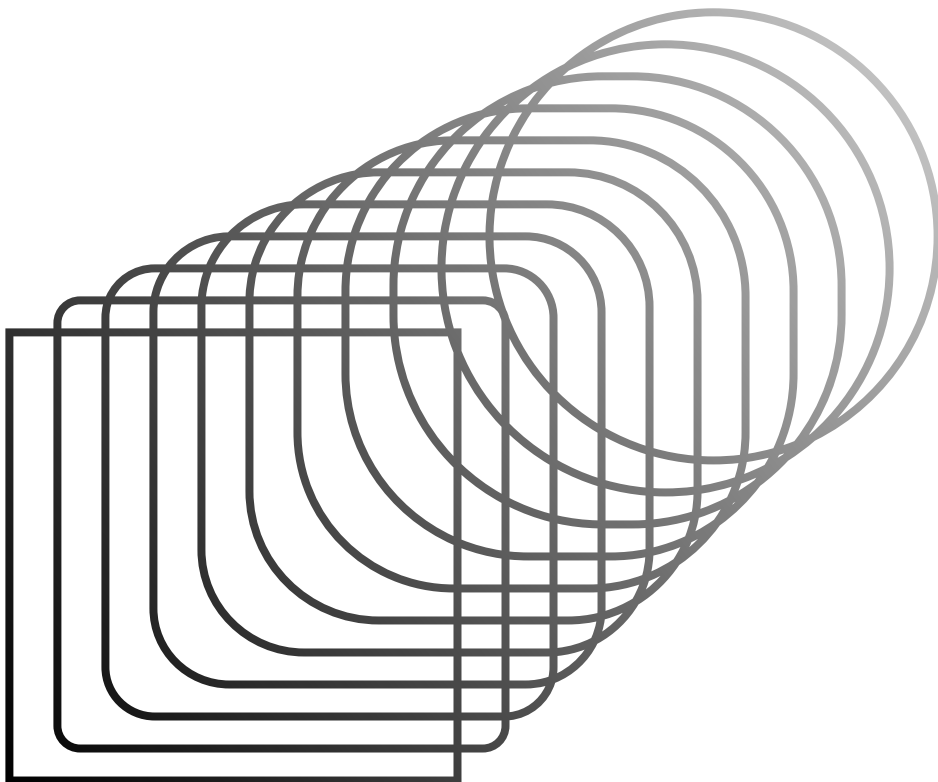


# 10 Dysfunctions Of Product Management

& How Productboard Can Help

Written in partnership with Prodifly

**PRODIFY™**



 productboard

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**“Happy families are all alike;  
every unhappy family is  
unhappy in its own way.”**

Leo Tolstoy  
Anna Karenina

## **Product management is a paradox. Consider the following questions:**

- ◆ Does product management deliver outcomes for the business or the customer?
- ◆ Is product management an art or a science?
- ◆ Does product management succeed by setting the right priorities now or by planning farther ahead?
- ◆ Should product managers be held fully accountable for results, or do they lack the necessary authority?

We could keep going with these kinds of questions, but the answer to all of them would still be the same: both! That's the inherent complexity of product management. It's the reason so many companies struggle to understand the role, and even the companies who "totally get it" end up struggling anyway.

Over the past 8 years, [Prodivy](#) has advised and coached more than 80 SaaS companies to help them become more product-driven. As you might imagine, we've seen hard-working product teams struggling all the time, even under the best of conditions. While there are many things that can go wrong, we've identified the most common dysfunctions in product management and named them so teams can talk about them openly in the hopes of addressing them. If some of these seem familiar, then this is the ebook for you.

We'll delve into each of these dysfunctions so you can see if they are representative of the challenges you're dealing with in your company. You may find you've experienced most or even all of them at one time or another. Rest assured that doesn't signal incompetence or imply your product team is deficient or unskilled. On the contrary, these issues are so prevalent that almost everyone who has worked in product management will have struggled with them at one point or another. I certainly have, and I'm guilty of a few myself. As you read each of them, mark which ones ring true at your company, and read on to see how Productboard can help you address each one.

# Overview: The 10 Dysfunctions of Product Management



## 1. THE HAMSTER WHEEL

A focus on output over outcomes



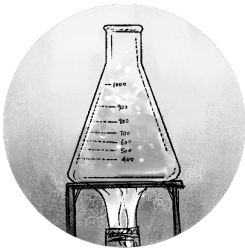
## 2. THE COUNTING HOUSE

An obsession with internal metrics



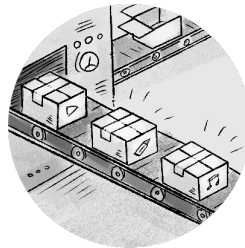
## 3. THE IVORY TOWER

A lack of customer research



## 4. THE SCIENCE LAB

Optimization to the exclusion of all else



## 5. THE FEATURE FACTORY

An assembly line of features



## 6. THE BUSINESS SCHOOL

The overuse of science and data



## 7. THE ROLLER COASTER

Fast-paced twists and turns



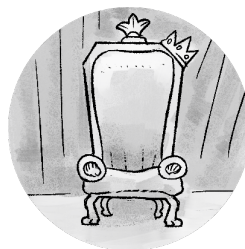
## 8. THE BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

