

Roman Pichler

HOW TO LEAD IN PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

Practices to Align Stakeholders,
Guide Development Teams,
and Create Value Together

*How to Lead in Product Management: Practices to Align Stakeholders,
Guide Development Teams, and Create Value Together*

Roman Pichler

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PREFACE

No matter how it looks at first, it's always a people problem.

Gerald Weinberg

Being a successful product manager or product owner does not only require the right hard skills—for example, the ability to interview users, create an effective product strategy and actionable product roadmap, prioritise and manage the product backlog, and apply the right metrics. While these skills are undoubtedly important, they are not enough. Products are developed, provided, and enhanced by people, and being able to effectively lead them is crucial to achieve product success. In other words, you can possess an extensive knowledge about advanced product management techniques, deep insights into the market your product addresses, its technologies, and the competition, but if you lack the right leadership skills, you will struggle to succeed in your job. This book helps you improve your capability to lead others and yourself. It helps you reflect on your current leadership ideas and behaviours and offers a collection of practical techniques to align stakeholders, guide development teams, and create value together.

Who Should Read This Book

I wrote this book with people in mind who work as product managers or Scrum product owners—who are responsible for making or keeping a product successful and for maximising the value it creates. I refer to these individuals as *product people* and *product person*, respectively, in order to avoid any negative connotations the reader might associate with the terms *product manager* and *product owner*.¹ But you will also benefit from reading this book if you manage a team of product people or a product portfolio or product part like a feature or component. The main practices covered, which include goal setting, listening and speaking, conflict resolution, and decision-making, are applicable whenever you lead and collaborate with others.

To get the most out of this book, you should be familiar with core product management concepts and techniques. If you lack this knowledge, you might struggle with some of the examples used. The book assumes that you work with or are familiar with agile practices and that your development team uses a framework like Scrum or Kanban, or at least some of their elements.

Where the Ideas Come From

Before I wrote this book, I researched as much of the leadership literature as I possibly could. My hope was to find a leadership model and adapt it for product management. But the more research I did, the more it became clear to me that none of the frameworks I found was a perfect fit: No model took into account the specific challenges that product people face, including having no transactional power and playing a dual role that involves leadership and active contribution. Instead of subscribing to a specific leadership model, I have carefully selected and combined practices from different frameworks

1 Thanks to Rich Mironov for introducing the term to me.

that I have found valuable in my work over the last fifteen years, both being a product person in my own business leading a dispersed team and teaching and coaching other product people, as well as advising companies to develop their product people into empowered, inspirational leaders. Additionally, I have applied Buddhist insights, due to my background as a practicing Buddhist. These include mindfulness, open-mindedness, and compassion. I believe that at its heart, leadership is about supporting and guiding people; it means caring about others as well as looking after yourself. I have made every effort, though, to avoid any form of dogmatism, and I truly hope that you will find this book helpful, no matter what your preferred leadership theory and spiritual practice may be.

A Brief Guide to This Book

I've written this book so that you can read its chapters individually, without necessarily having to read it front to back. At the same time, I have ordered the chapters so that they build on one another in a meaningful way. However you prefer to read the book, I recommend that you start with the chapters *Introduction* and *Interactions*. The former lays the basis for the remainder of the book, including the key leadership challenges product people face as well as techniques for influencing others and helping them change for the better. The latter discusses roles and responsibilities as well as building trust and establishing rapport with stakeholders and development teams. Note that this book covers a lot of ground. Like my other books, it is intended to provide a solid overview of the subject matter and to discuss helpful practices. It encourages you to reflect on your leadership behaviour, try out new practices, and become a better product leader.

INTRODUCTION

True leaders understand that leadership is not about them but about those they serve.

It is not about exalting themselves but about lifting others up.

Sheri L. Dew

This chapter covers important aspects and success factors in order to align stakeholders and guide development teams. It helps you reflect on the challenges you are likely to face, strengthen your authority and ability to influence others, and embrace the right leadership style, thereby forming the basis for the remainder of this book.

Six Product Leadership Challenges

While helping a group of people achieve shared goals is a general leadership objective, I find that there are six common challenges that make leading stakeholders and development teams special: As the person in charge of the product, you typically lack transactional power; you lead a comparatively large and heterogeneous group; you have limited influence on the group member selection; you actively contribute to reaching the goals while guiding others; you offer strategic and tactical leadership; and you usually work with agile practices, as I discuss at the end of this section.

