

Telling the Right Story: Product Management with Narratives

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The Products Sandwich

Product managers are in the unique position of being sandwiched between product development and strategy. Engineers, designers, marketers, and other stakeholders look to them for direction in the ideation or evolution process of a product, while the strategy layer usually wants to hear from them how their products fit into the bigger picture of their vision and longer term plans.

In this situation, where product managers are expected to regularly give updates on product concepts and the development status, using narratives can dramatically reduce efforts and provide much better alignment than simple bullet lists or keyword overviews. In addition, as Bernadette Jiwa (2018) has pointed out drawing from her experience as a consultant, teams and companies that use narratives tend to see themselves as less limited by boundaries of existing markets than companies that do not use their own narratives, instead focusing on winning against existing competition.

At its core, a narrative is a story being told. Stories comprise a sequence of events, i.e. the barebones framework of purported facts. The sequence in which the events are being told, and the interpretation of the relations within a story, make up the narrative. There can be different narratives based on the same story; these are what we usually know as versions.

Narratives and Identities

One of the most debated aspects of product management is the identity of the product. This identity encompasses the relation to target customer groups, or personas, to the identity and product portfolio of the company, as well as its market positioning. This identity is constantly re-constructed, based on learnings from customer feedback, user research, or changes in the strategic outlook of the company. With Heinz Abels (2010, p. 196), identity is fundamentally constructed as an answer to the question “Who am I?”. To operationalize this question, Abels suggests the following questions: “How did I become who I am?”, “Who do I want to become?”, “What am I doing?”, and “How am I viewed by others?”. Out of these answers, narratives can be constructed that portray their subject’s identity in ways that are understandable to observers coming from very different perspectives. And even though Abels’ questions are mainly intended to relate to the concept of individuals, they are very valuable in defining the identity of a product, brand, or organization.

Narratives can integrate two perspectives. On the one hand, the stories they tell are used to contribute to the formation and constant re-construction of an identity. In this sense, they may be understood as puzzle pieces out of which identities are constructed, with the puzzle becoming more than the sum of its pieces. On the other hand, though, the puzzle metaphor falls short in that identities are not incomplete if a story is missing, like a puzzle would be without one of its pieces. This is where the re-construction aspect of narratives and identities come in: An identity is never complete and fixed, but rather remains a dynamic entity that only gets fixed in the stories that are told about it. In this sense, every new story that is told about an identity shapes that identity, but it also provides a new context to that identity. Since each such story is a story about the identity, it is also larger than the identity itself. This is why it is so important for product managers to understand the stories that are being told about their products, as they form the narrative that constitutes their identities.

Why Narratives?

Narratives in written long-form offer several benefits. First, they already contain at least one interpretation of a story. This does not prevent other interpretations spawning from coffee machine talk, but at least there is one single interpretation that can serve as ground truth with regard to what the original intention of the product managers was. Inviting and potentially enforcing feedback can facilitate the surfacing of differences in understanding and interpretation of the narrative that would go unnoticed if the information was conveyed in the form of a bullet list. Secondly, long-form narratives enable a process of decoupled feedback, where unlike in a realtime presentation format, also the more quiet team members or stakeholders can integrate their perspective. With this, the long-form narrative is a practical way to utilize the largely untapped potential that often lies in the insights coming from team members who rarely speak up in face-to-face situations.

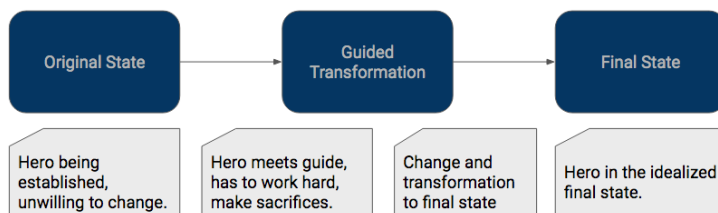
Of Heroes and Transformations

At the highest level, stories are constructed out of three phases (cf. Müller 2017, pp. 25). They move from an original state through a transition and lead into a final state. Traditionally, a hero reluctantly embarks on a journey through these three stages (with potentially several sub-stages), often being forced into the transition against her will. The hero would often be lost on this journey if it were not for the character that is usually the strongest in the story: the guide. This guide shows the hero a possible path through the transformation stage. Reaching a positive final state seems unlikely at times during the journey as the odds turn against the hero, leading into a climax in which (in the case of a happy ending) the unlikely turn to the positive is achieved and the final state is reached eventually. The unlikeliness of this positive turn is usually the meta-point, or the morale of the story: The odds can be overcome by some action or property of the hero,

with the help of the guide. Examples include hard work, training, sacrifice of personal goals for the benefit of the greater good, etc.

