

INFO TO GO

- Projects need one person to be the voice for the customer, the project team, and the market.
- The product champion builds relationships with customers and has insights into their needs.
- Representing and protecting the team at all project meetings are important aspects of being a product champion.

The Product Champion

Making sure that customer, team, and business needs are well represented in the development process **by Linda Rising**

I RECENTLY ATTENDED A CONFERENCE ON NEW APPROACHES for agile software development. All of the approaches had two elements in common: 1) building a closer relationship with the customer and 2) building the simplest software possible. The ultimate goal of all of the approaches was for the product developer and the customer to “speak with the same voice,” thereby producing what the customer really needs—and only what the customer needs.

These things are all good. We should be closer to our customers. We should aim for simplicity. And yes, we should speak with the same voice. But who will worry about long-term planning? Who will look beyond the *simplest* thing, searching for the *best* thing? Who will peer over the head of the current customer and forecast future applications for the product? When conflicts arise, who will be the one voice that speaks for all? The product champion, that’s who.

In our industry, we rush to do this, and we rush to do that. It’s difficult to step back and reflect—to take a broader

Profile of a Product Champion

- Knows the customers—all of them
- Is not too close to a single customer
- Has business experience in the domain
- Can speak intelligently about the issues
- Acts as a good facilitator
- Works and plays well with others
- Accepts responsibility for the product
- Defends the team's ability to produce the product
- Is willing to make hard decisions about scope
- Treats the team as knowledgeable professionals
- Sets reasonable performance expectations
- Communicates with the team, the customer, management, sales, and marketing
- Has a willingness to learn—from everyone
- Doesn't trust everyone; does trust the right people
- Doesn't think he knows more about the market than he really does
- Can say "No"
- Keeps his promises
- Performs ongoing market analysis

view. That's where the product champion (PC) comes in. The PC is the one person who is officially responsible for delivering the product. This person helps the stakeholders and the project manager reach a shared vision for a product, and then defines and initiates the product within that vision.

A single person should play the role of PC, not a group. Being a PC requires leadership, clear vision, and quick decisions—something that is difficult for a committee to do. While a small support group can advise and assist the PC during a large development effort, there must be one person, and one person only, who is ultimately responsible for a product.

The Product Champion and the Customer

We can all agree that having a close relationship with the customer is a good idea. But with that relationship come risks. First, you usually have more than one customer. And these customers may have

conflicting interests. Even if you have only one large customer, there are often internal disagreements to contend with. A PC can arbitrate to make the best decision for the life of the product. He knows the customers *and* the product and is able to reach the best decision for all. On the other hand, you may have so many customers that you can gauge their needs only through focus groups or some other sampling method. This is especially true for shrink-wrapped products. In this situation, the PC knows the market and is able to effectively apply this data.

Second, in many agile environments, the customer works directly with the team. The PC can facilitate this process. If a few customers are involved and all want to have on-site representatives, he can mediate interaction with developers and the different customer representatives to make sure the best decision is made for the life of the product.

A PC should acquire as much knowledge as he can from the customer repre-

sentative(s). That way, if a representative leaves, valuable knowledge doesn't leave with her. The PC can keep the project on course while building a relationship with the new representative(s), thereby minimizing damage to the project. What if a reliable customer representative is not available? Who will communicate any new information or problems from the customer to the developer, or from the developer to the customer? The PC can ensure that both sides are well informed and up-to-date.

The Product Champion and the Team

Teams are at their best when working toward a shared vision. Given time, a team can evolve toward a shared vision. However, without some occasional nudges in the right direction from someone more in touch with broader company goals, this shared vision isn't always the *right* shared vision. I have seen teams go off in the wrong direction and make bad decisions. Frequently, the PC has insights into the customer or the team's own company that the team members might not have.

For instance, suppose the team decides, partway into a release cycle, that it can't finish the work on time. The team needs to prioritize the remaining work. Should the team redefine the vision for this project on their own? No. This is not a technical decision; it's a business decision. I know of at least one case where the team thought it was following what the customer wanted, but, instead, created something that did not meet the customer's expectations. This misunderstanding cost that company a potentially lucrative contract. Selecting the highest-priority work should be done with the PC and the customer. Only then can the team be sure that the vision they are working toward is the right one for all concerned.