Who Are the Stakeholders and Development Team Members?

A *stakeholder* is anybody with an interest in your product. In this book, I use the term to refer to those employees whose help you need to provide the product—for example, a sales rep who creates the sales strategy, a marketer who markets the product, or someone from legal or finance whose expertise is required.

A *development team* is a group of people who jointly develop a product or product part, like a feature or component.² The group has usually no more than ten members, and the individuals have all the skills required to design, implement, test, and document the product. Consequently, a development team may consist of user-experience designers, software architects, programmers, and testers. Additionally, it can be helpful when dev teams are stable, collocated, and autonomous. The former two qualities facilitate effective teamwork; the latter helps teams quickly innovate.

No Transactional Power

Unlike a line manager, you are not the boss; you don't manage the development team and stakeholders, and the individuals usually don't report to you. You consequently don't have any transactional power: You cannot tell the group members what to do; you cannot assign tasks to them; and you are typically not in a position to offer a bonus, pay raise, or other incentives. At the same time, you rely on their work. For example, the individuals may design, implement, market, sell, and support the product. Additionally, some of the people you lead might be more senior than you. They might have worked longer for the company, and they might be very influential and well connected.

Large and Heterogeneous Group

The group you lead can be large and heterogeneous. The development team is typically cross-functional: The members have different backgrounds and skills, including design, software development, and testing. Add the stakeholders to the mix who come from different

² I use *feature* to refer to a product part that users can interact with, like search and navigation on an online retailer's website, and *component* to describe an architecture building block, such as a service, component, or layer.

business units—for example, marketing, sales, support, and service for a commercial product—and you will end up with a very diverse group that can easily comprise fifteen people.³ Understanding the group members’ different perspectives and needs and effectively guiding everyone can therefore be challenging.

Limited Influence on Group Selection

While you should try to get the right people on board, as I explain in the chapter *Interactions*, you can’t always choose who the team members and stakeholders are, and you are typically not in a position to hand-pick people. Instead, you often rely on line management to staff the development team and to select representatives from the business units as stakeholders—no matter how likeable you find the individuals and how well you get on with them. Likewise, you usually don’t have control over how long people will work with you: While it’s beneficial to form a stable group whose members work with you on a continued basis, people might leave or join the group based on shifting business needs.

Dual Role

While guiding people can be challenging on its own, you also have to actively contribute to reaching the shared goals and achieving product success. In this sense, you play a dual role: You are leader and contributor. The former involves ensuring that the various workstreams, such as designing and building the product, preparing its release, and supporting it, are aligned—for instance, by encouraging key stakeholders to participate in sprint review meetings. It also comprises regularly assessing product performance and monitoring progress against the product roadmap. Additionally, you may have to coach or mentor

3 This number assumes that the development team has up to ten members. Compare the number with line managers, who typically look after seven to ten people in my experience.

some of the individuals and help them acquire the relevant product knowledge so that they can do a great job. As if this were not enough, you also have to help progress the product—for instance, by observing and interviewing users, analysing user feedback and data, revising the product strategy, adapting the product roadmap, prioritising the product backlog, and creating new user stories.

Leadership at Multiple Levels

Guiding the development team and stakeholders towards product success requires leadership at three levels: vision, strategy, and tactics. As the person in charge of the product, you should shape the vision of your product; you should lead the effort to create, validate, and evolve an effective strategy; you should guide the development of a product roadmap; and you should work with the development team on the product backlog to determine, capture, refine, and prioritise its items. This ensures that leadership and decision-making are consistent: The vision should guide the strategy, and the strategy should direct the tactics. At the same time, insights gained on the tactical level—for example, by testing prototypes or product increment with users—should inform the strategy, which in turn might impact the vision.

Shared Product Leadership

Products can grow too big for one person to provide guidance at all three levels. A common way to share product ownership is to have one person in charge of the overall product and individuals owning product parts, like features and components. You may therefore end up with an overall product owner or manager who closely works with feature and component owners.

