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Chapter One: Busy Is Not a Business

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CHAPTER 1

Busy Is Not a Business

> *"There is surely nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency what should not be done at all."*
>
> — *Peter F. Drucker, "Managing for Business Effectiveness,"* Harvard Business Review (*1963*)

Some of the busiest companies I have walked into were in the most trouble.

When the private-equity firm I work with put me in as chief executive of a distributor of aftermarket parts, its results were declining. It was missing its sales targets while its costs kept rising. The company sold parts for motorcycles, ATVs, outdoor power equipment and a good deal more, in more than a dozen countries, and it had been adding markets and products for years. You would not have known it was in trouble from the hallways. Projects and initiatives were under way everywhere, and the product line kept growing.

That much activity in a company whose numbers are going the wrong way is not a good sign. To me it was an alarm. Nobody could tell me what most of the projects would return, and nobody was watching the cash they used up. A product launched without anybody asking what it will earn doesn't just fail to help. It bleeds money, and the more of them you launch, the faster the bleeding.

So we cut the spending and the initiatives that weren't tied to revenue. At our first town hall, and in an open letter after it, I told the whole company we would begin by simplifying the business. The leadership team had already worked through three lists — what we would stop, what we would start and what we would keep doing — and we would let the 80/20 numbers on our customers and products tell us where to simplify and where to raise prices. The people and the money the first list freed were meant for what was already performing, and for what

showed enough promise to save. I have told more of that turnaround in *The 80/20 CEO*.

Nobody in that company was short of ability. Many had simply stopped paying attention, to the business and to one another, and they were busy on work nobody had chosen. That is a leader's problem, not a team's problem, and it is the problem this book is about.

The Same Problem, One Product at a Time

It shows up product by product, too. Here is what it looks like at Dispatchwell, the first of the three invented companies you will follow through this book.

Dispatchwell distributes maintenance and repair parts from forty branches. Its product team released a feature on a Thursday that let a technician photograph the nameplate on a failed part and order the replacement from the job. Engineering closed the last ticket before lunch, the sales deck was ready by two, and the demonstration was beautiful. By Friday afternoon the team was already arguing about what to build next. Six weeks later, a handful of technicians were using the feature. Everyone else still phoned the branch counter, read out the number on the dead part and waited for somebody to call back.

The team delivered exactly what it promised. The customer was still doing the old work.

So where, exactly, did the product succeed? It succeeded on the only scoreboard the team could see. The feature shipped on time, the tickets closed and the demonstration landed, and every one of those is a real accomplishment. Not one of them tells you whether a single customer's day got easier, or whether Dispatchwell will be paid a dollar more for the trouble.

Busy Has Excellent Paperwork

Activity is easy to display. You can count features shipped, launches held, variants added, hours logged and projects closed, and all of it fits on a slide with a green arrow beside it. Those counts tell you something about the work moving through the building. They do not tell you whether the work deserved to move.

So when a product team reports to you, ask for a sentence about the customer first. What should be different for the customer when the work is done? A technician orders the right part without reading the number

down the phone twice. A maintenance crew replaces a failed control without rewiring the cabinet. A purchasing manager reorders standard parts without asking for a special quote. Each of those describes something outside the team's own activity — something you could go and watch.

Then ask what should be different for the business. Perhaps the customer buys again, a profitable order becomes repeatable, service calls fall, or an expensive source of errors disappears.

Then ask for the link between the two, because it is not automatic. A service can delight its customers and lose money on every visit, and a profitable product can be a sitting duck, tolerated by customers only until something better comes along. The link is a claim, and claims can be wrong.

At Dispatchwell, the link might read like this: technicians who can find and order the right part with less back-and-forth will order from Dispatchwell more often, and the owners who pay the bills will move more of their spending to it. That is a reason to investigate. It is not yet a finding, because nobody knows whether finding the right part is a serious problem for Dispatchwell's customers, whether the feature makes it easier, or whether their spending depends on it.

A launch date answers none of those questions. Figure 01-01 puts the three scoreboards side by side.

Whose scoreboard	What it counts	What it says about the photo-ordering feature
The team's	Features shipped, tickets closed, dates met	A clean win
The customer's	The right part, found once and on site when the job needs it	Unchanged for most technicians
The business's	Repeat orders and a bigger share of spending from accounts that order every week	Unknown

Fig. 01-01: Three scoreboards at Dispatchwell. The team kept the first one, and it was the only one of the three that couldn't say whether the work paid.

The team kept the scoreboard it was given. Which scoreboard counts is the leader's call.

Name the Owner Yourself

Ask who owns a product and you will often get a title instead of a name. Product managers in particular are handed responsibility without the

authority that is supposed to come with it. They are expected to improve results while sales promises custom work, engineering sets its own priorities, finance controls the money, and an executive can drop in a new project whenever a big customer calls. Sometimes that executive is you.

Every one of those people has a legitimate concern. Sales sees the order at risk. Engineering sees the technical limits and the maintenance bill that arrives after launch. Operations sees the work it will have to do every week from now on, and finance sees the cash and the commitments. Trouble starts when nobody is responsible for reconciling those concerns before the company makes a promise.

That is why the first product decision belongs to you. Name the owner of each product — one person, by name — and draw the boundary around what that person decides alone. In a company Halloran's size it is often the owner. At Halloran Service, the maintenance company in our trio, Tom Halloran holds the product job himself, because nobody else at Halloran has it. In a larger company it may be a product manager working inside a defined investment limit. The title matters much less than the boundary.

