TODD SOBIECH

TURNING COMPLEXITY INTO CLARITY

ROCK STAR SERIES / 01

Product Owner Rock Star

A practical guide to eight everyday habits

Turning data, analytics and AI into business value | November 2026



Eight habits. One standard for value.

Customer relationships. Clear choices. Dependable products.

A practical guide to use with your team.

START HERE / THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

Build Products People Can Depend On

A dashboard can be beautifully designed and still leave people unsure what to do next. An AI tool can deliver an impressive demonstration and never become part of anyone's daily work.

Over the past 25+ years, I've developed, owned and enabled products serving more than 250,000 consumers across organizations ranging from startups to Fortune 25 companies. My experience spans data, analytics and AI products supporting financial services, manufacturing and industrial, retail and consumer, healthcare, and supply chain and procurement. Working as both a product owner and a consumer has shaped the habits in this guide - and my belief that ownership starts with understanding people and continues well beyond launch.

The Product Owners who stand out connect customer needs, business strategy and delivery decisions. They make difficult choices, explain trade-offs and help teams create products people trust and use.



Ivan S / Pexels

A Product Owner Rock Star helps a team turn a real problem into lasting business value.

PRODUCT LEADERSHIP / EIGHT CORE HABITS

Eight Habits. A Practical Guide.

Use this guide to assess your product, choose a habit to strengthen and agree on a practical next step. Start with the overview, then use SCORE and TEMPO when a decision needs structure.

01 / Know Your Customer

Build regular relationships through conversations, roundtables, QPRs, an advisory group and an advocate network.

02 / Make the Direction Clear - and the Value Visible

Choose who and what to serve, where to differentiate and what to leave out. Connect direction to intended value.

03 / Put the Right Work First

Use formal intake, published criteria and a visible backlog to focus on the right work. Explain no and not now.

04 / Bring the Next Idea

Research, learn from external partners and test ideas that create value and differentiation.

05 / Make the Trade-Offs Clear

Navigate pressure with options, a recommendation and a transparent roadmap. Use TEMPO to show the full picture.

06 / Stand Behind Your Product

Build strong partnerships, formal support and transparent communication. Track health and follow through on issues.

07 / Build Confidence Into How You Work

Apply consistent practices, practical governance and guardrails. Build product literacy and reuse trusted capabilities.

08 / Show the Value. Celebrate the Wins.

Define success, track a scorecard, investigate signals and share outcomes that connect the product to value.

Titles vary. This article spans Product Owner, Product Manager and broader product leadership responsibilities. Apply these habits within your decision rights, in partnership with the people accountable for design, engineering, data and operations.

A full backlog is easy to create. A clear direction takes judgment.

01 / KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

Know Your Customer



Alena Darmel / Pexels

Some of the most useful feedback comes from a conversation that never felt like a feedback session.

Surveys and interviews have their place. In my experience, informal conversations also reveal the weekly workaround, the number someone distrusts or the idea they have not found an opportunity to share.

Make engagement a habit. Use roundtables, recurring conversations and Quarterly Product Reviews - QPRs - to understand challenges and explore ideas. Invite engineering, design and data colleagues to hear needs firsthand. Ask what people are trying to accomplish, where they get stuck and what could work better.

01 / RELATIONSHIPS IN PRACTICE

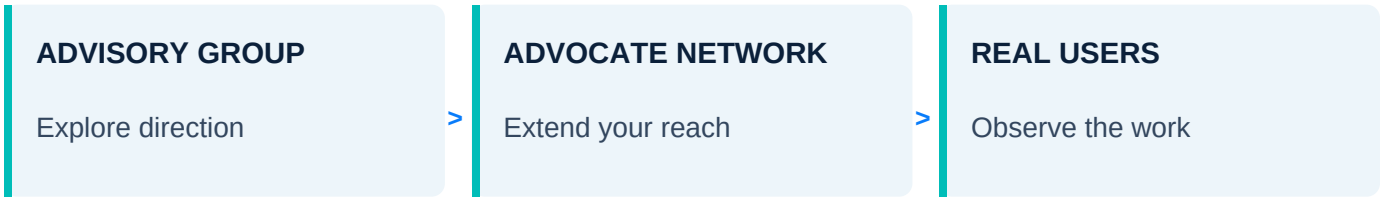
Listen. Observe. Close the Loop.