Another approach, made popular by the scaling framework SAFe, is to split strategic and tactical responsibilities. This results in employing a person making strategic product decisions and one or more individuals looking after the tactical work and managing the product backlog. This option, however, is only recommendable in my experience for mature, stable products whose strategy is unlikely to change significantly.⁴

4 See Pichler (2016, “Scaling the Product Owner Role”) for more information on how several product people can share product leadership and effectively collaborate.

Agile Processes

Most digital products are developed using an agile development framework like Scrum or Kanban. An agile process puts requirements on your interaction with the development team and, to a certain extent, the stakeholders. For example, an agile team is self-organising. This includes the right to determine the appropriate workload, reject work items if they exceed the team's capacity, and only work on what has been agreed for a sprint or what is within the agreed work in progress (WIP) limits.⁵ These rules increase productivity and create a healthy, sustainable work environment. But they mean that you can't push work on to the team or interfere with the work during a sprint. Instead, the development team pulls work from the product backlog. Additionally, you have to make yourself available to the dev team, jointly work on the product backlog, participate in meetings like sprint planning and review, answer questions, and provide feedback on *done* pieces of work.⁶

Influence People and Encourage Change

Leading people comprises influencing and supporting the individuals to jointly work towards shared goals—for example, acquiring new users, retaining existing customers, or increasing revenue. But as the person in charge of the product, you usually don't have the authority to tell people what to do, as mentioned before. How can you then influence people and encourage individuals to be, for instance, more open to the ideas of others and more willing to co-operate with them?

5 WIP stands for "work in progress." A WIP limit prevents bottlenecks in software development and ensures a smooth flow of work. If the WIP limit has been reached, people can't take on more work.

6 A work item is typically "done" if it is implemented, tested, documented, and ready to be deployed.

The Behavioural Change Stairway Model

A not dissimilar but more extreme challenge was encountered by the FBI, the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States. Imagine that you are faced with the following situation: Armed terrorists have kidnapped a group of civilians. They are now asking for a ransom, and they are threatening to kill the hostages if their demands are not fulfilled. If you grew up with 1980s Hollywood movies like I did, you might be tempted to suggest sending in a Rambo-like agent who singlehandedly frees the hostages and captures the terrorists. In the real world, however, this approach has a low success and high death rate. The FBI therefore developed a different method, called the *behavioural change stairway model* (Voss 2016), which is based on the following insight: In order to encourage change in another person, you have to be able to influence the individual. To do so, you first need to establish a trustful relationship with the person. This is only possible if you empathise with the individual, understand her or his perspective, and take a genuine interest in the person's needs. And the best way to understand someone is to actively listen to the person, as figure 1 shows.

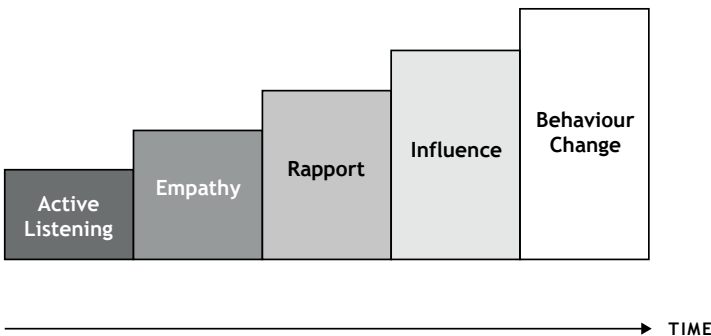


Figure 1: *Behavioural Change Stairway Model*

Figure 1 suggests that the best way to influence someone and encourage the person to change is to carefully listen to the individual, empathise with the person, and build a trustful relationship. You

cannot skip any of the steps. Instead, you have to be patient and take one step at a time.

While I do hope that your challenges in guiding stakeholders and development teams are not quite as bad as the FBI's, my experience suggests that the behavioural change stairway model is directly applicable to product management. Here is why: People will only follow you for two reasons—because they trust and respect you or because they fear you. Coercing people to do something is undesirable: It never results in motivated individuals who are committed to achieving shared goals. Instead, it creates an unhealthy work environment where people act out of fear and obligation, and it destroys creativity, informed risk-taking, and innovation. Additionally, this option is usually not available to product people—you normally don't have the authority to tell people what to do, as I've mentioned before. If you want people to truly trust and respect you, then you have to show them that you genuinely care for them and that you are interested in their perspectives and would like to understand their needs. In other words, you have to strengthen your ability to empathise with others.