Your owner should be able to say, without notes, which customer the product serves, what problem it solves for them, what evidence supports that choice and what result will justify more investment. The owner also needs a reliable path to you, or to whoever decides above that limit. A product manager cannot settle an argument about company strategy by scheduling another workshop.

Then write down who decides what. Who can approve a new product? Who can accept a material change in scope, commit a delivery date to a customer, grant a customer an exception or end an offering? For each of those, name the person who decides and the people who must be consulted first. Nobody who will carry the consequences should learn about the promise from a sales announcement.

None of this makes the product manager the chief executive of the product. A safety engineer may have the authority to stop a release, engineering should own how a thing gets built, and finance should own the definitions of the numbers. What matters is that every disputed choice has a home before the dispute starts. Chapter 11 works through those boundaries with the people who build and deliver, and Chapter 17 takes on the hard cases that come to your desk — the urgent deal, the override, the dissent that won't go away.

One more line belongs on that page, and it is the one most often left off. Good product work includes saying "We don't know yet," with a

plan to find out. It includes showing why an attractive request would push out something more valuable, and it includes bringing bad news forward while the decision can still change. If every unwelcome finding is a career risk, don't expect to see many unwelcome findings in your product reviews. People take their cue from how you react the first time.

Ask for the Product on One Page

You don't need a new department to start. Ask the owner of one product you already sell to describe it on a single page. I call it the product page, and it is the first worksheet in the Field Guide because everything else in this book adds to it.

1. **The customer.** Which customer, in which situation, described specifically enough that two people would recognize the same customer.
2. **The job and the promise.** What the customer is trying to get done, and the result your offering promises.
3. **The whole offering.** What is included: the product itself, setup, delivery, support, and what happens when it ends.
4. **The owner.** The name, the decisions that person can make, and where everything else goes.
5. **The results.** What should be different for the customer, what should be different for the business, and the link you believe connects them.
6. **The next decision.** The decision the product needs next, the evidence that would improve it, and the date it will be made.

A one-page limit punishes vagueness — which is the point of it. "Digital services" is not a product. "The recurring inspection package for facilities that can't staff their own quarterly checks" is one you can examine.

Read the page before you read anything else about the product. If the owner can't fill in a line, that blank is the most useful thing on the page.

Go Looking for the Discrepancy

Once the page exists, gather evidence from the whole life of the product: how people find it and buy it, how they start using it, where they struggle, what support it takes, what the company earns from it and why customers leave. Don't assume the sales report holds the whole story.

A product can sell well because the sales team quietly makes up for its defects with unpaid work.

Use the records you already have. Orders, returns, support cases, installation notes, service calls and renewal decisions will show you where the promise breaks, and so will an hour spent watching a customer use the thing. Read a sample of those records yourself, even if a tool has already sorted and summarized them for you. A tidy summary of misunderstood records is still wrong.

Your first useful conversation will usually be about a discrepancy. The product is called standard, yet every order needs an engineer. Customers praise its flexibility, yet support can't keep up with the variations. Revenue is rising, yet the people needed to serve it are rising faster. Those are product questions, because each one concerns the relationship between the promise, the delivery and what the delivery costs.

Measure What Changes Outside the Building

Go back to the photo-ordering feature. If Dispatchwell keeps counting app features shipped, it will reward the team for repeating its original mistake. Better questions sit outside the building. Can technicians find the right part without phoning the branch? Do they trust the match enough to stop calling to check it? Does the new way cut wrong parts and second trips without slowing the orders that already go well?

It also matters who is asking. A contractor with three technicians, who knows the counter clerk by name, may have no use for the app at all, while a regional service company with 150 technicians spread across a territory may need it badly. An average across both of them hides the only difference that matters.

So tie every measure to a specific customer behavior and to a result that matters to the business, and put limits around it. Faster ordering is not an improvement if the wrong parts arrive faster.

Some limits are not up for trade at all: safety, security, privacy, accessibility, the law and the contracts you have signed. I'll call them obligations from here on. They sit outside every commercial argument in this book, and no revenue forecast buys an exception to them.

For the company as a whole, keep one number in front of you: the share of this year's sales that comes from products launched in the last three years. It is called the vitality score, and it tells you whether all that product work is turning into sales. Chapter 4 shows how far it can move, and Chapter 14 shows how to keep it honest.

You won't settle all of this in the first meeting. You can settle what decision comes next, what evidence is missing, who will get it and when the team will come back to the question. That is a more useful commitment than another feature deadline dressed up as progress.

Before anyone leaves the room, ask one person to explain what should be different for the customer and another to explain what should be different for the business. If they cannot connect their answers, the work is not ready for a bigger budget.

Give the uncertainty an owner.

Your call, their call

Your call. Who owns each product, by name, and what that person decides alone. Which decisions come to you. Which scoreboard counts.

Their call. The product page, the evidence behind it and the next decision, with the date it will be made.

Do This

1. Name the owner of each product your company sells — one person each — and write down what each one decides without you.
2. Ask one owner for the product page — the customer, the job and the promise, the whole offering, the owner, the results and the next decision — and read it before anything else about that product.
3. Ask for the last five things the team shipped, with the customer behavior each one changed. Treat every blank as a question, not a failure.
4. Write down, by name, who can approve a new product, a change in scope, a delivery date, a customer exception and the end of an offering.
5. Read twenty support cases, returns or service calls for that product yourself.
6. Put one discrepancy — a standard product that isn't standard, or growth that costs more than it brings in — on the agenda for your next leadership meeting.