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Parental Leadership in Product-Engineering Partnerships for Managing Software Teams

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Abstract

In high-performing software teams, the collaboration between Product Managers (PMs) and Engineering Managers (EMs) is pivotal. This paper introduces the "Parental Leadership" model, where PMs and EMs function as co-parents to their teams. They balance the nurturing of team growth with the shielding from external disruptions. Drawing parallels from organizational psychology and software engineering practices, we explore how this leadership approach fosters psychological safety, enhances team performance, and aligns product delivery with strategic objectives. The proposed framework outlines roles, behaviors, risks, and success conditions to serve as a guide for implementing this leadership model in real-world software organizations.

Keywords: Software Engineering Management, Product Management, Team Leadership, Collaboration, Psychological Safety, Dyadic Leadership

1. Introduction

Software development is an inherently collaborative process that requires seamless coordination across diverse roles and cross-functional stakeholders. While technical acumen and agile methods are well-studied, the leadership dynamics between Product Managers (PMs) and Engineering Managers (EMs) remain comparatively under-explored. In high-performing software teams, the collaboration between these two roles is pivotal to not only delivering business outcomes but sustaining team morale and resilience.

This paper introduces the "Parental Leadership" model, a metaphor in which the PM and EM act as co-parents to the software team. Like parental figures, they share responsibility for both nurturing the team's growth and shielding it from disruptive organizational forces. The model articulates how PMs and EMs can collaboratively foster psychological safety, clarify priorities, and drive sustainable performance. We draw from insights in organizational psychology and software engineering to outline the key functions of this leadership model: nurturing, shielding, and aligning.

Although the concept itself is novel, several themes in existing literature are relevant. For example, emotional intelligence, consistency, and team support are recognized traits of effective engineering leaders [1]. Similarly, stakeholder alignment and influence without authority are essential skills often discussed in the context of product management [2]. Broader process frameworks like the Team Software Process (TSP) [3] offer role structure guidance but rarely address cross-functional co-

leadership. Principles like trust calibration and role clarity—originally studied in the context of human-AI collaboration—have meaningful parallels here [4].

The Parental Leadership model can also be situated within the broader literature on dyadic leadership, where two individuals jointly lead a team, often bringing complementary strengths. Dyadic leadership has been explored in business and healthcare management [5], and its relevance is increasingly recognized in interdisciplinary settings. These studies emphasize role clarity, mutual accountability, and shared vision as pillars of success. These principles are central to our proposal.
Despite their interdependence, PM-EM collaboration is seldom formalized in academic frameworks. While dyadic models of leadership have been established in other disciplines, they remain underutilized in the context of software engineering management. This paper proposes a framework, offering a set of behaviors and considerations that product and engineering leaders can apply to co-lead high-performing teams more intentionally.

2. The Parental Leadership Model

The central thesis is that the PM and EM are co-leaders of the team, each with a unique but complementary role. Separately, they are expected to bring an expertise to the role:

- **The PM** provides external alignment: vision, roadmap, customer feedback, business context, stakeholder management.
- **The EM** provides internal protection: execution consistency, technical quality, team health, prioritization trade-offs.

Together, they serve three functions:

1. **Nurture** – coaching, mentorship, and growth of individual contributors.
2. **Shield** – filtering chaos, avoiding churn, pushing back on low-value interruptions.
3. **Align** – ensuring the team delivers outcomes that matter while maintaining sustainable velocity.

2.1 Tactical Behaviors

Area	PM Focus	EM Focus	Joint Action
Strategy and execution	Customer needs, Market timing, Prioritization	Feasibility, team velocity, resource allocation, delivery pacing	Backlog grooming, Planning ceremonies; Retrospective
Communication	Stakeholder updates	Technical escalation management	Sprint demos
Team Culture	Impact communication to leadership and engineers	Mentorship, career growth, learnings and skills development	Motivation and recognition, Feedback cycles

Table 1: *Core responsibilities of PMs and EMs under the Parental Leadership model*

2.2 Dysfunctional Dynamics

In some teams, misaligned parental leadership can manifest in unhealthy extremes: an overprotective EM who shields too much and stifles exposure, or a PM who bypasses the EM to meet short-term deadlines. These breakdowns often result in churn, eroded trust, and fragmented execution [6]. Early detection of these anti-patterns through feedback cycles and skip-level 1:1s is key to recovery.

3. Implementation Considerations

3.1 Role Negotiation

Clarity on decision boundaries between PM and EM reduces conflict. An initial alignment exercise to define "decision owners," "consulted roles," and "tie-breaker mechanisms" is recommended.

3.2 Conflict Management

PMs may push for speed, EMs for quality. These tensions are normal. Retrospectives and triad reviews (with a designer or tech lead) help build mutual empathy.

3.3 Team Shielding

High-performing teams often operate in a "safe bubble". PMs and EMs jointly determine which disruptions reach the team and to what degree. Together they make the judgement call to balance transparency with churn.

3.4 Scaling the Model

This model can scale to larger organizations through "pods," where PMs and EMs manage scope for sub-teams and rotate pairing for exposure and growth.

4. Conclusion

This paper proposes a novel framing of cross-functional leadership in software teams through the Parental Leadership model. By conceptualizing the PM and EM as co-parents, we clarify leadership expectations and foster a more resilient and cohesive team culture. The framework describes how PM-EM alignment can drive psychological safety, role clarity, and delivery sustainability which are key success factors in today’s dynamic, cross-functional development environments. The model provides a metaphor-driven but structured approach to dyadic leadership that is both empathetic and execution-oriented.

By articulating the joint responsibilities of nurturing, shielding, and aligning, the model illuminates leadership behaviors often overlooked in execution-focused environments. It repositions leadership not as a function of authority but as an act of shared stewardship, one rooted in trust and care. In a time when software teams face increasing complexity and pressure, the Parental Leadership model provides both language and structure for building cultures where teams can not just deliver but thrive.

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