The PC can help to build a bridge of trust between the development team and the customer. The agile process of producing a workable product in increments is an ideal tool for keeping these lines of communication open. When customers and the PC can see the behavior of the product at regular intervals, trust develops, along with a sense that everyone is heading in the same direction.

An effective product champion

- acts in the best interests of the customer(s) and the product, steering product development in the right direction

- listens to the developers' estimates, and balances the needs of the team against those of the product
- makes real decisions that enable the team to deliver consistently
- understands that customers would rather have a date and a list of features they can count on than promises of a pie in the sky that they know will never materialize

Customer involvement means working with people, and working with people means working with politics. There are always hidden agendas. The PC can protect the team, and represent the team in all meetings where the project is being examined. There's always a need to correct perceptions about a project. A little public relations work can go a long way toward preventing a project from being canceled. Sometimes, the PC can understand what kind of data would help the team's image and can suggest

that the team provide this kind of information to the right decision-maker.

The Project Champion and the Market

In addition to building bridges and defending his team, the PC must keep an eye on the market. He must think about the life of the product, and understand when tradeoffs are needed in order to keep the product viable in the marketplace. To do this, the PC must anticipate and be agile. In today's changing environment, it's risky to do things "the way we've always done them."

Often, collaborating with the customer is not enough. Customers don't always know what they want or how their expectations can best be served. Some of the best ideas have come not directly from customers but from good "idea people" who listened to the customers and heard something the customers liked or needed. Or in some cases, these idea people created something that the customers had never even

thought of. We can't stay tied to explicit customer expressions, or we'll never make significant moves forward. Yes, it's important to deliver value to the customer, but the PC must be thinking beyond today and beyond what the customer explicitly states.

What If You Don't Have a Product Champion?

You can see how important the PC is to the software development process, especially an agile one. But what if your PC leaves? Or if you never had one to begin with? Or if your PC is ineffective? As a development, project, or test manager, you can try to fill the gap by creating a long-term customer focus.

1. A close relationship with marketing can always help. I have known many organizations where the marketing folks effectively played the role of PC, even though the position was not formally expressed. A good marketing guy can make the difference for your product.

PERSPECTIVE

Building Bridges in the Desert

When you think Arizona, you don't think bridges. Dry air and lots of sand? Yes. Rivers and lakes? No. But out in Phoenix, David Mosley is building bridges every day. He's the Product Champion for DDC-I's SCORE (**S**afety-Critical, **O**bject-Oriented, **R**eal-time, and **E**mbodied). In this new role, he and DDC-I have found a way to bridge the gaps between divisions inside their own company, and between DDC-I and its customers.

"We used to have project leaders," David explains. "The leader was focused strictly on developing the product. Customer interaction was handled by a separate group. The project leader was isolated from the customer; his job was to focus on the current state of the product. Customer support was someone else's job. With such a division between support and development, we found that problems with the product weren't getting resolved as quickly as we would like. The support engineers didn't have the expertise to fix them, and the project leader had a development schedule to meet and couldn't take the time to solve problems."

Now all of that has changed. "The help desk handles simple customer problems themselves—user error, installation questions, and things like that. The rest of the problems are funneled to me. Part of my time is now spent trying to identify the problem and figure out what to do about it. ... I'm out on the road about one week a month with the sales reps, talking to customers, demonstrating our product, and seeing what their reactions are—what they are looking for. ... And, I do still want to get products delivered, too."

Knowing customer needs and having the authority to respond have created some great opportunities for DDC-I. For instance, David noticed

that at sales presentations, many potential customers were asking for JTAG capability, an interface for testing embedded devices. "We had it on our wish list, but had not yet developed it." This type of first-hand marketing knowledge helped him decide to elevate the importance of JTAG. "I went back and said, 'We're working on that next.' We did just that and it immediately led to a couple of sales, because now the customers were able to use JTAG to connect to their hardware."

