
UNABATED PRODUCTS

PM CAREER RESEARCH REPORT

3 Hidden Systems Blocking Your PM Career

Why competent PMs stall — and what to do about it

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500+ PMs coached · 36+ career advancements · 4.9/5.0 course rating

The Question

I've coached over 500 product managers. Corporate teams at Fortune 500 companies. Individual PMs at startups. Group cohorts across every industry you can name.

Early in every engagement, I ask the same question.

"How does your product make money for the company?"

The most common answer is silence.

These are competent PMs. They ship features. They manage backlogs. They run sprints on time. Their managers give them good performance reviews. By every visible metric, they're doing the job well.

But they can't answer that question. And that gap is costing them promotions, strategic influence, and career progression they can't figure out why they're missing.

After 500+ of these conversations, I stopped thinking this was an individual problem. The same three gaps showed up across every industry, every company size, every experience level. PMs at Amazon had them. PMs at three-person startups had them. Directors had them. APMs had them.

Three hidden systems are running underneath your product organization right now. They determine who gets promoted, who gets funded, and who gets managed. None of them are in your job description.

The Language Gap

You speak features. Your executives speak money. There's a translation layer between you and every strategic conversation in your company, and nobody told you it existed.

What it looks like from the inside

You build a roadmap. It's solid. Good user research, clear priorities, realistic timelines. You present it to leadership and get polite nods. Then someone from finance presents a one-page business case and gets the budget you asked for.

You optimized for the right product metrics. They talked about contribution margin. You weren't wrong. You were speaking the wrong language in the room that mattered.

CHECK YOURSELF

- 1 Can you connect your current sprint work to a line item on your company's P&L? Not vaguely. Specifically. Which revenue line or cost line does your product affect, and by how much?
- 2 If your CFO asked you to justify your team's headcount in financial terms, could you do it in under 60 seconds? Not with user stories. With dollars.
- 3 When you present a product metric (NPS, adoption rate, engagement), do you also present what that metric means in business outcome language that a board member would understand?

If you answered no to two or more of these, the Language Gap is active. Your product work is invisible to the people who make funding and promotion decisions.

The counter-intuitive fix

Stop measuring product success and start measuring business contribution. That sounds obvious. It's not. Because the fix isn't changing your dashboard. It's changing the conversation you have before you build the dashboard.

The tool that works: a metrics ladder. Five rungs. Feature metric at the bottom. Product metric above it. Product objective. Customer value. Business outcome at the top. Every feature you build should connect all five. If you can't draw the line from the feature to the business outcome, the feature doesn't have a business case. It has a product case. And product cases don't survive budget reviews.

"Within just a few weeks, I could see clear changes in how I approached strategy, framed decisions, and engaged with stakeholders. I shifted naturally from a feature-based approach to owning business outcomes."

— Coaching client, major bank

Try this Tuesday morning

Pick one feature your team is building right now. Write one sentence that connects it to a financial metric your CFO would recognize. If you can't write that sentence, you found the gap. That's your Language Gap showing.

SYSTEM 2

The Influence Trap

Every organization runs on two systems. The one in the documentation. And the one that actually determines what gets built, funded, and killed.

The org chart says one thing. The budget says another. The promotion criteria say a third. You're playing a game where the rules are written in invisible ink.

What it looks like from the inside

You spent three months building a case for a feature. The data was clear. Customer requests. Usage analytics. Revenue projections. You present it. Your manager kills it. The reason they give doesn't match the data.

You assume it's political. Or irrational. Or that your manager just doesn't get it.

It's none of those things. Your manager's bonus is tied to a metric your feature doesn't affect. The last person who pushed a similar initiative in that area got sidelined. Your manager isn't being difficult. They're being rational inside a system you can't see.

CHECK YOURSELF

- 1 Do you know what your boss's boss would have to do to get fired? Not their stated OKRs. The real thing. The thing that keeps them up at night.
- 2 When a stakeholder rejects your proposal, do you investigate their incentive structure before your next attempt? Or do you come back with more data supporting the same argument?
- 3 Can you name the unstated metric that drives budget decisions for your team? Not the one on the dashboard. The one in the conversation you weren't invited to.

If you answered no to two or more of these, the Influence Trap is active. You're optimizing for the wrong audience.

The counter-intuitive fix

Stop trying to convince people you're right. Start removing their biggest risk.

I coached a PM at Amazon who spent three months trying to get a multilingual feature approved. 600 feature request upvotes. Survey data. Straightforward engineering effort. Her manager kept blocking it.

The manager's track record was built on internal productivity. Customer-facing work felt like unfamiliar territory. That was his incentive system.

The reframe: position the feature as a revenue extension of internal productivity, not a customer request. Same feature. Different frame. She'd spent three months arguing with data. The right frame could have shortened that to weeks.

Try this Tuesday morning

Before your next stakeholder meeting, ask yourself: "What would this person have to do to get fired? What would they have done well to get promoted?" Map their incentive system before you present your idea. You'll pitch differently when you know what they're actually optimizing for.