Overengineering for future unknowns



## 9. THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

Trying to keep everyone happy



## 10. THE THRONE ROOM

Whipsaw decision-making from the person in charge



## About the Author

[Rajesh Nerlikar](#) is a Co-Founder and [Principal Product Advisor/Coach at Prodifly](#) and co-author of the best-selling product book, [Build What Matters](#).

Rajesh has more than 16 years of product management experience. Over the past 4 years, he's advised and coached nearly 40 companies on product strategy, team development and operations, from startup founders to growth stage product executives to entire enterprise product teams.

Prior to Prodifly, he was a technology consultant at Accenture, an entrepreneur, a product manager at Opower, a senior product manager at HelloWallet, a director of product at Morningstar, and the Interim Vice President of Product and Design at Savonix, a Prodifly client.



## **Dysfunction #1: The Hamster Wheel — a focus on output over outcomes**

On a hamster wheel, all that matters is continuing to run, even though you're not getting anywhere. Similarly, sometimes product teams are almost entirely focused on output — hitting deadlines — with little regard for the outcome.

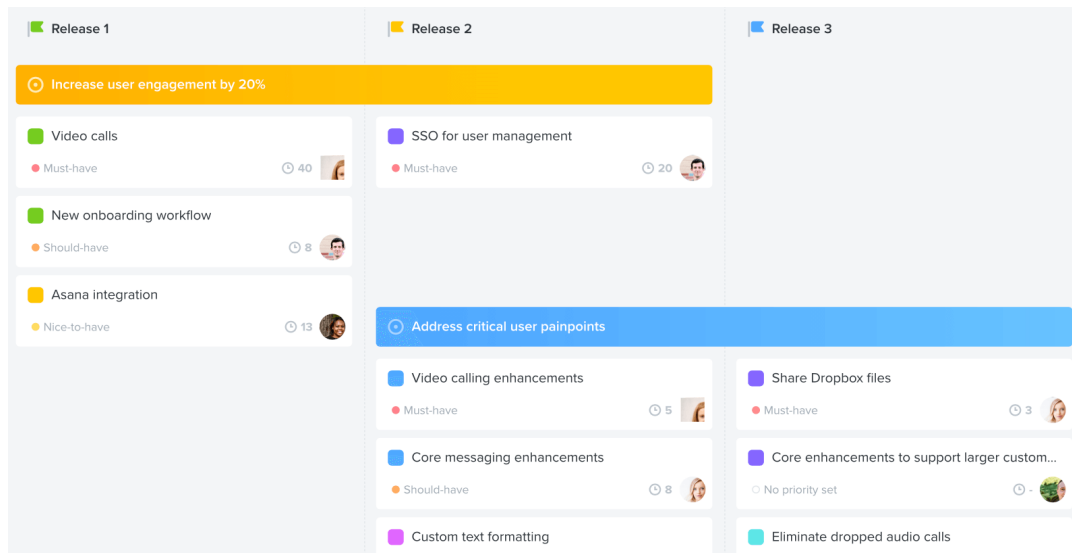
Compare these two questions and you'll see the difference in perspective:

- ◆ Did you ship that feature on time? (output-oriented)
- ◆ Did that feature deliver value to customers and grow revenue? (outcome-oriented)

What's the use of shipping a feature on time if no customer wants or is willing to pay for it?

## Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

To escape the hamster wheel, use Productboard [to create an outcome-driven roadmap](#) and emphasize what metrics your proposed product changes are expected to move (rather than just when the releases are planned). After the release, be sure to go back and measure whether the changes delivered the expected outcomes. Then communicate the results to your team and stakeholders, along with any recommendations on the next steps.





## **Dysfunction #2: The Counting House — an obsession with internal metrics**

In the counting house, the focus is entirely on internal metrics with no regard for customer success. Many product teams become obsessed with internal metrics like revenue growth, monthly active users, and customer retention.