The role of the hero in a story is not limited to persons, but can also be filled by teams and organizations. However, as Miller (2017) points out, it is paramount not to think of the company or the product as the hero in the context of customers. For stories about interaction with customers, the company or the product should always be positioned as the guide, who usually is the character with the most wisdom and professionalism in the story.

In any case, there is often a prominent point in the story that marks the change of one era to the next. And even if there is no such clear point but rather a longer and potentially painful process, then there is still a clear before and after, i.e. an observable change between an original and a final state.

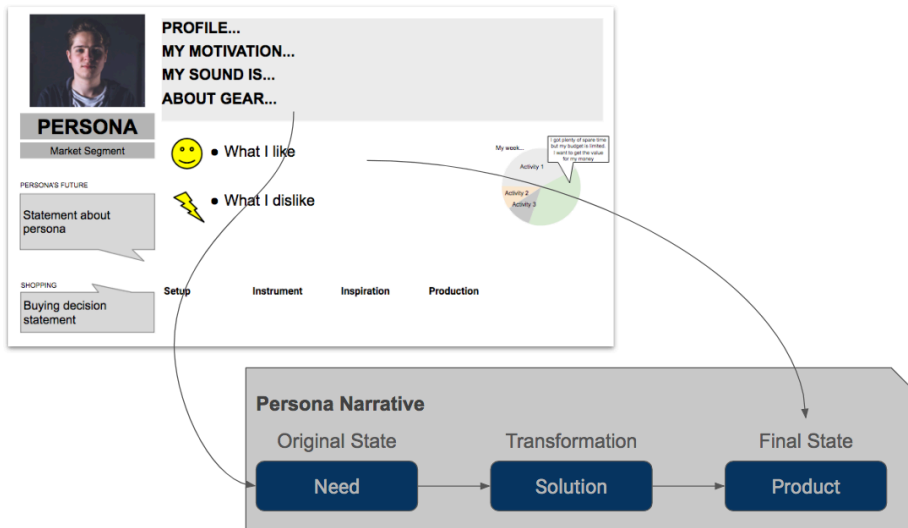


In addition, there are different ways in which stories can be told. Literary theory even suggests that there might be a few recurring patterns in how most stories we encounter unfold. Christopher Booker (2005) suggests that most stories are made up from only seven basic plots: a monster which has to be overcome, a hero going from rags to riches, on a quest, on a voyage with uncertain return, in a comedy, a tragedy, and the hero being reborn. The simple story of an aspiring teenager purchasing his first serious piece of music equipment and then exploring his creativity can be told as a joyous journey from eagerly saving money, finally having an exciting purchasing experience supported by a helpful and supportive retail staffer, to the rewarding experience of taking the first creative steps with the new purchase. The same story could be filled with anger at high prices, limited choice, unfriendly retail staff, and a steep learning curve with the product, leading to a case of buyer's remorse. In user research, product managers will regularly encounter variants of both versions of the story, but the ratio and the trend toward the positive version are important if recurring revenues from returning customers are a goal.

Personas

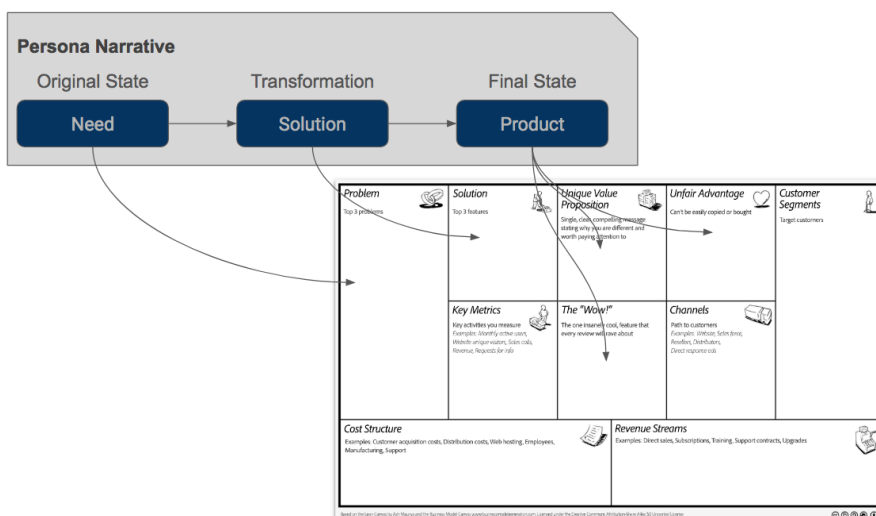
Personas can be used to collect and condense user pains, gains, and jobs to be done to represent a prototypical customer hero from a specific market and cultural segment (Cagan 2018). With regard to how the persona's story is built, the description of their status quo, including their pains and jobs to be done, informs the original state. Their goals and intended gains inform the final state of the story. It is the job of the product manager and the product team to come up with a compelling solution for the transformation in

