

Product Mindset in the AI Era

AI has fundamentally changed what small, high-agency product teams can accomplish. Most organizations haven't caught up yet.

What We'll Cover

01

Why legacy approaches fail

The waste hiding in plain sight

02

The product mindset foundations

What timeless principles still hold

03

How AI changes the game

Speed, team structure, and the builder/operator model

04

The evolved team model

05

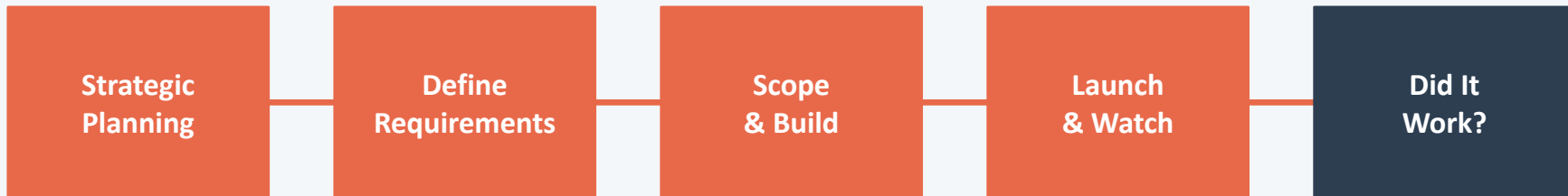
Where to start

01 Why Legacy Approaches Fail

The waste hiding in plain sight

The Legacy Approach: Build First, Learn Never

Typically waterfall — or at best 'agilefall'



⚠ Engineering work precedes learning — the most expensive mistake in product development

BEHAVIORS

- Leadership defines the why, what, AND how
- Big bets made on assumptions, not evidence
- Delivery teams lack business & user context
- User experience designed by committee
- Features scoped on capacity, not customer value

OUTCOMES

- Build the wrong stuff for the wrong people
- At the wrong time or sequence
- Mistakes, rework & defects pile up
- Takes too long to create any value
- No one knows if it's working

02 The Product Mindset Foundations

What timeless principles still hold — and still matter more than ever

What Is a Product, Really?

The role of a product is to change user behaviors in order to drive business outcomes

Customer

Does it solve an important problem?
Can users successfully use it?

Business

Can we make money?
Does it fit our constraints?

Technology

Can we build it?
Is it scalable?

If your team isn't solving for all three, they're not building products — they're building features.

Setting Teams Up for Success

Before teams start building solutions, leaders must set the foundation

Mission *Why does our team exist?*

Vision *What will be true when we achieve our goals?*

Strategy *What challenges stand between us and the vision?*

Culture *How do we create an environment where people do great work?*

Approach *How does the team work? (discovery → experimentation → delivery)*

The Culture Shift That Makes Everything Else Work

TEAM

Missionaries over Mercenaries

Mercenaries land in a trouble spot, fight the enemy, and leave.

Missionaries live alongside the culture to understand people and their real needs.

Implications:

- Dedicated to a domain; empowered to solve its problems
- Prepared to learn, fail & improve — repeatedly
- Focused on outcomes, not outputs

LEADERSHIP

Gardeners over Chess Masters

Chess masters alone understand the board and move the pieces.

Gardeners create an environment where people and ideas flourish.

Implications:

- Embrace shared consciousness & bottom-up discovery
- Re-orient from features to build → problems to solve
- Make it safe to experiment and fail