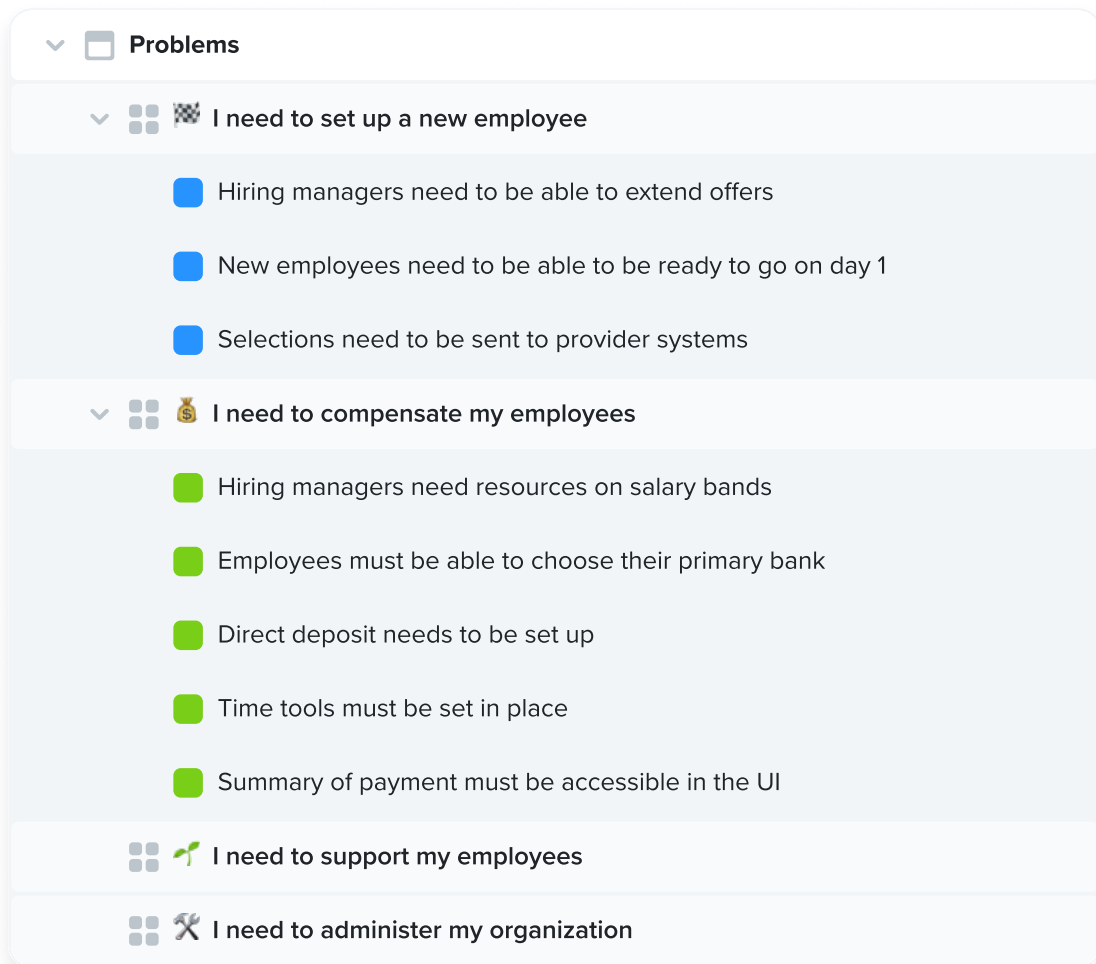
The truth is, most internal metrics are trailing indicators of a product's success, and therefore shouldn't be the primary focus of product management.

It's far better to answer the question, "How can we effectively deliver greater value to our customers?" If you can answer that question and create a good business model around the answer, your internal metrics will almost always follow suit.



## Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

To ensure you never lose sight of your customer's needs, [create a hierarchy](#) that emulates how your customers would think about what you're working on. For example, you could use a [Jobs-to-be-Done hierarchy](#) to show how your work is helping users get different jobs done, as seen in the example below.



You could also implement [our concept of customer outcome pyramids](#) by orienting your hierarchy around metrics your customers would use to measure your product's value, like saving them time in completing a task or hitting a personal goal like losing weight or exercising more. This may not feel natural, but going through the process of identifying the customer value proposition for each feature in your existing product/on your roadmap can force you to see if your product is helping customers achieve the outcomes they care about. If you can't articulate why a feature is valuable, it begs the question of whether it's needed.



## **Dysfunction #3: The Ivory Tower — a lack of customer research**

In the ivory tower, product teams become so removed and so far above the customers that they start thinking they know their customers better than the customers know themselves. Consequently, they never really talk to their customers, which means they risk building a product no one wants or needs. This is one of the most common, and in my mind, egregious, dysfunctions.

This can also lead to mistrust between product management and other departments. Product management feels like they're building the right product (though they may not be), so when the product doesn't perform well, they assume the fault lies elsewhere.

