



# Darlene Mann, CEO of Siperian – Three Keys to Product Management Success

**D**arlene Mann knows product management. She joined Siperian as CEO in 2003 with nearly 20 years in the software industry, as both a venture capitalist and a corporate executive, spending more than 12 years in software product marketing. Her prior roles include serving as Vice President of Marketing at Avantos Performance Systems and Founding Vice President of Marketing at BroadVision, Inc., and holding senior product marketing positions with Lotus Development Corporation, Verity, and Paramount Communications.

Given the depth of her background in product management and marketing, we asked Darlene to share with us her thoughts on the product management function and what she deems to be the critical success factors. She identified three keys to success:

## #1 — Products Have To Support The Business Case Sounds simple right? Not always.

Engineers and product managers don't always have the visibility they need into the business model developed by the senior executives. Without that knowledge, understanding, and buy-in, there can often be a disconnect between the product strategy and the business plan. Darlene relayed an example from one of her early software days:

At software company XYZ, the business model was to create a product to sell to a department within an organization, with the hopes that once the product was in the company it would be taken up in many places and sales would multiply from one department across the enterprise. The engineers, unaware of the implications of this sales model for overall systems management, designed the product to be implemented by a highly skilled IT person,

someone with more sophisticated knowledge than the average departmental administrator that would actually be responsible for the product at the customer site. So, the product was complex to install, configure, and maintain. The sales reps would make the first deal and the caliber of resources that the engineers expected were not applied by the customer. So, that person would fail to maintain the product and subsequent sales never happened. The problem proved quite costly to solve – the product needed to be redesigned, costing millions in development and opportunity costs.

### *Lesson*

You need to educate the entire company, not just the executive team, on the positioning in the marketplace and the business model.

## #2 — Product Management Requires a Lightweight Process and Information Flow

The natural human tendency is to gain control. The effort to control often leads to heavy processes which will ultimately slow the team down. Particularly in software development, product managers and engineers alike can often come up with lengthy spreadsheets and forms and processes that are well intentioned, but become so burdensome that the real work can not get done quickly. Darlene recalled a case where people simply refused to participate in the cumbersome process and essentially the product development process came to a near halt.

### *Lesson*

Product management requires agility. Individuals need a lightweight process and better information in order to respond. The C-level needs to send the message

that it is not okay to have heavy processes and encumber people.

## #3 — Product Managers Need A Certain Skill Set

Ahhh, the beautiful balance that occurs when you have the right product manager on board. A good product manager gets things done through influence. They are able to magically cause people to get things done rather than try to force them to do so. As Darlene says product managers need to “ride the tiger” not “tame the tiger.” But, she also points out; the problem is you can't teach this quality. It's a gift for the job. You know the skill set when you see it, but it's hard to find. It's some magical combination of smarts, creativity, pragmatism, and people skills.

### *Lesson*

Unfortunately no one has learned to breed product managers. So, if you don't have the perfect product manager with that magical skill set, it is up to the C-level to apply some influence to make sure things get done. The management team should support the product management effort, send a signal that product management has the authority and responsibility to drive the product, and reward people for their performance based on alignment and cooperation with the product strategy and the deliverable goals.

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