Watch the work. Someone may like a dashboard and still export everything into a spreadsheet before deciding what to do. Explore that extra step. When users struggle, examine the product design, workflow and training.

Extend your reach. A small customer advisory group provides a consistent sounding board for needs, ideas and direction. A broader advocate network connects consumers across roles, teams, locations and experience levels. Advocates can surface feedback, share practices and help others get value.

Include enthusiastic, occasional and struggling users with different abilities and access needs. Make participation accessible and check whose perspective is missing. The most vocal customers may not represent everyone.

Close the loop. Explain what you heard, what will change and why some requests will wait. Let people see their influence. Put engagement on the calendar and keep showing up.



PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Invite three users with different experiences. Ask each to show one task and one workaround.

02 / DIRECTION, TRANSPARENCY & VALUE

Make the Direction Clear - and the Value Visible



Lara Jameson / Pexels

Customers should understand where the product is going. The team should understand why the work matters.

Make strategic choices. Decide which customers and problems to serve, where you can differentiate and what you will leave out. Ground those choices in customer evidence, business priorities and market context. Revisit them as conditions change; a new request should earn its place.

Be able to answer three questions in plain language:

Where are we going? Describe the experience or capability you are working toward and what comes next.

Why does it matter? Connect the direction to a customer need and a business outcome.

How will we get there? Explain the approach, trade-offs and measures of progress.

02 / DIRECTION IN PRACTICE

Give People a Reason to Care

"We are adding an AI assistant" describes a capability. "We are helping account managers investigate margin changes before their next pricing review" gives people a reason to care.

Keep people connected. In my experience, touchpoints, newsletters and QPRs help people understand and challenge the direction. Share changes, lessons and upcoming decisions. Leave room for questions.

Agree on the KPIs that will show progress toward the intended outcomes, including the cost and capability needed to sustain them. Make the evidence accessible. Section 8 covers tracking and communicating results.

When expectations change, explain what you learned and how the direction responds. Give people enough context to contribute, rather than asking them simply to accept the plan.

WHERE	>	WHY	>	HOW
Customers + direction		User + business value		Choices + measures

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Write your where, why and how in three sentences. Ask a customer and a team member to explain them back.

03 / PRIORITIZATION & BACKLOG MANAGEMENT

Put the Right Work First

There is never a shortage of ideas. The harder job is deciding which ones deserve the team's attention now. Saying "no" or "not now" is part of being a Product Owner Rock Star - and people deserve to understand the reasoning.

Create a clear front door. Use a formal intake process to capture the problem, affected users, expected value, strategic connection, requested timing and dependencies. Keep it simple enough that people use it. A request earns consideration; it does not automatically become a delivery commitment.

Publish how you prioritize. Make the criteria, weights and scoring definitions visible. SCORE offers a starting model; agree the weights with stakeholders before comparing requests. Rate each criterion from 1 to 5, with 3 representing the middle ground. These are illustrative weights to tailor to your product.

CAPTURE
Problem + users

>

COMPARE
Value + readiness

>

DECIDE
Explain the choice



ANTONI SHKRABA production / Pexels

03 / THE SCORE MODEL

Make the Criteria Visible

SCORE criterion	Weight	Rating anchors / 1 to 5
S / Strategic alignment	25%	1: Weak link to goals. 5: Directly advances a priority goal.
C / Customer and business value	30%	1: Limited expected benefit. 5: Substantial benefit backed by evidence.
O / Operational readiness	15%	1: Major unresolved dependencies. 5: Data, skills and dependencies ready.
R / Required timing	20%	1: Little cost of waiting. 5: Credible deadline or high cost of delay.
E / Effort and time to value	10%	1: High effort, slow benefit. 5: Low effort, quick meaningful benefit.

Score out of 100 = sum of (weight x rating / 5). Use weights as whole numbers: 25, 30, 15, 20 and 10. Ratings of 5, 4, 3, 4 and 2 produce 78/100. Record evidence and uncertainty; a number supports judgment. Mandatory work, dependencies or capacity can change the sequence - document why.

Keep the backlog visible and current. Show status, priority, owner, rationale, dependencies, timing confidence and progress. Separate commitments from tentative plans. Review regularly, split large items, merge duplicates and retire stale requests. Include maintenance and simplification work. Explain "no" and "not now," and what would trigger reconsideration.