that story, i.e. to design and project a product that has the potential to transform the persona’s original state into the wished-for final state, thereby acting as the guide. This user narrative can be used primarily by the product managers to check whether there is a compelling and realistic path to acquiring a significant set of customers from the market and cultural segment represented by the specific persona.



Lean Canvas

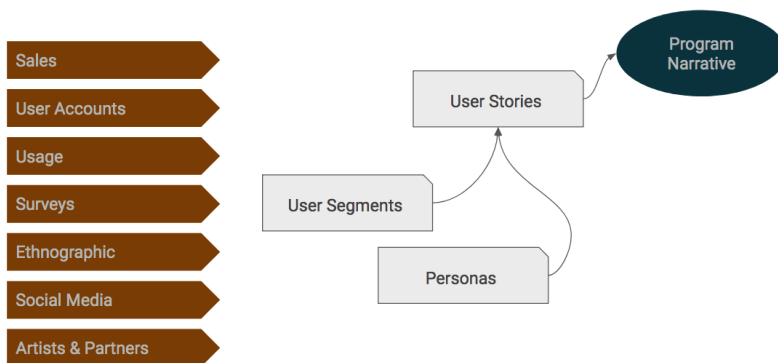
The user narrative generated from the persona description and the product manager’s projection for the transformative solution can also be used to build and test the lean canvas for the product (for the lean canvas concept, see Maurya 2012). The original state in the story told in the narrative has to match the description of the problem in the lean canvas. The final state of the story is represented in the three central fields of the lean canvas: The Unique Value Proposition, the “Wow” factor, and the Unfair Advantage. Finally, the solution in the lean canvas needs to represent the transformation in the story, even though this field in the



lean canvas will tend to be filled with more technical descriptions of features, while the narrative will highlight the effects of these features on the transformation of states in the persona's life.

Data and Narratives

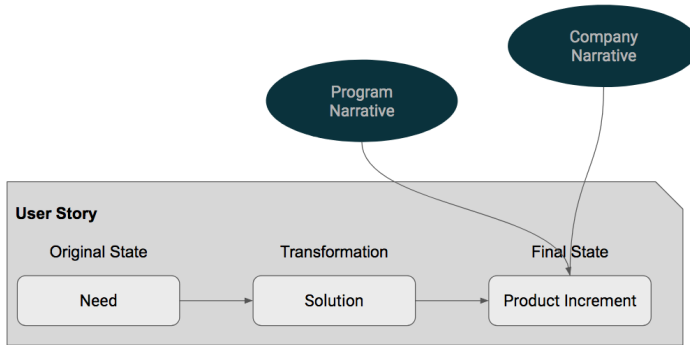
The philosopher Byung Chul Han warns against the current age of data-driven decisions. In his view, the focus on data is an expression of nihilism, where identities are swept away by massive amounts of data (Han 2014). And indeed, data and narratives in a product management context have a two-sided, sometimes difficult relationship. In the analysis stages of data, stories are often formed to make sense of the aggregated reports with their tables of numbers and charts of visualized trends. In larger surveys, individual stories often form an overarching narrative around the entire report, assuming the place of a more or less official outcome. On the other hand, data is often used to back up existing stories and narratives around products or brands, especially when there are conflicting narratives. This approach can be helpful when a decision for one narrative has to be taken and data is used to inform the decision with perspectives from the outside. Also, as contexts of products and brands are constantly changing, it is important to check a narrative that is in place and being used for product development against fresh data to see whether the narrative still has contextual fit. In this sense, to counterbalance data-driven nihilism, narratives can play an important role to keep the focus on identities of products, but also of cultural contexts in which products may be used, in order to take more holistic decisions which are informed by data, but not necessarily driven by it.