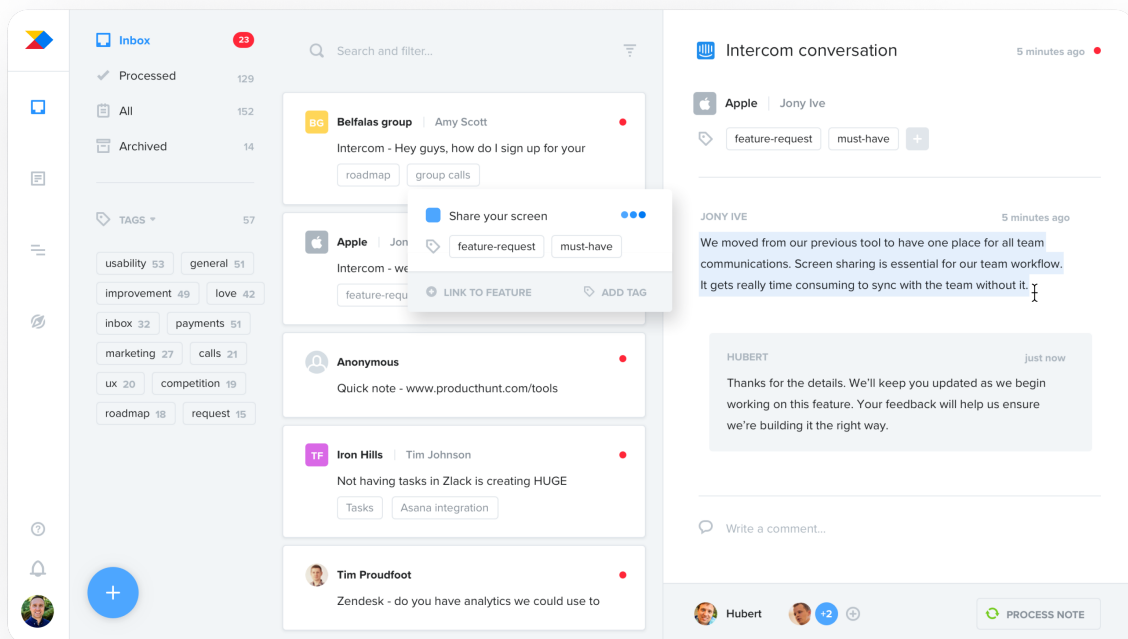
The ivory tower is a trap. Stay on the ground with your customers.

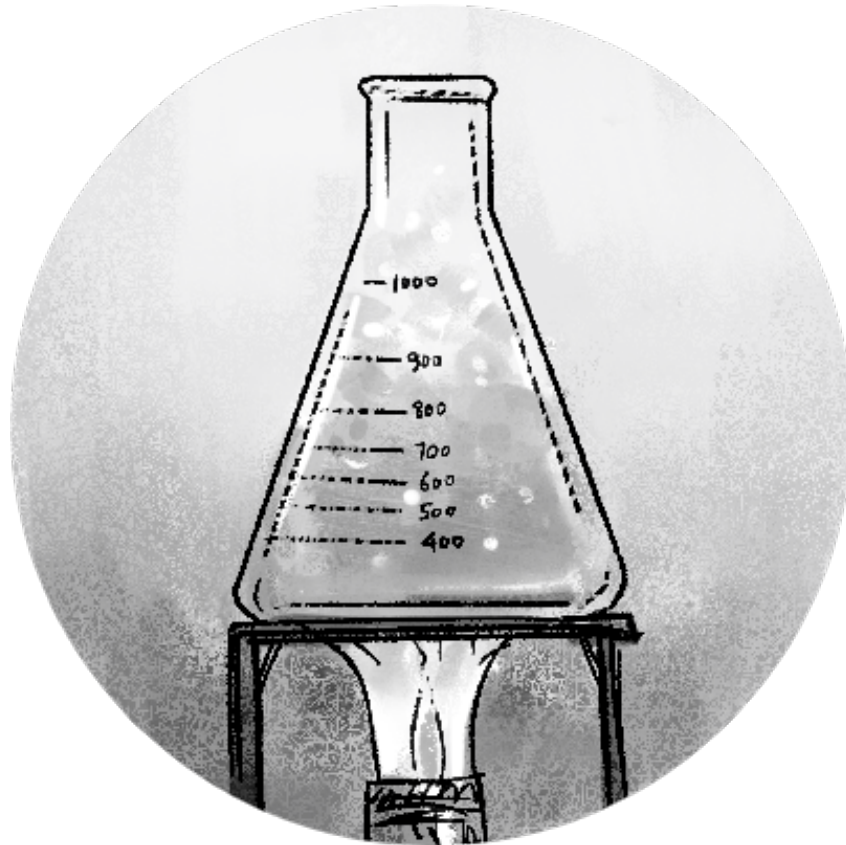
# Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

There are quite a few features in Productboard to help you better understand your users:

1. [Use the Insights board](#) to [link customer insights and feedback directly to the features](#) you're working on.
2. You can also collect feedback and ideas directly from users via the [Portal](#).
3. You can further clarify who you're targeting with your roadmap by [segmenting your users manually](#) or based on the new [Amplitude behavioral cohort integration](#) (for example, find what power users are saying)

By using these features, anyone trying to understand your roadmap will be able to read what customers actually said or what your team heard that led to the feature. Now it will be more clear to stakeholders why you prioritized solving a specific customer problem and how the solution factors in all the feedback received.