The goal is to keep the team focused on the right work - and make the choices visible.

04 / INNOVATION & CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Bring the Next Idea



Ketut Subiyanto / Pexels

Knowing customers helps you understand today's needs. Owning the product also means exploring what could be possible tomorrow.

Develop ideas together. Give engineering, design and data partners a problem and the context to solve it. Invite challenge and let specialists shape solutions from the start.

Look beyond the backlog. Make research and continuous learning routine. Follow relevant technologies, industry developments and changing customer expectations. Consider a better experience, a new capability, lower cost or a different way to serve people.

Engage external partners, vendors, peers and professional communities. Compare approaches, attend demonstrations and ask what others have learned. Bring useful perspectives back to customers and the team.

Question the existing approach. If people request a faster report, could they investigate the question directly? If an alert takes time to interpret, could the product provide context and next steps?

04 / EXPERIMENTS IN PRACTICE

Test the Assumption. Then Invest.

Test before committing. Use prototypes and pilots to ask: Do people want this? Can they use it? Can we build and support it? Does it work for the business? Define the hypothesis, participants, measures and investment limit. Agree what evidence would justify expanding, changing or stopping.

Test in real workflows with users who have different needs and experience. Share findings that contradict expectations. A pilot that prevents a poor investment has value too.

Build quality, security and validation into experiments. Keep learning, and invest where evidence supports a new opportunity or meaningful differentiation.

TEST THE IDEA FROM FOUR ANGLES

WANTED
Will people choose to use it? Test the need and the expected benefit.

USABLE
Can people complete the task? Observe real users, including different access needs.

FEASIBLE
Can we build and sustain it? Involve engineering, data and operational partners.

VIABLE
Does it work for the business? Examine cost, constraints and ongoing ownership.

A practical synthesis of SVPG's four product risks.

Own the product's future. Bring ideas, test them and show what they could make possible.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Choose one assumption. Define the smallest experiment and the evidence that would change your decision.

05 / TRADE-OFFS, OPTIONS & THE ROADMAP

Make the Trade-Offs Clear

A leader wants delivery sooner. The budget gets tighter. A customer needs a capability early. Compliance requirements change. You still need to understand what the work will take.

Help people navigate the full picture: what matters, what is possible, what is unknown and what each choice means.

Understand the pressure. What must happen by the requested date, and why? Distinguish a customer commitment, business opportunity or mandatory obligation from a preferred date.

Bring options and a recommendation. Compare scope, timing, cost, capacity and risk. A smaller release may deliver essential value sooner; a broader release may need more time. Additional investment helps when it addresses the actual constraint. Explain what other work would be deferred.

Show uncertainty and boundaries. Separate facts, estimates and assumptions. Identify dependencies, timing confidence and the next learning checkpoint. Validate options with relevant partners. Clarify compliance, security, quality and validation requirements with their accountable owners.

Connect decisions to the roadmap. Show the selected path, what moved, what will wait and why. Separate commitments from tentative plans. Revisit choices and communicate changes before they become surprises.

Choose how to deliver. Compare building, buying, partnering and reusing. Assess business fit, integration, total cost, time to value, security, flexibility and support. Customize where it creates meaningful differentiation.

Use TEMPO on the next page to structure the conversation. Agree on the decision owner and next checkpoint.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Bring two feasible options to the next decision, with consequences, a recommendation and a checkpoint.

05 / TRADE-OFFS IN PRACTICE / TEMPO

Set the TEMPO for Delivery.

When pressure changes the plan, use TEMPO to make the choices concrete. Compare business outcomes, timing, scope, investment, dependencies and essential controls - then agree on a path and a checkpoint.

T / Target the outcome and date

What must be achieved, by when and why? Agree on the business result the deadline serves.

E / Edit the scope

Identify the smallest pilot or release that delivers meaningful value. Phase remaining capabilities.

M / Map the constraints

Expose dependencies, data access, skills and approvals. Explain why each critical constraint matters.

P / Present options

Compare scope, timing, cost, capacity and risk. Explain what each option delivers, defers and depends on.

O / Own essential controls

Name owners for quality, security and validation. Set frequent checkpoints to resolve issues.

Speed improves when the team understands what can change and what must hold.