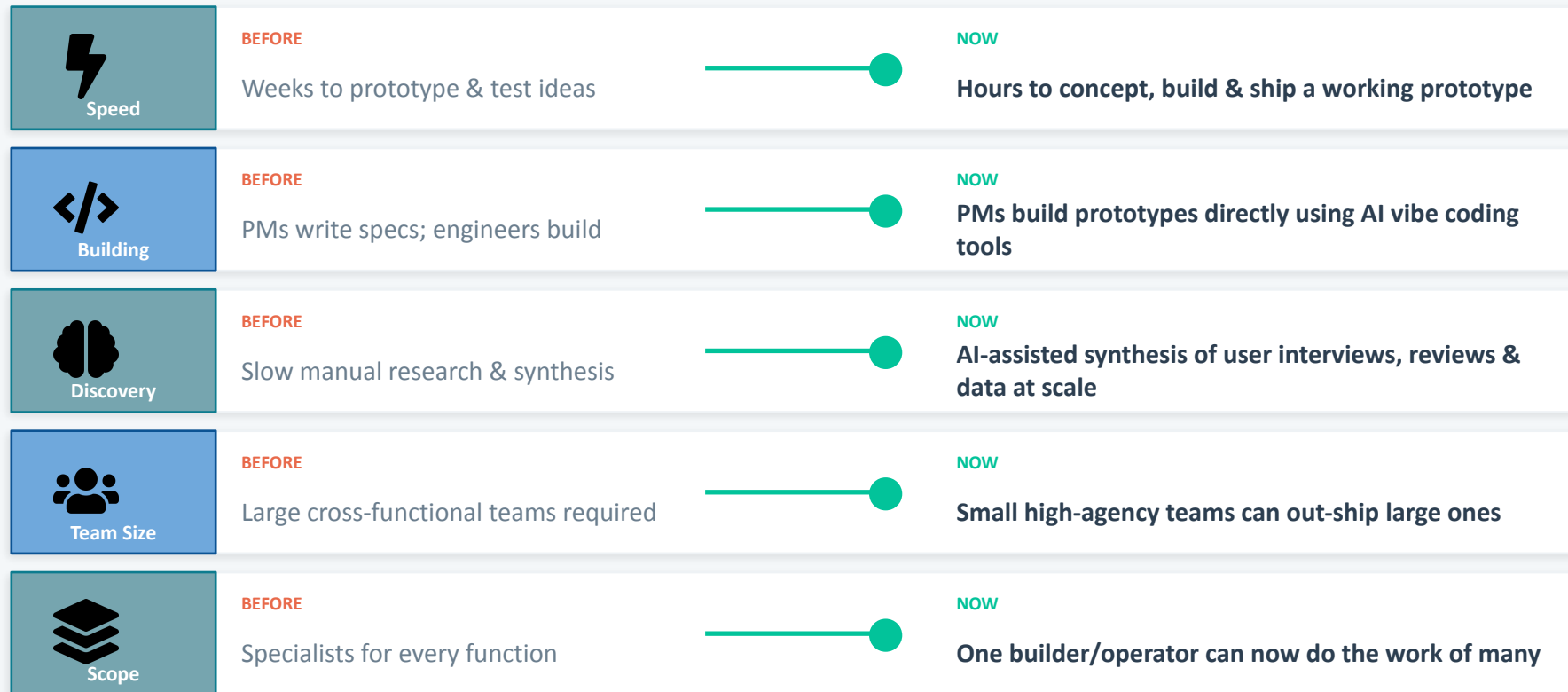
03

How AI

Changes the Game

Speed, team structure, and the rise of the builder/operator

The AI Era: A Step Change, Not an Incremental Improvement



The Builder/Operator: A New Kind of Product Leader

AI fluency isn't a nice-to-have. It's the new product leadership differentiator.

Strategic Thinking

Vision, roadmap,
business outcomes

Builder Fluency

Vibe coding, AI tools,
prototyping → shipping

Operator Instincts

Ownership, speed,
high agency

= The Builder/Operator

Most product consultants tell you what to build. Builder/Operators help you build it — and often build it themselves.

04 The Evolved Team Model

What high-agency product teams look like in 2026

The AI-Era Product Team: Who's On It and What They Do

3–6 high-agency generalists, each amplified by AI — out-shipping teams twice their size

CORE TEAM · Always present

Builder/Operator PM

The engine

- Owns the product vision, roadmap & outcomes
- Conducts discovery: user interviews, data synthesis
- Vibe codes working prototypes with AI tools
- Prioritizes ruthlessly; writes almost no specs
- Ships MVPs directly — no handoff required

Full-Stack Engineer

The builder

- Builds and ships production-quality code
- Uses AI coding tools (Cursor, Copilot) as a force multiplier
- Collaborates directly with PM on architecture
- Owns technical debt and platform scalability
- Can cover both frontend & backend in AI era

Product Designer

The experience owner

- Owns UX research, journey mapping & usability
- Creates lo/hi fidelity prototypes in Figma
- Partners with PM on discovery — not just delivery
- Uses AI tools for rapid ideation & design variants
- Advocates for the user in every product decision

EXTENDED / SHARED · As needed — often fractional or AI-assisted (ultimately greatly shrunk or eliminated)

Data / Analytics · Growth / Marketing · Domain SME · Legal / Compliance · Delivery / Scrum (optional)

What Changed, What's New, and What Goes Away

The AI era doesn't just shrink teams — it fundamentally reshapes every role that touches product