## **Dysfunction #4: The Science Lab — optimization to the exclusion of all else**

In the science lab, product teams tend to focus all of their efforts on highly measurable yet superficial improvements to their product. Collectively, these small-scale optimizations don't do much to innovate or add customer value.

For more and more companies, optimization has become the be-all and end-all rather than a facet of a balanced product development roadmap. The assumption is that making improvements to existing solutions is the one thing that will drive results, but even effective optimizations can't take the place of real innovation.

Sometimes you need new solutions, not optimizations.

## Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

It's important to balance your roadmap between innovation, iteration, and operation. We also suggest you do a top-down allocation exercise to get stakeholders aligned on what percentage of product development capacity should go towards each category. The ratios likely depend on the product lifecycle stage. Early on, it's mostly innovation, then mostly iteration as you seek product/market fit, and then mostly operation as you scale your product.

### 3 CATEGORIES FOR ROADMAP BALANCING

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#### 1. INNOVATION

Bold changes to make leaps and bounds towards the customer journey vision

- New features
- Overhauls to existing features
- Architectural changes to support future end state
- Integrations with partners

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#### 2. ITERATION

Incremental changes to the existing product to deliver additional customer & business value

- Conversion funnel optimizations
- A/B testing
- Small fixes that provide incremental lift of a KPI
- One-off feature requests or enhancements

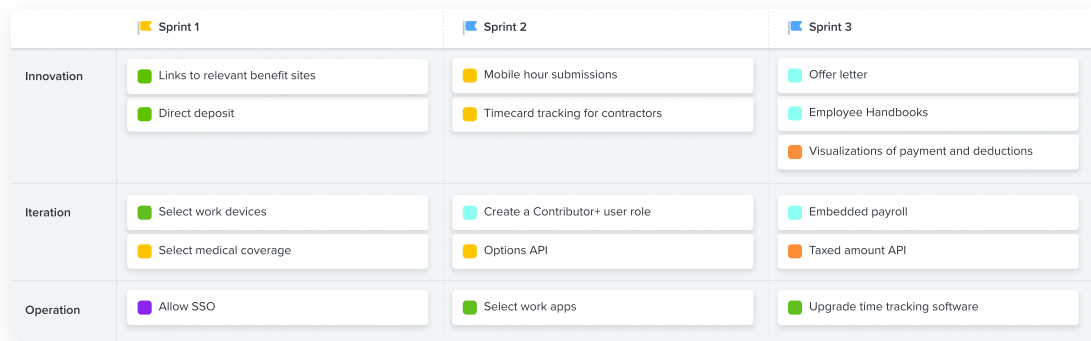
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#### 3. OPERATION

The cost of managing a modern SaaS product

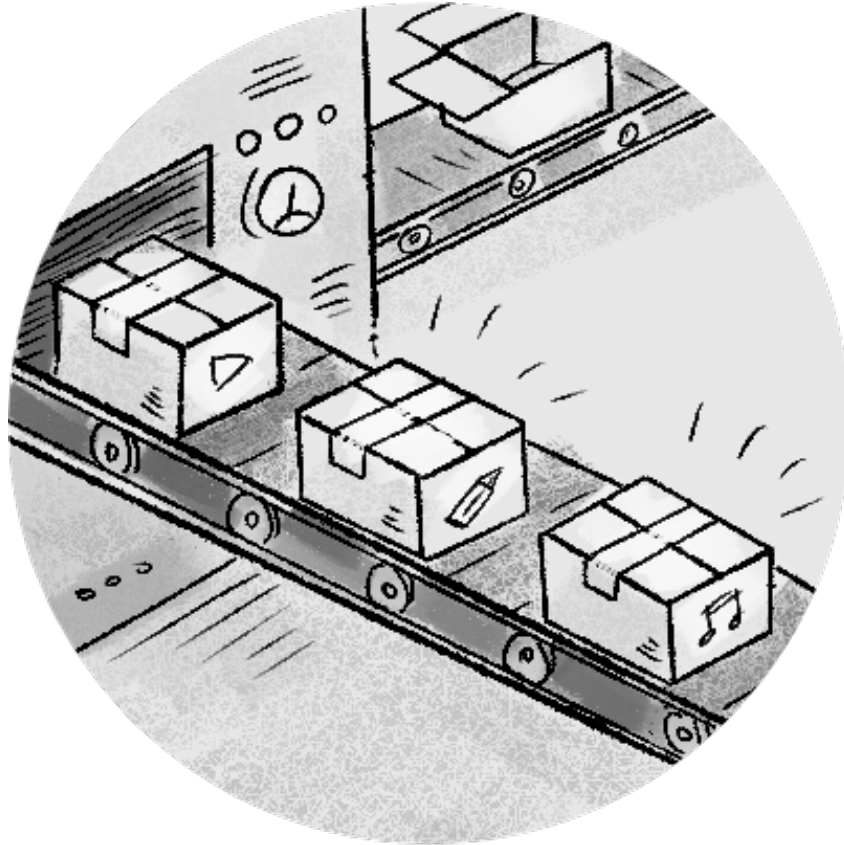
- Security/data privacy
- Performance/up time
- Technical debt/ pgrades
- Internal tooling
- Bug fixes