SYSTEM 3

The Order-Taker Loop

This one is the most dangerous because it feels like success.

You ship features reliably. Your stakeholders are happy. Your manager gives you good reviews. You hit every deadline. And your reward for all of that competent execution is more execution.

The organization unconsciously reinforces order-taking because it's comfortable for everyone. Stakeholders get what they asked for. Managers get predictable output. You get positive reviews. Nobody notices that you never investigated whether the feature was the right thing to build.

The loop is self-reinforcing. Competent PMs get stuck in it for years.

What it looks like from the inside

Someone in leadership says "we need a dashboard for X." You scope it, build it, ship it. Leadership is satisfied. You get a good review.

You never asked: why does leadership want a dashboard? What decision are they trying to make? Is a dashboard the best way to support that decision? Would a weekly email with three numbers serve them better?

You executed the stated solution instead of investigating the actual problem. And your execution was so good that nobody noticed the difference.

CHECK YOURSELF

- 1 When a stakeholder gives you a specific solution ("build me a dashboard," "add this feature"), do you investigate the underlying problem before committing to their solution? Or do you scope it and start building?
- 2 In your last three product decisions, did you present multiple options with trade-offs? Or did you present one recommendation?
- 3 If you looked at your last six months of shipped work, how much of it came from your investigation of problems versus executing solutions other people defined?

If you answered honestly and felt uncomfortable, the Order-Taker Loop is active. You're getting rewarded for the wrong thing.

The counter-intuitive fix

Stop saying "I'll get that on the roadmap." Start saying "let me investigate what's driving that need."

You're not saying no. You're responding with curiosity instead of compliance. When a VP asks for a dashboard, the order-taker says "I'll scope it." The outcome owner says "that's an interesting signal. Can you tell me more about where it came from? What decisions will this dashboard inform? Let me investigate and come back with two or three approaches."

"My manager told me I had become a different PM in three months. The only thing that changed was how I responded to requests."

— Coaching client

Try this Tuesday morning

The next time someone asks you to build something specific, respond with a 24-hour investigation commitment instead of a timeline. "I want to make sure to understand the underlying problems. Let me look into what's driving this and come back tomorrow with options." One sentence. It repositions you from executor to strategist.

What Happens When These Systems Break

I've watched this sequence play out across 500+ coaching engagements. When PMs close these three gaps, career outcomes follow a consistent pattern:

MONTHS 1–2

PMs change how they communicate product decisions. They stop presenting features and start presenting business cases. Managers notice because the conversation sounds different.

MONTHS 3–4

PMs build unprompted business cases. They connect product work to financial outcomes without being asked. Stakeholders start including them in conversations they weren't invited to before.

MONTHS 5–8

PMs get pulled into strategic conversations. Leadership recognizes them as someone who understands the business, not just the product. Cross-functional partners start seeking their input.

MONTHS 9–12

Promotions, senior role transitions, leadership appointments. 36+ observed career advancements in 12 months across PMs at PwC, PayPal, Amazon, Walmart, Microsoft, Disney, Mastercard, and Capital One.

The timeline surprises people. They expect years. It takes months. Because these aren't skills you build from scratch. They're skills you were never taught that you're capable of learning quickly.

The corporate amplifier: When you train teams together, the effect compounds. One PM talking about business outcomes is easy to ignore. Fifteen PMs doing it at the same time changes how the entire organization talks about product work. Managers recognize the behavioral shift because they're seeing it from multiple people at once. The promotion conversation starts faster when the language changes at the team level.

Your Score

Count your "no" answers across all three systems. Nine questions total.

0–2 no answers

You're ahead of most PMs. You've closed at least one system gap, probably through instinct or a good manager. The remaining gaps are where your next career acceleration lives.

3–5 no answers

You're in the delivery trap that most mid-career PMs live in. You're competent at the job as it's defined. The problem is that the job as it's defined is only a quarter of what determines career progression. The other three quarters are the hidden systems you just scored low on.

6–9 no answers

You're not failing. You're operating in a system that was never explained to you. Every PM who enters coaching looks like this. The good news: the pattern breaks quickly once you can see it.

What This Means

PM career stalls are structural, not individual. The same three gaps appeared across every industry, company size, and experience level I've worked in. PM training stops at delivery. Nobody teaches the other three-quarters of the job.

That's what we built Unabated Products to fix.

Every framework in our curriculum comes from patterns observed across 500+ real coaching conversations. Not theory. Not academic models. Patterns from watching what actually moves PM careers forward.

If you recognized yourself in two or more of these systems, start with the "Tuesday morning" exercise from whichever system scored worst. The metrics ladder (System 1) and the stakeholder incentive map (System 2) produce the fastest visible change.

Free Webinars

We run free webinars that walk through one system per session with live exercises.

The Influential PM

4-week live course. 36+ career advancements. 4.9/5.0 course satisfaction across 400+ PMs trained at 50+ companies.

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