05 / OPTIONS IN PRACTICE

Make the Choice Concrete



Pavel Danilyuk / Pexels

Here are the options, here is what each one means, and here is the path I recommend.

ILLUSTRATIVE OPTIONS / AN AI KNOWLEDGE ASSISTANT

Limited: One topic, one team, human review of answers.

Balanced: More topics, governed retrieval, evaluation and a support process.

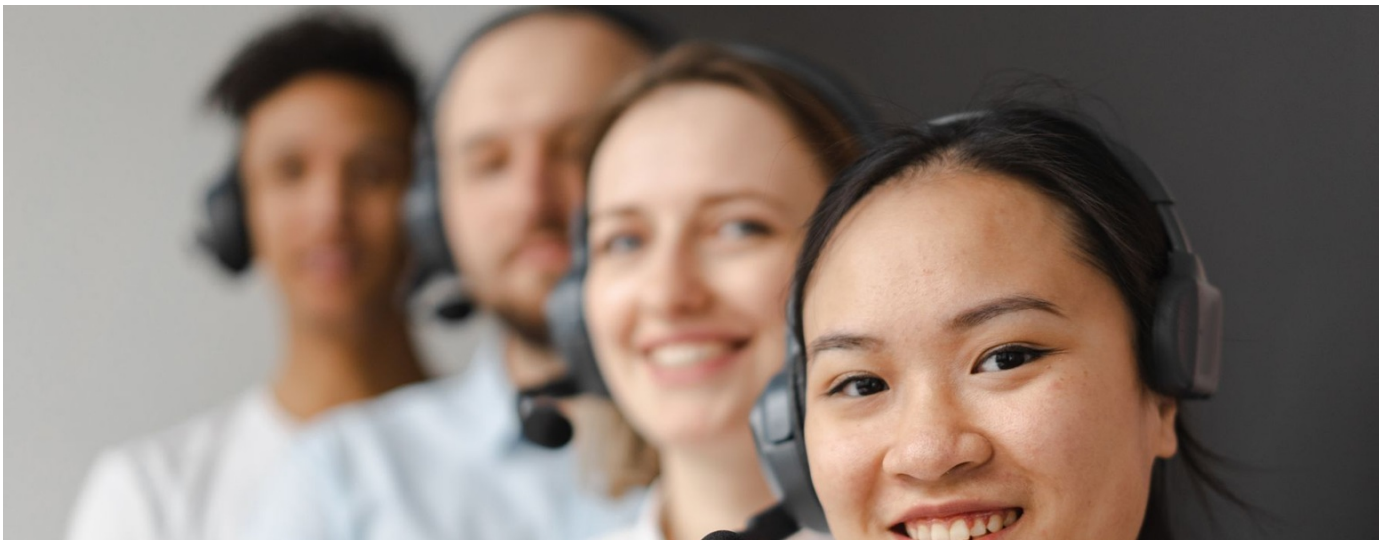
Expanded: More integrations and approved actions, with additional controls and operating capacity.

A useful options summary shows the expected outcome, timing range, cost or capacity needs, dependencies, assumptions and residual risks. Record the decision owner and next review date. GenAI can help explore alternatives; validate them with the people accountable for delivery and controls.

RECOMMEND	>	AGREE	>	REVISIT
Explain the path		Name the owner		Set the checkpoint

06 / ACCOUNTABILITY, PARTNERSHIPS & SUPPORT

Stand Behind Your Product



Mikhail Nilov / Pexels

Customers experience the whole product: how it works, how they learn to use it and what happens when something goes wrong. Accountability continues after launch.

Build partnerships early. Forge relationships with engineering, security, architecture, design, data, marketing, sales and operational partners. Agree responsibilities and decision rights. Involve specialists in shaping solutions, share context and resolve problems together.

Formalize support. Make the route clear for functional questions, training, data issues, platform problems and technical help. Define ownership, severity levels, response expectations, escalation and handoffs. Confirm evening, weekend and holiday coverage so help is available when the product needs it.

Use technology and AI. Provide a clear intake channel. Automate information capture, routing, urgent flags and status updates. Use AI to find approved guidance, summarize cases and suggest next steps. Keep knowledge current, verify recommendations and provide an easy route to a person.