Strategy Development & Alignment

Narratives are a very useful asset for strategy work. Reportedly, Amazon's founder and CEO Jeff Bezos accepted strategic input only in the form of long-form essays, which had to be handed in before meetings (Stone 2014, p. 175). These essays then had to be read by all participants and were used as the basis for discussion in face-to-face meetings. This procedure can be very helpful as the use of long-form writing can help bring out differing nuances in the understanding of what a specific goal actually means, and therefore better facilitate alignment than lists of bullet points with aspects of goals. Such bullet points might be im-

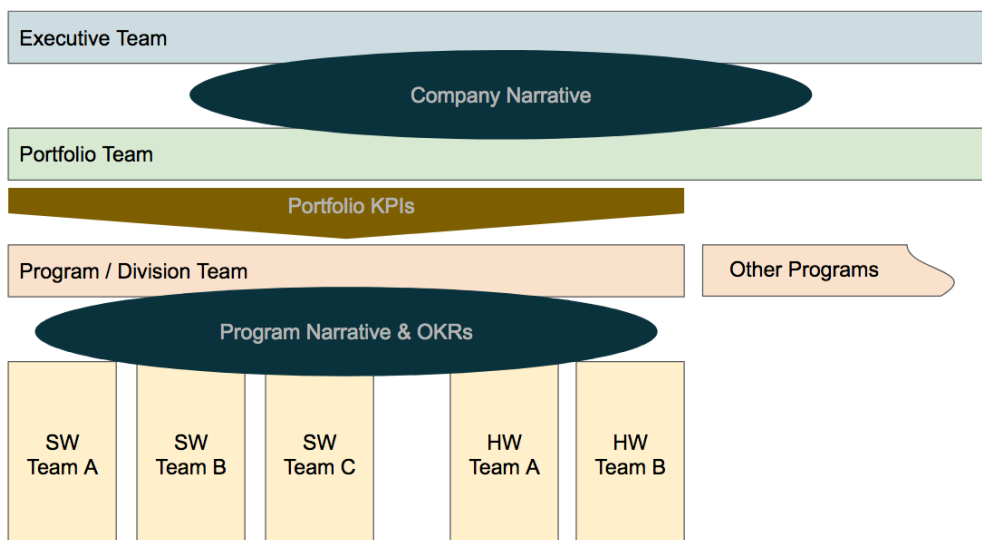
portant assets as well, but only to remind everyone of the cornerstones of the strategic narrative once it is in place and understood by all participants involved in strategy development.



The job of strategy in the context of product development is to provide guidance—a guide for the guides—on where to go with the products, setting a true north for individual feature development. In terms of structuring stories, this means informing the final state to be achieved with the entirety of users stories and other narratives in place. This does not have to and will never be a perfect match, but the intention should be to set the spirit in which all user stories are developed. Therefore, strategic narratives themselves do not have to be structured to have an original state and a transformation before reaching a final state. Rather, it can make a lot of sense to leave out the transformational part, since this should be the domain of the teams who are working on the actual products. The original state can also be left up to the work on developing personas, but much attention should be paid to describing the wished-for final state as vividly as possible.

Scaling

In a scaled agile environment, strategic narratives can be used as a glue between different layers in the organization’s hierarchy. For example, if there are several product development teams working in a division or program, these can be aligned on common goals via a strategic narrative for the entire division or program.

