

Doug Ringer's Product Development Accelerator

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A free, bi-monthly newsletter about techniques for improving product development and product management. Past issues are archived for free downloading on our website: <http://www.dougringer.com>.

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Product Management is a Team Sport like Golf, not Football

Many management gurus talk about teamwork and how the “team” solved a major problem. This concept of a “team” seems to find favor because of our infatuation with professional sports teams - football, baseball, soccer/futbol, basketball, etc.

I enjoy watching an occasional football or basketball game, I am not a fanatic. What I do realize from watching these games is that a product development “team” has more in common with golf teams than with the sports previously mentioned. Here is why:

1. All members must play their best game
2. My play affects others' play indirectly
3. The results of each member contribute equally
4. Members play alone but wins or loses collectively

The first point is obvious. All teams working toward a common goal need each member to pull their own weight if they are to be successful. Every person's contribution is needed on time and on target for the project plan to succeed.

Secondly, the work of individual project team members is done mostly in isolation. She has a section of software code to write while at the same time others designing circuitry and mechanical parts. Each is aware of the other's work and they discuss the portions of the project where their activities meet, but there is little direct impact. This is much like a golf team or a cross-country running team. Each individual team member plays his or her best round of golf or runs their fastest time in isolation from the other team members.

Third, there are no insignificant team members. In the business climate today, there are not any unnecessary employees. They have been made redundant and removed from the ranks of their company. Everyone on every team has a defined purpose and there is no "slack time" or "extra resources" to throw at a problem. In the running and golfing examples above, the sports teams' score is a sum of the scores of the individual contributors, just like a typical, modern-day project development team.

Lastly, it can be a lonely business, especially for the product and project managers. As previously mentioned, team members work in isolation for much of the time. The technical and manufacturing teams typically have multiple members and are part of a large department so they have social and affiliation needs addressed by the fact of numbers. Project and product managers are more of the lone wolves. The departments are typically small and there is little in the way of commonality between product lines or projects that can be discussed. Compound this with the fact that no two projects are ever going to be at the same point at the same time and there is little common ground among members.

I typically eschew sports analogies when referring to business because the logical connection is not there, but Super Bowl 49 is only 36 hours past and it became clear to me how similar work and sports can be, but you must look deeply at both to find commonalities. Surface level comparisons are not accurate nor helpful.

Doug Ringer has devoted his career to maximizing the value of product development projects and services. In roles in R&D, manufacturing, marketing, and product management, he has seen change from many perspectives and has a deep understanding of the critical importance of customer focus to an organization's success. He has worked across 20 states and in 3 continents, and has been privileged to assist GE, Ericsson, Honeywell, Meritor, Schneider Electric, and others. Contact Doug at doug@dougringer.com or at www.dougringer.com.

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