

The Diagnosis is the Cure – An Example of How to Influence Executives on Tough, Contentious Issues

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SUMMARY

The discussion focuses on how product managers (PMs) can effectively navigate disagreements with leadership regarding product direction. It emphasizes the importance of logical problem-solving, understanding intent versus solutions, and the necessity of aligning on core principles before proposing alternative solutions.

- Determine if the disagreement directly affects your product and assess your influence in the situation.*
- Recognize that many PMs may not objectively evaluate the reasoning behind executive decisions.*
- Instead of stating "I disagree," frame your response positively to avoid defensiveness.*
- Split the discussion into intent and proposed solutions to clarify your position.*
- Propose principles that should guide decision-making, rather than jumping straight to options.*
- Align on these principles with leadership to clarify the rationale behind potential solutions.*
- Understanding the core principles can make the best solution more apparent and facilitate better communication.*
- This approach helps PMs diagnose problems effectively and propose constructive alternatives.*

[Music] Let me perhaps share just how to problem solve these types of questions. And again the problem solving here is extremely logical. The first question in this situation is whatever this topic is that I disagree with. Is it directly affecting my product or is it not directly affecting my product? What is the case?

>> Let's say it would affect my product and if I were to sign on to this and take my team in this direction, I feel like I'm just becoming a worse PM by doing it. >> All right. So, others are making decisions or others are having discussions while you are in the room which are directly affecting your product in ways that you disagree with. Is that right? >> Yes. >> Okay. All right. So that's one branch of the flowchart. The other branch is it doesn't directly affect me or it doesn't affect me my product to a very large degree. Let's take the branch that we have chosen. But we have to recognize there's this other branch too. And many PM's stress and anxiety is actually because of this other branch. It's like oh this or is doing this thing it might have these these these. I'm like yo why like sure but they might kill that initiative in 3 months. Stop cluttering your mind up with things that might happen or hypotheticals. But that's the other branch. So we're just going down this flowchart. This affects our product. That's the branch of the flowchart we are in. Now the question is how much power influence do I have in this situation? So what is our tentative response here?

>> Let's say medium. And this is coming down from leadership. They are well-intentioned but they are not the

ones with feet on the ground. So they may not be privy to everything. You can push back, but it's going to come with a lot of, you know, ruffling feathers. >> Yes. Got it. Okay, that's amazing. Thank you. So, now the next question I would ask is, is leadership right? >> I mean, if I'm disagreeing, I think they're not right.

>> Have I thought deeply enough about it? Yes or no? >> Yes. >> This is another important point. Okay. And we'll go down the yes branch because that's what you selected. But I will point out that most PMs again that's how we are coded that's maybe why we even select this field of product management right most PM think of course I'm right of course I'm right these idiot executives like they don't know what they're doing right they just do whatever they do meet and do offsites and board meetings and all of that but I'm the one talking to customers every day right so a lot of PMs experience that they don't fairly evaluate and objectively evaluate why executives might be pushing the team the org down a certain path. All right, I am just merely pointing that out. All right, just so folks understand most PMs don't fairly objectively thoroughly evaluate why the executives could be right. So that's like one thing. Okay. But now here we are saying well we think the executives are wrong cuz that's the branch we pick. So let's go down that part of the branch. Now my next question is do we disagree with their intent or do we disagree with their solution?

>> Let's say in this hypothetical it's the solution and maybe not the intent. >> Wonderful. Okay. So the diagnosis is the cure. Now that we've diagnosed the problem, we have the solution. Here's how I would do this in this situation when we are in this branch of the logic. Okay, I understand their intent and I agree with their intent. Amazing. By the way, all of these are influence challenges. But again, your influence challenge is actually a thinking challenge. It's the quality of your thinking here that will determine everything else.

So even to my boss, even to my own boss, I wouldn't go I disagree. You see, we all have this like, oh, I disagree. I disagree. As though your disagreement matters. Doesn't matter. Your disagreement doesn't matter at all. Okay? You have to understand that. What matters is the quality of your thinking and the quality of your ideas. All right? So the fact that you disagree, I don't care. Doesn't matter.

Okay? And the moment you say I disagree, now you're putting the other person on the defensive. I don't care if it's like an executive or a mid-manager or somebody else or a stakeholder of some kind. So why do that? Just to get an outlet for our ego. This is nonsense. We need to win. That is our goal. So here's how I would do it. I would tell my boss or boss's boss, whoever is relaying this to me, I would say, I love this.