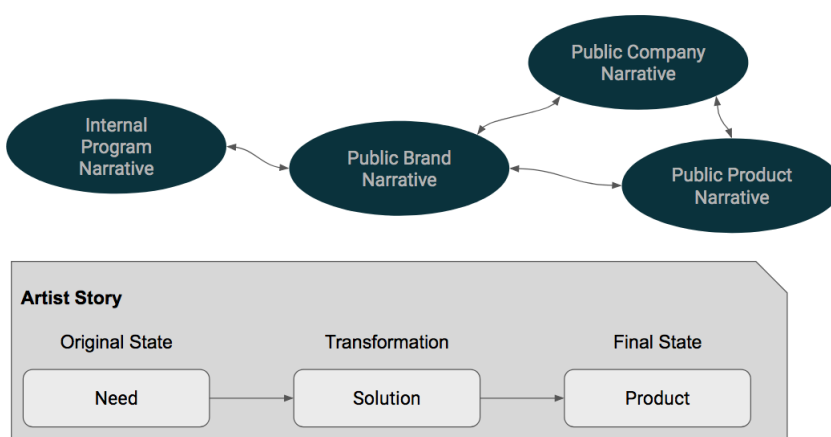


If there are different layers steering larger parts of the organization, strategic narratives can be used to align these layers. In the example given here, there are two different layers representing the organization as a whole: the strategic executive team and the operational portfolio team. Both of these are bound together by a company narrative that is constantly being worked on from both sides. The portfolio team then establishes individual key performance indicators for divisions or programs, around which the program teams create their program narratives and derive objectives and key results (OKRs) for their individual product development teams. Regardless of the hierarchical level, all narratives should be available to everyone in the organization who is even remotely involved in working with the products, which usually includes everyone. Secrecy in this regard is usually far more expensive in sunk opportunity cost versus any gains to be had by preventing the leaking of information to the public or to competitors.

Narratives for Customers

Narratives are an important part of marketing efforts around any product. In marketing, stories are told where the product or the company as the guide are the main drivers for the transformation toward a final state that is clearly better than the original state. Since marketing intends to facilitate buying decisions, such stories often try to align the original state with the perceived status quo of the targeted audience. Another option is to tell stories that are aspirational for the targeted audience. In music technology, for example, this is the case with artist stories. If the product can be pitched as a transformative solution for a professional creative, then its impact would likely be just as or even more positive for the regular customer.

From these positive narrations of stories, marketing aims to build a public product narrative. In the case of multi-product or even multi-brand companies, this narrative is informed by and will in turn inform the existing public company and brand narratives. How these relations are established and developed is an important aspect of strategic marketing. At the same time, it is crucial to maintain an active and dynamic relationship between the internal program or division narrative and the public brand and product narratives. Especially in user-centric design and development setups, product management has to ensure the close alignment between marketing and the development teams. Otherwise, there is a risk that a product might be developed for one market and cultural segment, but then is marketed to another.



Operationalization

There are different ways to operationalize the benefits of long-form narratives for product management. The methods described so far are close to a story management approach. In story management, all product-related as well as organization-related decisions are contextualized via stories. These stories need to be constructed in a constant feedback loop with all stakeholders and team members. This way, alignment on the course of action can be achieved even as this course is subject to change in an agile environment.

Another perspective can be found in the method of using so-called “springboard stories”, described by Denning (2001). In this method, participants are asked to come up with their own versions of potential future scenarios. The goal of this method is not to create the stories themselves, but rather to facilitate the discussion and foster the understanding of what needs to change in the current state in order to make a path to the wished-for future states possible. For this reason, the springboard method can be helpful in change management processes. In this context, it is sometimes helpful to let the participants describe themselves as the heroes looking for guidance. This exception to the rule of never seeing yourself as the hero can be used to highlight the lack of guidance in certain areas.

User stories are already a cornerstone of agile product development (Cohn 2004). They are usually kept short on purpose, yet their structure is supposed to follow the same three-step journey at the heart of all stories: As a user (original state), I want to (transformation)..., so I can (final state).... User stories need to corroborate narratives generated from data and user research in a general sense. They can and will be much more specific, but the general direction needs to be aligned with the broader perspective of the narratives.

As a general rule, long-form narratives may be between one to six pages long and ideally contain visualizations that illustrate the ideas they convey. In practice, it is usually helpful to employ methods of collaborative brainwriting in the actual writing process, where team members or interested stakeholders get together and distribute individual paragraphs or parts of the narrative, which later get combined into a first version of the narrative. As an alternative, the product manager or one team member may take on the responsibility of creating the first draft alone. It is usually not advisable to have too many contributors for the first version of the narrative, in order to reach a stringent and consistent perspective from which the stories are told.

Once the first draft is available, the product manager moderates the alignment process with the stakeholders. This involves inviting them to read and comment on the document, and manages how changes get integrated. Once all relevant stakeholders are aligned and the narrative has reached a certain state of maturity, the narrative is then handed out to the broader team, i.e. everyone involved in building the product and