Through Productboard, you can help visualize how much of your roadmap is going to each of these three categories of work using swim lanes. See the example below:



This visualization can help your roadmap audience:

- ◆ Understand how much of a lift they can expect from different roadmap items (incremental for iteration, step-wise for innovation).
- ◆ Scan the roadmap artifact to quickly digest how much capacity is allocated to each category. That is, if they see a lot of innovation cards, they'll know we're investing a lot in innovation.



## **Dysfunction #5: The Feature Factory — an assembly line of features**

What does a feature factory build? Features.

When is a feature factory done building features? Never.

That's the problem with being a feature factory: there's always the next feature to build. Product teams fall into this trap because they are led to believe by customers or internal stakeholders that if they just had this one next feature, they will close incremental deals or keep customers who might otherwise leave.

Sometimes, it works out that way, but more often than not, the team discovers that yet another feature is also needed. At some point, you need to break the cycle.

## Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

You have to create a reason to pause the factory and break the cycle. To do so, consider using Productboard in a couple of different ways to take a breather and measure the impact of your team's work:

1. Use Insights to [build a sustainable feedback loop](#) so you can hear what users are saying about the new features you're building. Are they aware of the new feature? Do they understand the value? Do they like using it?
2. [Integrate with an analytics product like Amplitude](#) to see feedback from specific segments. Hopefully, the feedback from them is getting better (for example, "I'm so glad y'all finally built this feature — it was much-needed! Now I can \_\_\_\_\_")

Creating a process to pause and look back on your product development efforts can help combat a common sentiment from leadership to "just keep building" to showcase output/regular releases to their stakeholders. Instead, you can show whether you're working on the right problems and solving them in a way that users appreciate. Also, think about how to create a cadence to share these learnings with your stakeholders so they better understand why the "factory is shut down" and that constant output isn't the only path to product success.





## Dysfunction #6: The Business School — overuse of science and data

Business school is where you go to analyze business but not actually do business. Similarly, product teams can get so wrapped up in over-analyzing everything that they avoid making tough but essential judgment calls.

Some product managers will meticulously calculate return on investment (ROI) analyses to decide which features to pursue. With this approach, no product decisions are being made at all. Typically, it's simply the lowest-effort improvements that end up above the cutline.

To make strategic decisions, you must consider the customers and the larger business strategy, not just mathematically calculated ROIs.

### Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

Product management is part art, part science. Knowing when to use data vs. your gut instinct takes years to master (plus you need time for that gut instinct to mature). With [Productboard's new commenting feature \(in beta\)](#) you can add some commentary on why something is prioritized so your roadmap audience can understand and ask follow-up questions, keeping the conversation contextualized to the roadmap item.



## **Dysfunction #7: The Roller Coaster — fast-paced twists and turns**

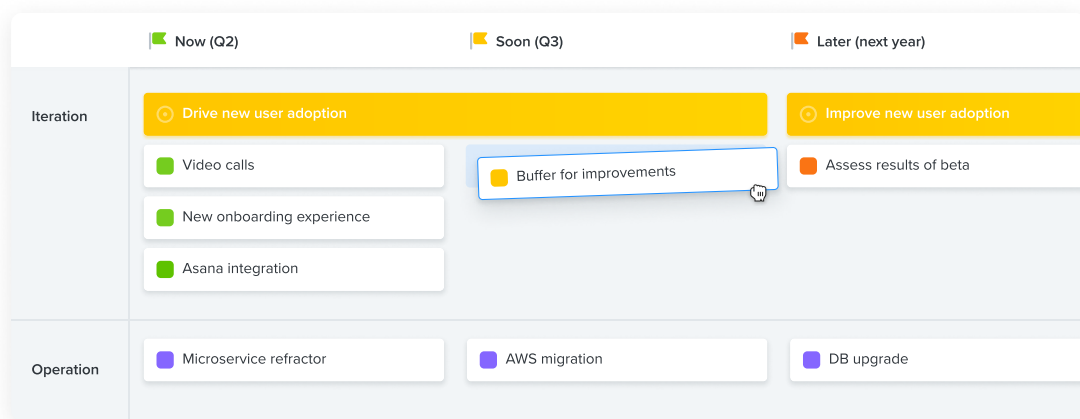
A roller coaster is all about fast thrills and wild, whiplashing movements. In product management, investors and executives like to see immediate results, and when those results don't materialize right away, they can be tempted to pivot suddenly, creating roller-coaster whiplash.

