



Exploring Agile Product Leadership at Agile Product Open Boston

By Tony DiBiase

“Imposing limits can encourage a creative response. Excellent work can emerge from uncomfortable or seemingly untenable circumstances.”

from author Ed Catmull’s book *Creativity Inc.*

Tired of a staid lecture format at meetups? Wired by hands-on participation with other agile-minded professionals ready to learn and share? Join us at the [Agile Product Open](#) (APO) meetups and [fall conference](#) in Boston. You’ll be inspired!

Our most recent APO meetup, guest facilitator [Dieter Reuther](#) helped us explore Agile product leadership styles with LEGO Serious Play (LSP). The session was titled: Exploring Agile Product Leadership Models with LEGO Serious Play.

First, Dieter divided the entire group into groups of around five people and then placed a heap of LEGO pieces at the center of their table. From there, we were off to build mode! Each person interpreted a “build challenge” provided by our facilitator by creating a LEGO model codifying their response to the challenge. Participants had only five to seven minutes to build, and then each group told their story about the model while addressing any questions the group posed. Lastly, the group briefly reflected and shared thoughts on each model with the entire group.

Dieter explicitly established a safe environment wherein:

- it’s “always about the model”
- one never attacked or questioned a person directly, only asked questions about the model
- one listened generously & asked questions

This event was about product leadership. Thus, the challenges Dieter presented were: :

1. What is the professional superpower that makes you proud?
2. What is a major barrier with product management or product ownership in an agile environment
3. How can you solve the barrier represented by the model of your neighbor on your right?
4. How does being micromanaged make you feel?
5. What’s the biggest benefit for product outcomes when micromanagement is eliminated?



6. How can you combine the models you have individually built that expresses the biggest benefit for product outcomes when no micromanagement exists (e.g., build a shared one)?

For all but the last question, each participant built their own model, crafted its story, shared the story with their group. Then each group selected the best story to share with everyone.

Examples of superpowers shared were: authenticity, inquiry in discovery, open-mindedness, and cross-functional / multiple perspectives on collaboration.

The group exposed several major barriers in product management, including:

- focus - understanding / catering to a wide variety of users needs,
- remote team dynamics/management,
- establishing trust (e.g. transparent communication),
- rapid discovery and learning,
- extreme / overvalued expectations.

Barrier solutions we discussed included:

- asking valuable questions & gathering evidence/data to amplify users needs & focus teams
- better alignment & direct interactions between customers and the entire product team (removing communication barriers)

People felt more - liberated, loved, trusted, joyous, focused, empowered, involved, willing to work, unified, and creative - when leadership eradicates micromanagement. Growth, relaxation, and playfulness are other emotions that could result. Just as important, teams increase the delight, satisfaction, and growth of their customers.

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Time and LEGO piece constraints kept you on edge searching. We quickly fell into a pattern of focusing our creative energy on the new model and its impactful story, accompanied by a motivating musical groove supplied by Dieter. What came out when we told our stories made us laugh and encouraged each narrator with positive queries about their intent through their model.

There are moments where your hands tell you what to do - though you're thinking "what should I build with LEGOs when you ask me what I feel?" Sometimes your hands will take over and guide you. You are constantly trying to bring out your feelings and emotions. You also use the LEGO characters to "wear all the hats" in the situations you analyze and model. It's amazing how one can tell a really powerful story exploiting a single piece of LEGO. Dieter also encouraged us to KISS (keep it simple) and use our imaginations.

We obtained a big return on the time invested from the evening. Here are some of the takeaways:

- devote time to improve your ability to craft and tell impactful stories; LEGOs and the challenges pushed our analytical skills and creativity
- as an artist who builds, there are times you must simply "trust your hands"
- challenge, build, share and reflect on the model you build
- search for emotional states at the core of why you value others and the work you do
- know when you improvising and confidently sense the reactions of others as you communicate



- contribute your authentic self to teamwork

Props to Slalom Consulting, our venue sponsor, sustaining sponsors Agile Alliance and Boston Product Management Association, and organizers Ellen, Dan & Peter!

Join the APO Boston Community at their next event, the full day Open Space conference with the theme “Agile Product Alignment Across the Organization”. Information and registration is here: <http://bit.ly/BostonAPO2019>

About Agile Product Open

APO is the leading forum for learning, sharing, and promoting the application of Agile principles and practices to product management so we can make better products in better ways. The APO Boston chapter meets in Boston for Meetups and an annual full-day Open Space event. There are also APO groups in Johannesburg. Visit our Boston APO site at www.agileproductopen.org and views events (and join) our Meetup at <https://www.meetup.com/Agile-Product-Open>. Photos of the June event, “Exploring Agile Product Leadership Models with LEGO Serious Play” are [here](#).

About LEGO Serious Play

LSP is a technique for teams used by facilitators all over the world that engages each participant in serious, interactive play where thinking, communication, & problem-solving. Its benefits include tackling and approaching an answer to a question not yet on your radar. LEGO started using this tool in the 1990s with the aim to do something better than individual mental models AND be better prepared as an organization to respond to the unexpected. LSP started as a real-time strategy tool that starts by building a 3D MODEL of clear company strategy with the LEGO, then everybody is able to visualize it, clarify issues and challenges, solve problems, change it and TOGETHER explore different mental models for real-time realization of scenarios.

A core idea behind LSP -- using mental models -- allows a group to come to a deeper understanding of what lies ahead. LSP is less about an accurate physical representation and MORE about representing an idea. It challenges you to express how a question from the session leader make you feel. As you build a LEGO model, you are encouraged to use your hands and both sides of your brain. These activities tap into your imagination and storytelling skills - first build a model, then tell stories about those models. Even though models can be simple, in the end it's all about using your imagination to tell stories about your models. The obvious constraints - bricks and time - push your creativity. This “lean win” approach keeps everyone involved.



About Tony DiBiase

Tony DiBiase synthesizes biology, engineering, high-performance computing, algorithms & art to improve human health. He builds products with customers & collaborates in large-scale genomics (& other omics) projects in academia & industry. [linkedin.com/in/addibiase](https://www.linkedin.com/in/addibiase) | [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net) | dibiase1.com | [@addibiase1](https://twitter.com/addibiase1)