At the same time, all of this customer focus sometimes means the development cycle has to stretch out a little longer. "If I find a really nasty problem that's affecting a large number of our users, I have to make the decision to devote some of our development time to fixing that problem." As the representative of the product team to the rest of the company, the product champion must be able to explain any tough choices or delays at the semi-annual Product Control Board (PCB) meeting. "Product champs are responsible for the entire product, for development and customer support. We can make most decisions on our own. But we don't work in a vacuum; we can't just do whatever we want. Every six months we lay out our plans and describe our progress to the PCB. That way, everyone—Sales, Support, and Engineering—knows what we're doing."

Speaking of knowing what you're doing, what qualities would a good product champion possess? David says, "Product champions must, number one, be knowledgeable about the product. Number two is to be connected to the market. And number three is to be politically savvy—to represent the product well internally." With these qualities in place, you too can begin building bridges in places you may have never thought possible. —R.T.

A Fairy Tale

Once upon a time there was a PC who lost his way. He was a former marketing and sales guy with a history of poor relationships with developers: He just didn't trust them to provide reliable information. All of his product and market knowledge was obtained from one customer rep. He didn't understand the real drivers in the market or what future customers would want.

The developers went "dark" and created their own vision of the project. The PC worked on his own, promising his one customer the moon. When the first release finally surfaced months later, the customer found that his "moon" had turned to cheese. The project was canceled and that PC was let go.

If only the project manager had stepped in. He was the only one with the insight to see that trouble lay ahead and with the power to carry the message to high-level management. But he was afraid—afraid for his own position. If he went forward, he risked being punished as the messenger of bad tidings. If he sat tight, even if the project failed, he wouldn't be blamed—the PC would—and he could be moved to another project to mis-manage (exactly what happened).

2. A development, project, or test manager can be an effective PC in every setting where the project is concerned. Providing good public relations can make a difference if the project is in danger of

being canceled based only on misunderstandings.

3. Enlarge your focus. Realize how critical the business component is for your success, and share that with your team. If no one has the role of PC, then everyone must adopt it. Encourage a broader view and you might be surprised—someone in your group might "adopt" this role.

4. Do what you can to make everyone more aware of the customer's role in determining product functionality. Take everyone to visit the customer site. An alteration of worldview takes place when the product is in the hands of real users.

5. It's difficult to adopt a long-term view when the rewards are for the short-term fix. You get what you measure. Reward your team for all the things you need from a PC. You work with smart people who want to succeed. Give them some direction based on what you see is missing in your organization. Mentor, encourage, and reward them.

Creating a long-term customer focus takes time. In the meantime, if customers or marketing continually buttonhole individual team members in an effort to coerce extra work from them, the defense is simple: Select a resident PC—usually the project lead, development manager, or test manager. This *local* PC can decide what work gets done. That way, when unwanted customer or marketing visits take place, the team's response can be, "Talk to Tom. He makes those decisions." Over time, the local PC can become a *real* PC, with official recognition and real power to guide the future of the product. To make this work, everyone on the team has to

give credit to the local PC, saying things like, "We couldn't have done it without Tom. He kept us on track, and gave a consistent view of what each release was all about." And, of course, the team has to deliver releases successfully.

The Voice of the Product Champion

Despite all the focus in agile approaches on the here and now, there must be someone focused on the "there and later." This someone is the PC. This person works closely with the project manager to ensure that the team has everything it needs to build each release. He removes obstacles standing in the team's way, and defends the team and its product to the powers that be. The PC also interacts with customers, learning their needs, ensuring that promises made to them are kept, and keeping them informed every step of the way. Finally, he assumes the ultimate responsibility for the product, ensuring that it fits both the current customer(s) and the market. If you don't have a strong PC, strengthen your ties with marketing, become a good PR agent for your project, enlarge the focus of your team, let everyone see real users, and reward the kind of behavior you need. You might be surprised. A champion just might arise from within your own team. **STQE**

Linda Rising is an independent consultant who has been working with object technologies since 1983. You can reach her at risingl@acm.org or www.lindarising.org.

**STQE magazine is produced by
Software Quality Engineering.**