Empathy as a Key Leadership Quality

Empathy is our capacity to understand other people's feelings, needs, and interests and to take the perspective of the other person. Empathy entails a warm-hearted, open, and kind attitude. Being empathic means to care about and accept the other person—no matter if we agree with her or his views or if we like or dislike the person. As the behavioural change stairway model shows, we can empathise with people whose actions we deeply disagree with and who we might dislike. An FBI agent will most likely disagree with the terrorist she or he negotiates with, and the individual probably won't find the hostage taker a very likeable person. But this doesn't prevent the agent from empathising with the terrorist, taking a genuine, warm-hearted interest in the individual, and treating the person as a fellow human being, despite her or his deplorable actions.

The same is true for you: No matter how difficult or challenging a stakeholder or development team member might be, the best way to help them change is to empathise with them. If you tell people what they should need without carefully listening to them and taking a respectful interest in their underlying needs, the individuals are unlikely to follow your advice, even if you are factually right. In order to take on your advice, people first need to feel heard and understood.

Empathy is possibly the most important leadership quality: It not only allows you to influence others and encourage change but also creates trust and psychological safety—an environment in which people feel safe to speak up and are comfortable to be themselves. By cultivating empathy, you also increase the chances to understand the needs of your users and customers. “Empathy...moves us beyond thinking of people as laboratory rats or standard deviations,” as Brown (2009, 49) puts it.⁷ What’s more, cultivating empathy will make you a more likeable and happier person: Connecting with others enriches our experience as human beings. Bear in mind, though, that your interest in the other person must be genuine. If you pretend to care or if you empathise only to get someone to do something, then people will sooner or later recognise your intention and stop trusting you.

All Smiles?

Being empathic does not require you to be happy and smiley all the time, nor does it mean sugar-coating messages, only telling people what they want to hear, and ignoring issues. Instead, it means caring about the other person and wanting to help the individual as much as is possible. This may well mean confronting someone’s behaviour. For example, imagine that a stakeholder regularly fails to attend product strategy workshops and requests product roadmap changes by talking to you one to one. You should then consider asking the individual to change her or his behaviour, stop requesting roadmap changes, and attend the strategy sessions. But act in an empathic way: Find out what’s going on with the individual and try to

⁷ Developing empathy is the first step in design thinking, an innovation process originally created by IDEO.

understand why she or he has not attended the workshops before you share your request. At the same time, be frank. Don't beat around the bush, but make a clear and specific request.⁸

Strengthening Your Capacity to Empathise

We all have the capacity to empathise. But sometimes it is difficult to take perspective and to comprehend what's going on for the other person. There are two common barriers to empathy: First, we can be so caught up in our own thoughts and stories that our ability to be receptive to the needs of others is reduced. The same is true when we are tense, irritated, or worried: Experiencing negative mental states makes it harder to relate to and understand others.

Second, we might confuse projection with empathy: The former means making assumptions about what the individual should feel according to preconceived ideas—for example, believing that someone who speaks loudly wants to dominate and take over the meeting. Empathy, however, implies developing an understanding of what is really going on for the other person. In the example mentioned, the individual might just have an odd communication habit and a general tendency to speak loudly, or the person might raise her or his voice because the individual is upset or wants to hide her or his worries.

Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf, who coined the term *servant leadership*, suggests that effective leadership starts with the desire to serve and help others, not to gain a personal benefit (Greenleaf 2002, 27). He also proposes that leaders should care about their followers, be concerned about their well-being, and ensure that their highest-priority needs are being served. This is in stark contrast to a view that regards people as resources, as a means to maximise personal and business benefits.

While you might disagree with Greenleaf's views or dislike the term *servant leader*, becoming aware of your true intention to lead others is important. It not only helps you decide if you should take on a leadership role but also helps you to effectively play the role and lead others. To put it differently, being an effective leader requires

8 I discuss speaking practices that help you convey difficult messages in more detail in the chapter *Conversations*.

you to cultivate a genuine caring attitude for the people you want to lead, whether you like them or not. If this intention is not present in you, then you may not be ready yet to lead others.