I love it. I'm so glad that we are talking about this and I'm so glad that this solution was proposed. Okay, so that's my first statement. It's the polar opposite of I disagree. Right? So that's how I'll start. Next, I will say I've been thinking about this and perhaps I'd like to split what is being asked of us into two components. The intent and the proposed solution. Does that seem fair? Then you would describe like it seems to me that this is the intent of whatever we are trying to do which is we're not happy with XYZ growth and so therefore the intent is to significantly grow it further etc etc and then I might even if it's my boss or somebody I have a good relationship with where I can be very conversational I'll also ask did I get the intent right okay cool so that's the intent all right I 110% agree with the intent Okay. Now my observation is that a specific solution was proposed and I like that too. I like that a specific solution was proposed. However, I feel that we are not being creative enough here.

I feel that perhaps there are like you know three other solutions possible and I'm just curious if we have explored those solutions and I would then like having done the work I would share you know these are like two or three other creative solutions that are possible now once I've done this say with my boss and like if I've done a good job they will agree agree that the solution that was proposed by the executives or the solution they are pushing for may not be optimal that there is something else out there that is a better solution. Okay, now that I've convinced my boss and now I have to convince other people including boss's boss or whoever CEO, right? Now I don't go to them with solutions first.

What I would do is I would list out the principles. So this is a master stroke. This is something every PM should be doing but hardly any PM does. All right, I learned this at Stripe. Every PM should be doing this, but hardly anybody does it, which is how do people typically make proposals? I will share how they do it. People propose solutions in the following way, right? And this is in a rigorous place. There's nonsense places where it's like just the whole proposal doesn't make sense. I'm talking about a place which is rigorous, smart, all of that. All right? So first problem statement then options option A option B option C and then pros and cons of each option and then a recommendation based on the pros and cons.

So this is fine but you know when we're talking about mastery of the craft it is kind of This is not how you should propose solutions to executives especially to CEO. I mean I'm assuming a competent CEO. Okay. So to a competent CEO this is not how we propose solutions. The way to propose solutions to a competent CEO is first present the principles which is we believe these are the core principles that should be driving what we decide. So here's the problem statement or the objective. By all means start with that. But don't then just immediately go from problem statement or objectives to options. Option A, option B, option C. No, first propose principles.

And these principles are not some like oh we want to be user centric. I don't want that nonsense. The principles need to be specific to whatever problem you are facing. Whatever the growth problem is or whatever the UX problem is, the adoption problem is whatever else right the principle should encapsulate basically what we think we are trying to do but in a principle format. Now they'll end up being like 3 4 5 6 bullet points whatever it is you should even label the principles like 1 2 3 4. First step when you're talking to the CEO is to align on the principles like are we aligned on the principles which of these principles don't make sense that we can eliminate then stack rack the principles that actually we care about X principle first Y principle next Z principle next and again don't make it nonsense just like you know broides like users first right I'm not talking about that it has to be specific to the situation not something at a company values level. So first discuss and debate the principles and make sure you are all aligned on the principles.

Once you do that now what happens is that the solution becomes obvious. You don't have to do the pros and cons nonsense. You can still do it but you don't have to do it because once you align on the principles it'll be very clear whether X is the right solution or Y is the right solution or Z is the right solution. So now in situations where you think X is the right solution but executives are pushing you down Y right it is usually the case that you are not aligned on the core principles but you are discussing the pros and cons of X and Y instead of actually tackling the real issue which is that the principles are different right often time what happens with between PMs and executives is that executives are sort of okay with suboptimal results for a given product if it optimizes

for the entire product offering or for the product suite or for the brand.

So that is a principle level issue. Of course you disagree because it might be suboptimal for your product in the short term, right? So of course you disagree with the solution but again if you align on the principles first then you will at least see the logic of it. So that is the way to go about doing this. It's a very advanced idea. Most product managers never get to this understanding in their career. And it's true understanding not intellectual like okay I get the words is that the diagnosis is the cure. So your correct diagnosis of the problem is the cure.

And what we just went through is an example of that. That we diagnose the problem and as soon as we diagnose the problem that it's actually not a problem with the intent, it's a problem with the solution. Now we have a cure. We have a solution. [Music]