, start with at least half a day. This is an exercise that takes time but is an investment that pays off in the long run. Be sure to capture any questions the group can't answer, any decisions the group makes, and any other important notes from the collaboration. Then, be diligent on follow-up on them and sharing outcomes.

There you have it... A roadmap that is born out of collaboration and an effective bridge between your vision and your Product Backlog.
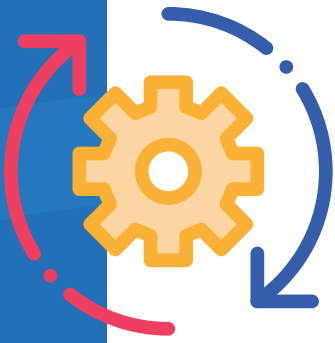
5. Mind the Product Backlog

How much time should you be spending on your Product Backlog? The fact is that there is no single or magical answer. But what we do know is that if you aren't spending time tending, refining, and generally ensuring that you have a healthy Product Backlog, as a new Product Owner you are going to quickly get into trouble.

As the Product Owner for your Scrum Team, it's up to you to ensure that the Product Backlog is maintained. Take a moment and think about how you spend your time throughout the Sprint.

- **Find a natural rhythm** to ensure that you are carving out enough time to tend to the Product Backlog. Maybe that's a little each day; maybe a set time throughout the week. Ultimately, you will want to experiment and figure out what rhythm is right for you and your team.

- **Talk to your team** about how much time they can spend with you refining the Product Backlog. A good rule of thumb might be to spend no more than 10% of the Scrum Team's capacity on Product Backlog refinement during a Sprint. Consider that in a typical 2-week Sprint, that amounts to a whole day — about 8 hours. Talk to your Scrum Team about how much involvement they want to have in helping you refine the Product Backlog. It could be a whole Scrum Team event or it could be just a few people who are interested in helping. Regardless, it's usually a good idea to get them involved.

How much of the Product Backlog you should refine is the topic of many debates. If in doubt, about midway through the current Sprint ask yourself, "Am I ready for the next Sprint?" If the answer is no, you have your work cut out for you. Looking ahead, aim to have 75%-85% of what you think your Developers can commit to in the next Sprint ready by the middle of the current Sprint. Beyond that, aim to have 50% of the stories in the following Sprint and 25% of the stories two Sprints out refined to ensure that you have a "ready" Product Backlog.

Caution:

Don't work too deep into the Product Backlog. If so, you will probably be spending too much time on things that you may not need or on things that will change between now and when your team is ready to pick them out of the Product Backlog for the next Sprint.
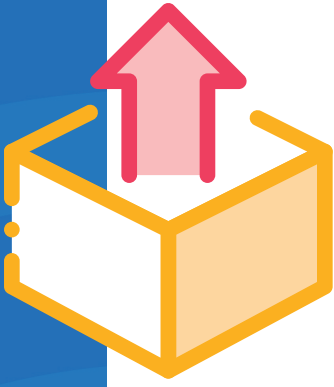
6. **Focus on Outcomes, Not Output**

Scrum Teams should remember that success isn't just "slinging code." It's delivering real value to customers and the organization. Scrum Teams can crank through code and deliver features each Sprint that never get used, or that don't deliver the right value to customers. That's not success. Help ensure the success of what your Scrum Team builds (guided by your vision) by measuring outcomes, not outputs. Put another way — it's not how much you get done, it's how much what you got done does for your customers. The fact that three new features were released following the last Sprint may be irrelevant if the goal was to increase sales but in the weeks following sales remain flat.

Here are a few ways to help keep focused on the outcomes of the value you are delivering:

- **Set Sprint Goals**: Many Scrum Teams skip right past this step in Sprint Planning. This is very important in keeping the Scrum Team focused on why they are delivering what they deliver each Sprint. Establish Sprint Goals at the beginning of Sprint Planning and carve some time out at the end of planning to look back at what the Scrum Team is planning to deliver. Think about whether or not what the Scrum Team is focusing on achieves the goals.

- **Assess the Value of Each Goal**: Not all Sprint Goals have the same weight. As you are thinking about Sprint Goals,

ask your stakeholders about how they might assess the importance of each Sprint Goal. You might be surprised at what they feel is important. You can also assign a relative numeric value to each. At the end of the Sprint Review, ask the stakeholders to weigh in on how much of the value they think the Scrum Team delivered in that Sprint, as related to the Sprint Goals. This will be a leading indicator of whether or not you will achieve the desired outcomes.