06 / SUPPORT IN PRACTICE

Stay Visible Through the Disruption

Communicate during disruptions. Explain the impact, available workarounds, response owner and next update. Give recovery estimates when credible, and acknowledge uncertainty. Keep updates regular, even without a resolution, and confirm restoration.

Publish the learning. Conduct a root cause analysis - RCA - after significant incidents. Explain the impact, timeline, cause, contributing factors, recovery and actions to reduce recurrence. Assign corrective-action owners and dates, then report progress. Publish a meaningful customer version that protects sensitive details.

Make health visible. Track relevant uptime, performance, data freshness and support response and resolution times. Publish status with agreed definitions and targets. Use recurring issues to improve the product, documentation and training.

Users want to know what happened, what you corrected and whether you followed through. Give them those answers.

RESPOND	>	EXPLAIN	>	FOLLOW THROUGH
Impact + workaround		Cause + correction		Owners + dates

Accountability continues after launch. Make support clear, product health visible and follow-through real.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Walk through a disruption outside normal hours. Check ownership, escalation, updates and corrective-action follow-up.

07 / DISCIPLINE, GOVERNANCE & PRODUCT LITERACY

Build Confidence Into How You Work



Beniam / Pexels

A dependable product needs consistent practices and people who know how to use it, question it and improve it.

Make good practices repeatable. Set clear requirements and acceptance criteria. Use consistent testing, validation, release readiness and change communication. Document decisions, maintain guidance and improve practices as the team learns.

Make governance practical. Clarify ownership of definitions, approvals, access and exceptions. Publish decision rights and quality expectations. Apply permissions, validated calculations, human review and automation limits where appropriate. Address privacy, harmful bias and intended use. Explain controls and provide a route for concerns.

Build consistency into the experience. Show sources, freshness, limitations and changes. Test workflows and performance across relevant user groups. For AI, reassess when data or conditions change; define when to involve a person, pause or roll back.

07 / CONFIDENCE IN PRACTICE

Help People Use It - and Question It

Reuse trusted capabilities. Share data products, metrics, components, templates and guidance where they fit. Assign owners and maintain them. Reduce duplicate work and inconsistent results while leaving room to improve.

Treat literacy as part of delivery. Users need understanding to maximize value and confidently challenge an answer or suggest an improvement. Provide role-based onboarding, examples, demonstrations, office hours and accessible guidance. Explain capabilities, interpretation, limitations and escalation.

Use advocates to share learning and surface confusion. Refresh guidance after changes. Check understanding through real tasks; attendance alone does not show capability. Fund enablement, assign an owner and track where help is needed.

Use those findings to improve both the learning materials and the product. Training should not compensate for avoidable design problems.

PRACTICES	>	GUARDRAILS	>	LITERACY
Consistent delivery		Clear boundaries		Confident users

Give people a dependable product - and the understanding to use it, question it and improve it.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Observe someone completing a real task. Identify one design improvement and one literacy need.

08 / VALUE, MEASUREMENT & SHARED SUCCESS

Show the Value. Celebrate the Wins.



Artem Podrez / Pexels

When your product helps someone do something better, show the progress and celebrate the people who made it possible.

Define success. Choose the outcome: faster decisions, less manual effort, better service, reduced risk or improved revenue or margin. Establish a baseline, target, timeframe and owner. Record assumptions and how you will assess the product's contribution.

Build a useful scorecard. Select measures for outcomes, adoption, health and cost. Show current results, targets, trends, freshness and owners. Review them consistently. Reliability and usage provide context; they still need to translate into value.

Enable investigation. Build dependable data and analytics products connecting usage, experience, support and business outcomes. Automate reporting where practical. Enable exploration by role, team, workflow or customer segment to find who benefits and where value is lost.

Connect signals to action. Set meaningful thresholds for declining adoption, slow responses, stale data or deteriorating outcomes. Assign an owner, response expectation and next step. Test and tune alerts. A signal becomes proactive when someone can investigate and act.

> **Define the value. Measure the progress. Share the wins - and use what you learn.**

08 / VALUE IN PRACTICE

A Scorecard That Starts a Conversation



Stephen Dawson / Unsplash

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE / ALL FIGURES ARE FICTIONAL

Measure	Baseline	Current	Target	Signal
Active use	45%	68%	75%	Review
Task time	18 min	11 min	10 min	Review
Uptime	99.7%	99.9%	99.9%	On target
Hours avoided / week	4	12	10	On target
Cost / completed task	$1.20	$0.80	$0.90	On target

Give every measure a definition, owner, review cadence and data-freshness expectation. Set alert thresholds appropriate to the product and assign the response.

