



Tips for POs: working with your stakeholders

The job of Product Owner is incredibly complex – it involves understanding the value that needs to be delivered (from your users’ or customers’ perspective) and figuring out how to work with all the product’s stakeholders to get that value delivered as quickly as possible.

The following are some tips, questions to ask, as well as links to articles and videos as inspiration.

When it comes to working with stakeholders, you must:

- Determine the “right” priorities on behalf of your customers – because it’s your responsibility to optimize the value for the organization
- Help your stakeholders discover what they want (and accept that your stakeholders don’t always know what they want)
- Get input/feedback from stakeholders to guide your decision making
- Communicate progress and decisions about priorities to stakeholders
- Manage stakeholder expectations
- And, oftentimes, help your stakeholders learn new habits as they move to more Agile ways of working

So how do you do that? Let’s take them one at a time...

Determine the “right” priorities on behalf of your customers

The only way to figure this out, is to really understand what it is that can help you make your customers’ lives better. As yourself:

- Do you know what your customers like or don’t like about what they have now or how they work now?
- What do they ask for? Why do they want that? You need to know the WHY, what benefit are they trying to achieve?
- Have you observed how your customers work?
- What do other people (not your direct customers) say about the product?

Help your stakeholders discover what they want

Learn and use facilitation to go from presenting *your* ideas to presenting *your stakeholders’* ideas. Involve and engage them, and help them find out what they want. If you can see that they are unsure about requirements or any part of the “why” or “what” of the product or service they are looking for, you will need to schedule and plan a workshop to help your stakeholders become more clear about their wishes (or “desirements”).

If or when your stakeholders don't know or have a hard time agreeing on what they want – perhaps specific decisions and priorities, then *be strong* and make the final call yourself, when needed. (Make sure you do so at the last responsible moment.) Sometimes you might not be 100% sure, and that is okay. Go ahead and make the decision anyway, so that your team can move on. Oftentimes the quickest way to find out if you are on the right track is to *try something*, and then inspect and adapt, (rather than keep thinking and

analyzing your way to certainty). The only way you really know is to try and see.

Get input/feedback from stakeholders to guide your decision making

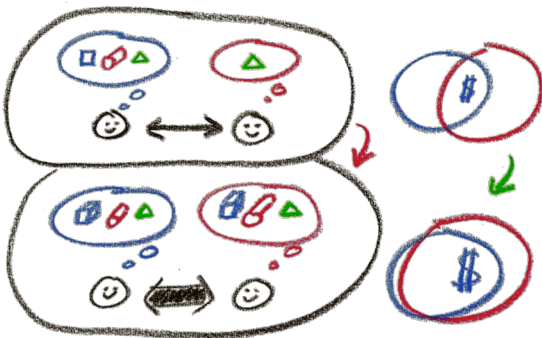
One of the best ways to get input and feedback on a regular basis is through the DEMO. If your team is not holding regular DEMOs, talk with your Scrum Master/team and get the DEMOs on the calendars! DEMOs are a vital part of the feedback loop – without them it is guess work or requires many, many meetings between PO and various stakeholders to get input about what features/functionality the team is working on. Not only is this inefficient, you miss the opportunity for stakeholders to understand and plan together – making your life as Product Owner a little easier in the long run. The DEMO provides a structured way to gain the feedback you need to make decisions about what to do next.

Communicate progress and decisions about priorities to stakeholders

Again, the DEMO provides a regular opportunity to show the progress of the work.

Key stakeholders should also be part of your REFINING THE PRODUCT BACKLOG meetings. These refinement meetings should happen each week – where you look ahead at what is planned and make adjustments to the plan with your stakeholders. It is also where you can ask more specific questions of your stakeholders to clarify what it is they want – adding ACCEPTANCE CRITERIA, for example, on the features the team will work on.

The Product Owner, of course, must also spend time in casual communications with stakeholders – stopping by where they work and “checking in” with them. Creating relationships that lead to getting richer exchanges of information that will help you in your role.



Broaden the bandwidth of your communication to create more value.

Manage stakeholder expectations

In addition to providing the opportunity to see the work done and give feedback, the DEMO is a fantastic way to give a sense of predictability. Stakeholders can see for themselves what has been done, and to understand when they will get their release. Holding a DEMO at the end of each sprint, is a tool for you to help manage expectations as stakeholders see for themselves what they will get and when.

Remember, you as a Product Owner are often between a “rock and a hard place.” You will not be able to please everyone all the time. Communicating the progress *and* the challenges your team faces in doing the work will build trust between you and your stakeholders – perhaps helping make your stakeholders more patient and understanding of the overall prioritization, even if it does not match their individual prioritization needs.

Help your stakeholders learn new habits as they move to more Agile ways of working

Working Agile – understanding together, planning together, demonstrating results frequently and getting feedback, and reflecting together to learn and improve – requires new ways of acting. The ceremonies built into the Scrum framework provide the mechanisms to work Agile. However, unless people participating feel that the DEMO, for instance, is valuable for them, they won't feel positive about this change. The neuroscience shows that *acting your way to new thinking* is the path of least resistance for the brain. This is how we learn new habits. This means that you as Product Owner must work closely with your Scrum Master and Team to make sure that new items of work go through you. Team members must tell stakeholders who come to them with work items: "I'm happy to do this, but you have to talk with my Product Owner. She is the one prioritizing what we do!" This way of working breaks if stakeholders try to get around you! You, in the meantime, need to constantly remind your stakeholders about WHY we are prioritizing in this way (it's the overall value delivered for the customer – in the larger context). This does not always match the individual needs of stakeholders, but most stakeholders understand the idea of the "greater good." Be consistent and patient. Changing habits takes time!

For more more inspiration, check out the following links:

Humorous YouTube video about requirements gathering:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXNu0VBVCUc>

"Product Ownership in a Nutshell" video (the basics of product ownership from a Scrum perspective):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=502ILHjX9EE>

Jenni's article on "Communicating Business Value to Stakeholders" from InfoQ:

<https://www.infoq.com/articles/communicate-business-value-stakeholders>

Some tips from a project management regarding stakeholder management:

<http://www.cio.com/article/2942210/project-management/7-tips-to-transform-difficult-stakeholders-into-project-partners.html>

A more general article about Scrum product ownership:

<https://blog.scrum.org/10-product-owner-questions/>

Tips for running a DEMO (substitute the word "product" for "working software" to make it more relevant:

<http://agileforall.com/how-to-give-a-great-sprint-demo/>

More on running successful team DEMOs from Scaled Agile Framework perspective:

<http://www.scaledagileframework.com/team-demo/>

Article on Real Options (in the Agile context) – about decision making and the "last responsible moment"

<https://www.infoq.com/articles/real-options-enhance-agility>