Roles That Evolve <i>Same title, very different job</i>	Roles That Are New <i>Didn't exist before AI</i>	Roles That Shrink or Go <i>Displaced by AI or team model shift</i>
Product Manager Now a builder/operator. Prototypes directly with AI. Writes almost no specs. Owns outcomes, not just delivery.	AI/Prompt Engineer Designs and maintains AI-powered workflows, prompts, and integrations within the product and team toolchain. (Shared service)	Business Analyst Largely absorbed by AI tools and empowered PMs with access to strategy & operations subject matter and enterprise data for analysis
Engineer Uses AI coding tools as a 10x multiplier. Less time on boilerplate, more on architecture and hard problems. Fewer needed per team.	AI Product Researcher Uses LLMs to synthesize user research, competitive data, and market signals at scale and speed. (Shared service)	Dedicated QA Engineer AI-powered testing tools handle much of regression and smoke testing. Engineers own quality end-to-end.
Designer Shifts from pixel-pusher to experience strategist. AI generates design variants; designer curates and owns the UX vision.	Builder/Operator CPO Senior product leader who can both set strategy AND build. Bridges the gap between vision and execution personally.	Scrum Master / Delivery Lead Smaller high-agency teams self-organize. Overhead of formal Scrum ceremonies doesn't scale to 3-person teams.
Engineering Manager Leads smaller, higher-output teams. More focus on culture, quality bar, and enabling AI-augmented workflows.		Large specialist pools Separate UX research, content strategy, or analytics teams. AI + generalist team members absorb much of this work.

Core product team

The Evolved PM Competency Profile

AI fluency is now a core PM competency — not optional, not a bonus

User

- Deeply knowledgeable about the target customer
- Interacts with users regularly — ideally weekly
- Evangelist for user problems and potential solutions

Business

- Understands value drivers and business model
- Can put rough valuations on features and bets
- Connects user behaviors to business outcomes

Technology

- Conversant in the tech stack and data architecture
- Can estimate effort with reasonable reliability
- Knows what's technically feasible vs. aspirational

Industry

- Tracks competitive landscape and emerging players
- Spots trends before they become table stakes
- Understands industry dynamics and regulatory context

AI & Builder

NEW IN 2026

- Vibe codes prototypes using AI tools, typically within an IDE
- Uses LLMs for research, synthesis & decision support
- Ships MVPs directly — without waiting on eng cycles

Great Teams Obsess Over Learning — AI Accelerates Every Stage

Problem Space

- Formulate hypotheses
- Engage in discovery to understand users
- Articulate the problem and opportunity

AI assists: faster synthesis of user interviews, reviews & support data

Solution Space

- Ideate on candidate solutions
- Experiment — tackle biggest risks before building
- Build/operator prototypes directly with AI tools

AI assists: vibe coding prototypes in hours, not weeks

Scale Space

- Deliver a product
- Observe outcomes at speed
- Iterate — AI compresses the feedback loop

AI assists: data analysis, anomaly detection, automated monitoring

KEY PRINCIPLE

Exhaustively define the problem space before progressing to the solution space — AI amplifies speed in every phase but cannot replace this discipline.

05 Where to Start

Practical paths for every maturity level

Where Should You Start? It Depends on Your Maturity.

Evangelizing a skeptical audience

- Facilitate a retrospective on a recent failure — how might AI-era product thinking have changed the outcome?
- Re-introduce leaders to the product mindset; ask what would need to be true to adopt it
- Seek buy-in for a single pilot team or project
- Show, don't tell — a working prototype built in a day beats a deck every time

Leadership bought in, not sure where to start

- Align on a good candidate problem for a pilot with agreed-upon objectives and guardrails
- Make sure you have a clear, customer-back problem statement before writing a single line of code
- Staff the team correctly — no cutting corners on PM, design, or engineering
- Use AI tools from day one to establish velocity and signal what's possible

Already practicing, want to level up

- Assess team AI fluency — are your PMs builder/operators or still spec writers?
- Audit your discovery and delivery velocity — how much can AI compress your cycles?
- Re-examine team structure — are you still staffing for the pre-AI world?
- Involve teams in the current/future state definition and close the gaps together

KEY TO SUCCESS — Bring in expert practitioners or product coaches who have done this before.
In the AI era, this means finding someone who leads AND builds.

The Bottom Line

1

The product mindset foundations — empowered teams, customer obsession, outcome focus — still matter more than ever. AI doesn't replace them; it amplifies them.

2

AI has fundamentally changed what small, high-agency teams can accomplish. Prototypes in hours. Discovery at scale. Shipping without waiting.

3

The team model must evolve. PMs who only write specs will be replaced by PMs who build. Organizations still staffing for the pre-AI world are falling behind.

4

The builder/operator is the new product leadership model — executive-level thinking, operator-level accountability, and the hands-on ability to ship.

Let's Talk

*If your product team is still operating like it's 2024,
you're leaving a lot on the table.*

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There's a lot more to the story — I have loads of real-world examples of product mindset in action (successes and failures) that bring these principles to life.