- **Build Data Gathering into Features**: Don't just build features, instrument them. Make it easy to quickly measure the value you are delivering by instrumenting the features you build so that you can quickly gather data to measure the outcomes. This can be as simple as pixel tagging to measure traffic or larger data gathering tools to measure shopping patterns through your mobile app.

7. **Connect with Your Customers**

Framework:

Immerse, Observe and Engage

Design Thinking, as a framework, uses some great strategies for gaining empathy for your customers through observing and engaging with them directly. The good folks at the *Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford* have even produced this very handy Ethnography Field Guide which is a great reference for new Product Owners on how to gain insights into your customers' behavior. It even includes step-by-step instructions on how to observe your customers, how to have an easy conversation with them, and how to capture what you learned in a structured way.

Here is the important part... don't stop talking to them! Customer behavioral patterns evolve over time and their problems change. You need to keep up with them. You can't do that if your insights are stale. So, make it a point to consistently get out there and talk to those folks for which you are solving problems. You will uncover new needs to fulfill and new uses for your products. That is a guarantee.

8. Plan to Re-Plan

Plans are just that... plans. And what do plans do? They change. As a Product Owner, you have to be ready for, and okay with, scrapping yesterday's plans and making new ones. The world around us changes, and the last thing that you want to do is to be stuck in yesterday's outdated plans.

Remember that plans are forecasts and not commitments. For certain, many roadmaps changed as a result of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Plans must adapt to the changing consumer, competitor, and even geopolitical landscapes around them. That's why you are working in an Agile environment, right?

Ensure that you establish conditions that trigger replanning. These triggers could be based on time — for instance, at the end of each Sprint, refresh the release plan — or changes in market conditions — sales growth has decreased 5%, refresh the roadmap. Though usually the result of something catastrophic, even a Sprint can be canceled and replanned.

Caution:

A Sprint cancellation is the nuclear option and should only be used in the event of a major change.

9. Take Care of your Fellow Team Members

Your Scrum Team should be the most important group of people in your work life — put them above (almost) all else. Without them, you will not be delivering anything. So, take good care of them. Here are a few ideas to set you apart as a top-rated Product Owner.

- **Buy them food.** Stock your team room with plenty of snacks, candy, health bars, and the like. If remote, send them a care package from time to time. A little pick-me-up may be just what someone needs to keep going when they are having a tough time debugging some code, or an enticement to press forward on in long Sprint Planning event.

- **Get to know them 1:1.** Spend a little time with each team member, just the two of you, to get to know them for who they are as a person and not just as a team member. In return, be open and vulnerable with them and let them get to know you as well. Take interest and remember little things like their favorite food, sports team, or partner's name. These little things can make a big difference.

- **Be available.** There is nothing worse than your Scrum Team getting stuck because you, the Product Owner, aren't there to answer a question or give feedback on something new. Ensure that you establish what your Scrum Team needs early on in terms of your time — and then stick with it. With that agreement as a baseline, know that at times they will need you more from you and others they will need you less. This doesn't mean that you can't take a vacation, but it does mean that you need to ensure that the Scrum Team knows when you won't be available. You also might need to spend a little extra time with them before you leave.

Good care and feeding of your Scrum Team is a critical part of your new role as Product Owner. An investment in your Scrum Team will return dividends in spades.

Bonus Tip:

Saying "No" is one of the hardest things a Product Owner must do. But, it's easier to say no to a request that doesn't support the product's clear vision.
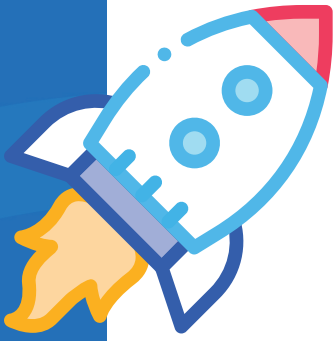
10. Have Fun and Enjoy Your Work

Probably the most given advice, but do have fun in your new role. Being a Product Owner on a Scrum Team that produces great work can be so much fun and so fulfilling — you should enjoy it.

Good Luck!

About the Author

Kevin Rosengren, Senior Vice President
In his role at Applied Frameworks, Kevin leverages his decades of experience in Product Management to lead many of our large-scale consulting engagements.

He is a Certified Scrum Professional - Product Owner and Certified Scrum Professional - ScrumMaster as well as a certified SAFe Program Consultant.