You need to be patient and provide sufficient opportunities for success. Otherwise, you'll get false negatives, where a feature that is truly a good idea fails because there wasn't time to properly execute it. Daisy-chained together, these false negatives result in a headache-inducing roller coaster ride for product development that ends up in exactly the same place it started.

## Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

Combating this dysfunction will require some process discipline to create patience. To do this, you'll need a buffer built into the roadmap so the team can find time to look back at previous releases to analyze user behavior metrics and collect qualitative feedback.

Within Productboard, you can create that buffer and manually place it into a roadmap so that stakeholders know there's time reserved to work on *something*, although **what** may not be known yet. This way, you slow the roller coaster and get stakeholders used to the idea of a post-release "cool down" instead of an immediate pivot because the first version wasn't perfect (which it rarely is).





## **Dysfunction #8: The Bridge to Nowhere — over-engineering for future unknowns**

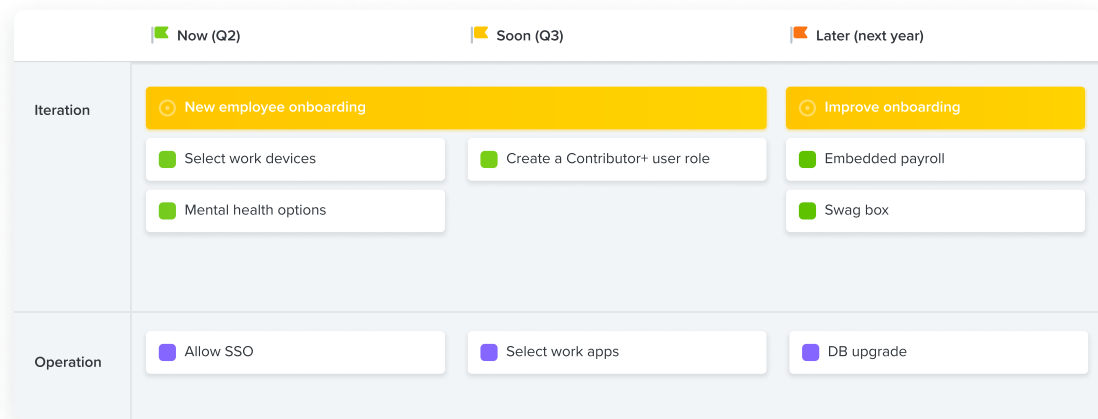
Imagine if a team of engineers designed and constructed a bridge over a river to connect a city to a wilderness area where another city might someday exist. They invest a tremendous amount of time, money, and resources, and then the second city never gets built. What a waste!

That's what happens with many product teams. They get excited about developing the infrastructure to get the product just right and then end up overengineering a product, trying to account for future needs that aren't relevant — and may never be.

Focus on current needs. In the future, you can always adjust.

## Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

Once again, using color coding or swim lanes to show what roadmap items are related to the infrastructure, architecture, or technical debt can help stakeholders understand *what* the major investments are so you can get alignment on whether the size of the bet matches the expected customer and business value.





## **Dysfunction #9: The Negotiating Table — trying to keep everyone happy**

Sometimes, product meetings can turn into a negotiating table as the product manager tries to give everyone what they want.