In order to overcome these barriers and strengthen your capacity to empathise, work on your ability to be mindful of your mental state and lead with presence, as I discuss in more detail in the chapter *Self-Leadership*. Additionally, come from a place of curiosity and care: Take a genuine interest in the other person, make an effort to listen with the intention to understand, and refrain from prematurely judging what the individual is saying. Imagine being in the position of the other person. What would this be like?⁹

Improve Your Expertise

In addition to strengthening your capacity to empathise with others, make sure you have the necessary expertise. If your understanding of, for example, user and customer needs is insufficient, or if you are not aware of market trends and the competition, it will be hard for people to trust and follow you. Becoming a competent, well-rounded product person requires a continued learning effort in my experience. There are two reasons for this: First, product management is a multifaceted and comparatively young profession that is still changing.¹⁰ Second, there is no standard education path, at the time of writing, to become a product professional. As product people, we therefore have the challenge not only to acquire a wide range of skills but also of different education backgrounds. Some of us may have started our careers in marketing, others in development, sales, or project management, for instance.

9 I've borrowed the expressions *lead with presence* and *come from a place of curiosity and care* from Sofer (2018).

10 To my knowledge, dedicated product management groups started to become more common from the 1950s onwards, and digital or software product management was introduced in the 1980s.

I would therefore encourage you to systematically develop your product management skills. Regularly reflect on your knowledge and skill set and identify gaps and shortcomings. Consider your leadership, strategic, and tactical skills.¹¹ Then choose the ones that need to be addressed and determine the right learning and development measures, be it by reading books and articles, watching videos, attending a public training course, or hiring a product mentor or coach. Embracing a growth mindset, as I describe in the chapter *Self-Leadership*, will help you sustain your learning journey.

Secure the Right Management Support

Last but not least, your ability to influence and lead others is affected by the management support you receive. If you don't have a management sponsor who can act as an adviser and escalation partner, then it may be harder for you to be respected by the stakeholders and development team. As a rule of thumb, the more important your product is, the more senior the sponsor should be. Additionally, if the product management maturity is low in your company—if, for example, there is no dedicated product management group or well-defined product roles—then people may not understand why you should be authorised to make product decisions, and it will be harder for you to guide and align others. In order to find the right management sponsor or help your company improve its product management maturity, partner with the Scrum Master, as I discuss in more detail in the chapter *Interactions*. But be aware that organisational change can be slow: Establishing an effective product management group may take many months or even several years.

11 See Pichler (2017) for more information on identifying gaps and shortcomings in your product management skill set.

Choose the Right Leadership Style

Most of us have ideas about what good leadership is and how great leaders act. For example, at an early stage of my career, I was invited to an assessment centre, where my leadership potential was evaluated. While the feedback I received was positive, the assessors told me that in order to succeed as a leader, I should be more directive. This surprised me for two reasons: First, people who know me well usually don't think that I lack assertiveness. Second, I've never agreed with the view that a strong leader is someone who acts in a dominant or authoritarian way. But as this story shows, different people and organisations have different ideas of what effective leadership entails.

Over the past decades, researchers have identified various leadership styles to describe common leadership behaviours.¹² For example, a *visionary* leader is someone who aligns people through a shared inspirational goal, a *democratic* or *participatory* leader is inclusive and involves people in decisions, an *affiliative* leader connects people and builds teams, a *delegative* leader empowers others to make decisions, a *coaching* leader develops people by helping them reach their goals, a *pacesetter* or *directive* leader sets standards and shows people how to move forward, and an *autocratic* leader makes the decisions and tells people what to do.

Distinguishing different styles can help you become aware of your preferred leadership behaviours. For instance, you might lean towards being an affiliative and delegative leader, as you like to care for the individuals, encourage teamwork, and let people work out for themselves what needs to be done. Or your preference might be a directive style, where you set standards and ask people to follow them. To better understand what your default leadership behaviour is, bring to mind a difficult situation you recently experienced and honestly reflect on how you communicated and acted. What did you say? And how did

12 See, for instance, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013). The authors distinguish six leadership styles: visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and commanding. Thanks to Geoff Watts for introducing them to me.

you say it? Did you resort to being authoritarian and tell people what to do? Or did you possibly gravitate towards the other extreme and watch people sort things out?