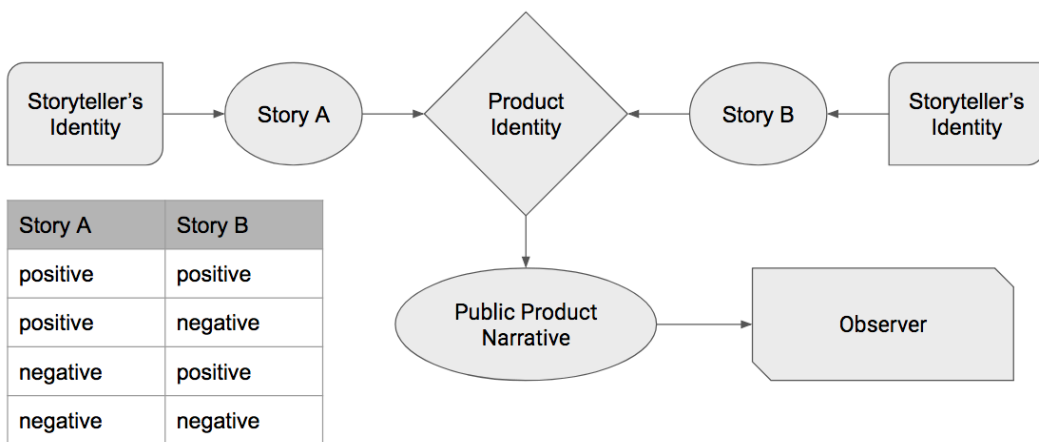
marketing it, as well as the front lines of sales and customer support. Again, feedback is invited and in due time, a public discussion forum with proper moderation is set up to discuss everyone's comments in detail. Again, the product manager needs to drive this process, collect the feedback and the outcomes of the discussions and manage all changes to the narrative document. Once alignment has been achieved at least to a certain degree, the narrative is fixed, but kept available to everyone involved with the products. However, this process of building narratives needs to be integrated with agile development approaches and mindsets, which means that narratives should not stay fixed for longer than roughly six months. Each fixed state should be viewed as an iteration only. Also, it may not be possible to align everyone on a specific narrative. Diverging opinions may surface and remain, and they are not necessarily detrimental to the success of narratives in product management and development. Rather, these minority opinions may be important points to integrate into strategy development and therefore the next iteration of the narratives, or it might even be worth considering writing a different, minority report version of the brand narrative.

Probabilistic Narratives

Coming back to the notion of identity construction via stories, it should now be clear how the various different stories being told around a product, a brand, and a company have an influence on how the product is seen. Each new story that the observer of a narrative is aware of acts as evidence in favor of or against the narrative, provided the observer deems the storyteller as credible. This can have a huge effect on a narrative, since at some point the observer may decide to not believe the narrative any longer. Narratives about something in development, of which an observer has no first-hand experience yet, are highly volatile and subject to change if the evidence corroborating or negating them swings in a different direction. This is the flipside of conceptual agility, where new findings from user or market research can keep products under development on a course of market fit even as market conditions change. If the observer is the product manager, shifting evidence in the form of stories negating the constructed product narrative may trigger a healthy realignment of the narrative with realities in the field. This field, by the way, can be both inside and outside the company. If the observer is an investor, it may trigger them to reconsider backing the development of the product in its current form, as covered by the product narrative. However, if the product is already in the market and the observer is a potential customer, then it may trigger a decision not to buy the product. These examples should help to further highlight the importance of story management to product managers.

In order to keep track of the situation around a product, brand, company, or other identity, it can be helpful to devise a probabilistic network graph of evidence in the field. Here, storytellers are connected to the stories they tell about the identity, which in turn connect to the identity they help to construct. This identity is connected to the narrative it is supposed to be backed by, and this entire path through the network connects to the observer. It is important to note here that when information is flowing through these nodes, it

does not get generalized, as it would in a neural network where the only code is to fire or not fire. In this probabilistic network graph, we assume the observer to have full transparency on where the stories being told about the identity in question are coming from, and we also assume that the observer has some means of judging the storytellers' credibility. If these conditions hold true, we can then assign values to the positive or negative effects of stories being told around an identity. We may consider stories that support the narrative as stabilizing and therefore positive. Stories that negate an identity's narrative may be considered destabilizing and therefore negative. The credibility of the storyteller adds to the weight of the positive or negative effect of a story, as does its content. All of this can only be judged by an observer, of course. With such a rating system, coarse as it may be, product managers can gain a near real-time overview of the state of the narratives around identities they are responsible for. This is where the probabilistic network becomes actionable: Individual storytellers with a high weight rating to their stories can be approached about their needs and inclusion in the development of the narrative, thus increasing their likelihood to be supportive. Other positive stories can be actively sought out, in an effort to counterbalance mounting negative evidence. In the end, product managers should feel compelled to be early observers of any shifts of corroborating or negating evidence relating to the narratives around the identities they are responsible for, so they can react as early as possible. A probabilistic network graph can serve as a fishing net for early indicators that something may be changing, hopefully long before agility becomes too costly.



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