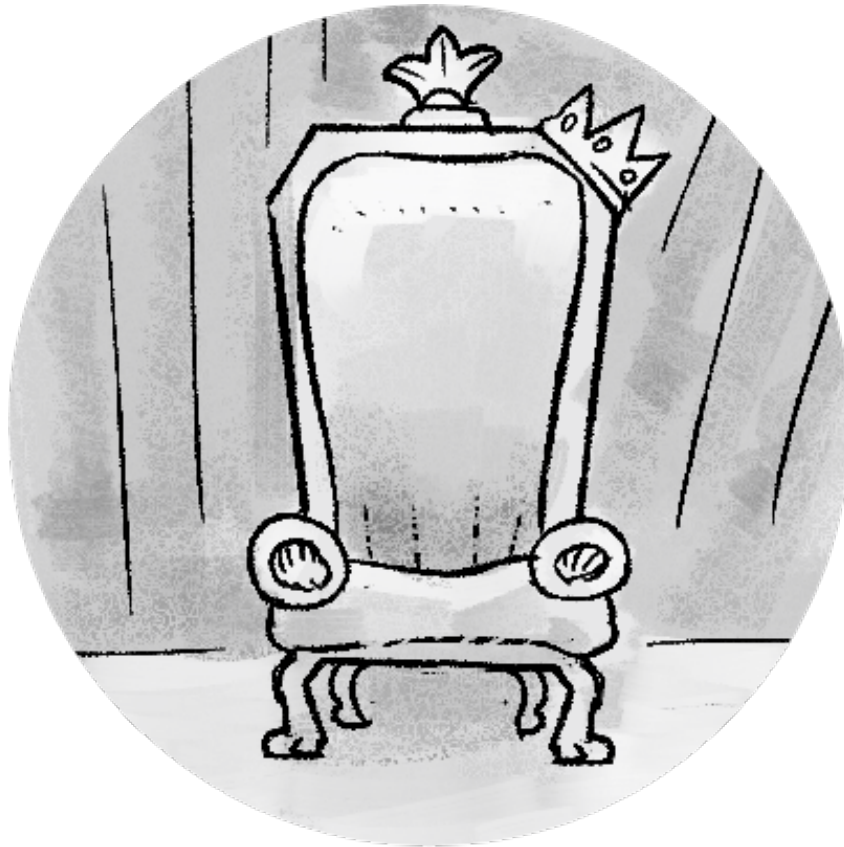
Product managers often believe that success means keeping all of their stakeholders happy — or, at least, minimizing their unhappiness — but when teams and individuals throughout the organization collectively want more than engineering can potentially deliver, this becomes practically impossible.

It's not your job to give everyone what they want. Your job is to give customers what they want. When you prioritize the right things for the customer, you help every team, whether those teams realize it or not.

## Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

One simple way to ensure everyone understands why you might need to say no to some ideas/ requests vs. others is to have a transparent prioritization framework. [Productboard's drivers and prioritization scores](#) can help you show the value vs. effort tradeoff that led to your decision on whether to include something in the roadmap or not. This way, viewers of the roadmap can drill into the scoring to understand where their items stand.

	DRIVERS			RELEASES	
	Value	Effort	Value/Effort Score	Release 1	Release 2
▼  Innovation		43	112		
▼  New employee onboarding		27	69		
Links to relevant benefit sites		2	50		
>  Direct deposit		5	16		
>  Timecard tracking for contractors		20	3		



## Dysfunction #10: The Throne Room — whipsaw decision-making from the person in charge

Sometimes, the founder or CEO just can't let go, and they morph from CEO to king or queen in a throne room. They make and override decisions on anything and everything, sometimes without even offering a rationale.

In these situations, the CEO typically fails to drive alignment around the product direction, so no one really understands what they're doing or why.

It's an impossible situation for a product team that prevents the scaling of the company beyond a single decision-maker. For the most effective product management, the product team needs the ability to call their own shots.

### Addressing this dysfunction with Productboard

I recently talked to the creator of the [SU-RICE prioritization framework](#). Through Productboard, you can [customize your scorecard](#) to include a field for the source of the idea and user persona who'd benefit, placing a higher emphasis on customers, sales, or specific execs (or not!).





## About Prodigy

If you like what you've read, we encourage you to connect with us to learn more about who we serve and how we can help. We offer variations of the following core services to founders, CEOs, product executives, product team leads, individual PMs, and investors. Many clients use multiple services and have opted to continue working with us for years as their product needs evolve.

- **Executive / Team Coaching:** Helping product leaders and their teams deliver more customer and business value, sharpen their product skills, feel more confident in their decisions, and ultimately reach their career goals
- **Strategic Advising:** Guiding teams to align on their key customer and business outcomes, defining a customer journey vision, and crafting a product strategy to realize that vision
- **Hiring:** Confirming product team needs, crafting a compelling job description, screening candidates (including through a tailored case study or activity), convincing candidates to join the team, and getting them ramped up to start contributing quickly
- **Consulting:** serving as a fractional product management executive/leader or as an individual product manager, conducting and summarizing user research, and establishing a product-driven culture and operations
- **Training/Speaking:** explaining the value of being product-driven and how to use Vision-Led Product Management to help the company achieve its mission

We talk to lots of companies about their product challenges, and we're always glad to meet more to provide some high-level guidance based on their specific situation. So please visit [prodify.group](http://prodify.group) or email Rajesh directly at [rajesh@prodify.group](mailto:rajesh@prodify.group) — we're here to help.



## About Productboard

Productboard is a customer-centric product management platform that helps organizations get the right products to market, faster. Over 5,400 companies, including Microsoft, Zoom, 1-800-Contacts, and UiPath, use Productboard to understand what users need, prioritize what to build next, and rally everyone around their roadmap. With offices in San Francisco, Prague, and Vancouver, Productboard is backed by leading investors like Dragoneer Investment Group, Tiger Global Management, Index Ventures, Kleiner Perkins, Sequoia Capital, Bessemer Venture Partners, and Credo Ventures.

Learn more at [productboard.com](https://productboard.com)