When carrying out this exercise, be careful that your ideas about how you *should* behave don't interfere with your analysis. Additionally, don't be self-judgemental and don't beat yourself up: We all have leadership preferences that are based on past experiences, the organisation we work in, and our beliefs and ideas; none of us is a perfect leader. What's more, there simply is *no one right way to lead people*. If you lean towards a visionary style, then this is helpful, for instance, when kicking off the development effort for a new product or a major product update. But the same behaviour probably won't be appropriate when stakeholders fail to meet a product roadmap goal or the development team repeatedly misses the sprint goal. You should therefore be flexible in your leadership approach and balance the different leadership styles depending on the needs of the stakeholders and the situation you find yourself in.¹³

Be Attentive to People's Needs

In order to be an effective leader, attend to the needs of the development team and stakeholders and take into account *group cohesion* and *expertise*. Newly formed groups with members hardly knowing each other typically require more support and often benefit from a more hands-on, directive leadership approach. For example, if you told a new development team to decide for themselves how to contribute to the product backlog work, they may well look at you with surprise and confusion. Instead, it might be more helpful to show people how to create effective user stories. Similarly, groups with little knowledge about the market, product, process, and relevant tools require more support. For example, if you ask the stakeholders how they want to

13 The discussion in the following two paragraphs is loosely based on Sosik and Jung (2011, 48), who suggest that effective leadership is centred on three components: leader, followers, and situation.

capture the product roadmap, then they may well feel overwhelmed if the individuals have never worked with such a plan. It might be better to suggest a specific roadmap format and jointly develop the plan.

But as a group gels and becomes more cohesive, and as people acquire the relevant expertise, you should adapt your leadership approach. You might be able, for instance, to delegate some of the user story refinement work to the development team, as suggested earlier, or you might want to explore with the stakeholders whether a different product roadmapping format or tool would be more helpful. And when stakeholders and dev team members change, group cohesion and expertise are likely to change too. Consequently, you may have to adapt your leadership style again.

If you are not quite sure what guidance people need, then ask them. Retrospectives are a great opportunity to collect feedback from the development team and stakeholders, understand if you effectively guided them, and adapt your leadership behaviour as appropriate. After all, leadership is not only about achieving results and getting things done. It's equally important to pay attention to how we accomplish the desired outcomes: What is the impact of your leadership style on the stakeholders and development team members? And what effect does it have on you? Does it support a healthy and creative work environment, or does it cause people to feel stressed or intimidated?

Consider the Situation You Are In

Finally, take into account the situation you are in. This includes your company with its unique culture, the overall business context, and the performance of groups and individuals. For example, in a company that has only recently started to value teamwork and is still characterised by strong hierarchies and a command-and-control management approach, you may find that people need plenty of encouragement to share ideas and to take on full responsibility for their work. It may therefore take a while before the stakeholders and team members start to appreciate an inclusive and delegative leadership style.

Similarly, if the business is struggling or even in crisis mode, you may find that people are worried and more concerned about their jobs than the success of the product and team. Consequently, a visionary and affiliative style might not be beneficial at this point in time, but the individuals may require a more directive approach. Finally, if you find that individual stakeholders or the development team struggle to meet agreed goals, then you should not turn a blind eye to this issue but address it. If the dev team, for example, has repeatedly not met the sprint goal despite you having analysed the issue in a sprint retrospective and agreed on actionable improvements, then do address the issue. Listen to and empathise with the individuals; don't blame people, and don't use harsh speech. But make it clear that the team is accountable for achieving an agreed sprint goal and that recurrently failing to meet the goal is not acceptable. This may require you to be assertive and possibly directive, even if you much prefer an affiliative or delegative style.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roman Pichler works as a product management consultant, teacher, and writer. He has a long track record of teaching and mentoring product managers, advising product leaders, and helping companies create successful product management organisations. He is the author of three other books, including *Agile Product Management with Scrum* and *Strategize: Product Strategy and Product Roadmap Practices for the Digital Age*, and he writes a popular product management blog. As the founder and director of Pichler Consulting, Roman looks after the company's products and services. This keeps his product management practice fresh, and it allows him to experiment with new ideas. Roman lives with his wife and three children near London, United Kingdom. You can contact Roman at info@romanpichler.com, and you can find out more about his work at www.romanpichler.com.