The scorecard starts the conversation. Segment the data, test explanations and connect the action to an outcome.

08 / INSIGHT, ACTION & SHARED SUCCESS

Look Beyond the Headline Number

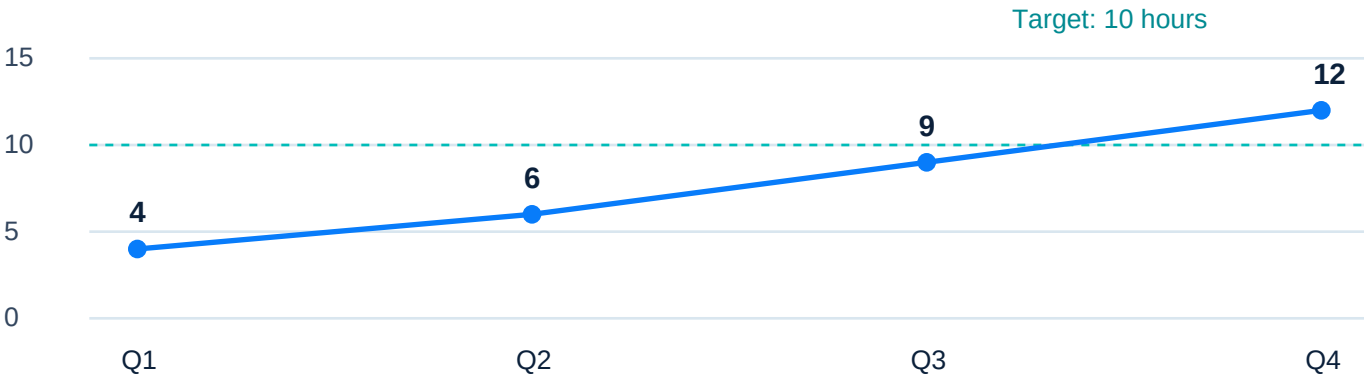
Share the wins. Use newsletters, QPRs, demonstrations and customer stories. Explain the challenge, what changed and the evidence. Credit customers, advocates and partners. Help others recognize opportunities in their own work.

Distinguish measured results from estimates. Consider adoption, operating cost and other explanations for change. Share shortfalls and lessons alongside wins to keep the story credible.

Own the lifecycle. Expand what works. Simplify, consolidate or retire capabilities whose value no longer justifies their cost. Plan migration with users and protect necessary records. Sometimes maintaining less helps customers more.

ILLUSTRATIVE TREND / FIGURES ARE FICTIONAL

HOURS OF MANUAL WORK AVOIDED PER WEEK



SIGNAL
Notice the change

>

INVESTIGATE
Find the explanation

>

ACT + LEARN
Measure the effect

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Choose five useful measures. Give each a baseline, target, owner and next action.

THE STANDARD / VALUE THAT LASTS

What Makes a Product Owner a Rock Star?

These habits work together: customer relationships inform direction, priorities focus effort, experiments open possibilities and clear trade-offs guide delivery. Support, literacy and evidence sustain the value.

Curiosity

Ask what people are trying to accomplish. Investigate the workflow behind the request.

Judgment

Choose deliberately. Make assumptions, constraints and trade-offs visible.

Clarity

Give customers, specialists and leaders a shared understanding of the goal.

Accountability

Stay connected to adoption, reliability, operating cost and outcomes after launch.

Help a team turn a real problem into a product people can depend on.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Choose One Habit. Put It to Work.

TRY IT WITH YOUR NEXT PRODUCT DECISION

Which of these eight product leadership habits needs the most attention right now?

Use SCORE to choose the work and TEMPO to navigate delivery trade-offs, including how to build, buy, partner or reuse.

Then return to the outcome: What should people be able to do better?

From the consumer's side, the result is a dependable product that helps someone accomplish something that matters. Strong product leadership builds that result with others: share context, invite challenge, enable specialists and give credit. The Rock Star helps the whole team succeed.

MY NEXT PRODUCT DECISION

The habit I will strengthen

_____

The action and the people involved

_____

The evidence and next checkpoint

_____