

The North Star Playbook

The guide to discovering your
product's North Star

Who is this book for?

YOU ARE:

- A product manager, product designer, product developer, or anyone interested in improving the way you manage and build products.
- Familiar with product management basics. You've worked on product teams with product managers, designers, developers, and researchers and are looking for new methods to deepen your understanding.
- Curious about frameworks, tools, and systems. You are eager to learn more, while recognizing that there are no silver bullets.

YOU WANT:

- A greater sense of impact and coherence in your work.
- A more focused, less reactive way to work.
- To address customer problems and opportunities without just churning out more features.
- Context and inspiration to improve your current tools and metrics, like OKRs, roadmaps, and KPIs.
- More autonomy, with more flexibility to solve problems, while ensuring your work aligns with the bigger picture.
- To be data-informed instead of letting the data drive you in circles.
- Shared language and common understanding about vision, strategy, and value.

BY THE END OF THIS BOOK, YOU WILL:

- Understand the purpose and value of the North Star Framework.
- Understand the elements of the North Star Framework.
- Be able to run an internal North Star workshop.
- Be able to define and name a North Star Metric (and related inputs) for your company.
- Be able to identify and address common traps.
- Know when to change your North Star Metric.
- Understand how to integrate the North Star Framework with your development process.

Now, let's get started.



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Intro

Tia was feeling burned out.

For four years, she had been a product designer and product manager at a publicly traded, thousand employee, business-to-business (B2B) software-as-a-service (SaaS) company. She did everything a product person should do: She researched her market, advocated for the humans using the product, emphasized outcomes over outputs, and made the case, over and over, for more focus and fewer distractions.

Co-workers—managers, teammates, executives—would nod in agreement. They all concurred: Tia’s product-led approach made sense.

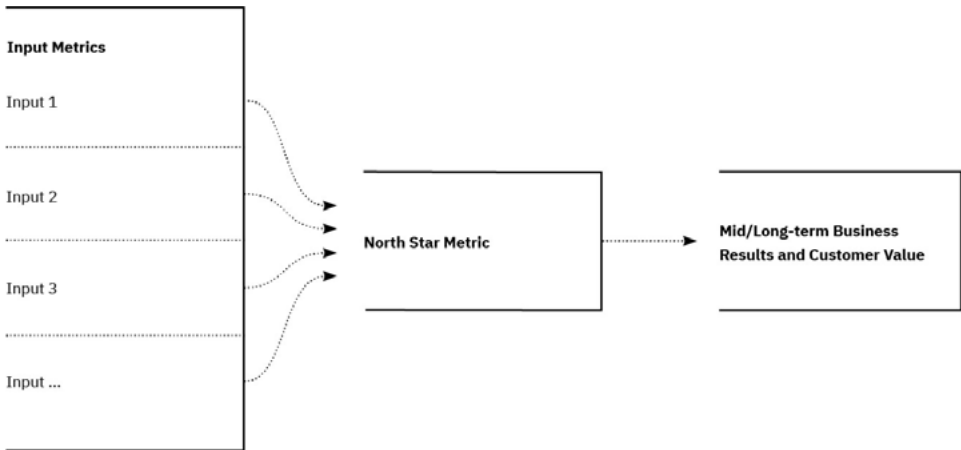
But still, the company struggled to put all these great concepts into action.

Her company seemed caught in a perpetual cycle of shiny objects, success theater, false starts, and vague pivots-by-PowerPoint. Just when they hit their stride, something would change. It felt like they were always talking past each other.

Tia’s co-workers were experienced and creative, but that almost made things worse. “It wasn’t for a lack of good ideas or experience,” Tia said. “Everyone I worked with was smart and persuasive, and they brought data to discussions of strategy and priorities. But a week or two later we were back to business as usual.”

We met Tia at an Amplitude North Star workshop in New York City. Amplitude makes product analytics software used by thousands of product, growth, and marketing teams, and we’re fortunate to interact with lots of passionate and skilled product people. Over the years, we’ve run lots of workshops on product topics. One of our favorite workshop topics is the **North Star Framework**.

A team using the North Star Framework identifies a single, meaningful metric and a handful of contributing Inputs. Product teams work to influence those Inputs, which in turn drive the metric. The North Star is a leading indicator of sustainable growth and acts as a connective tissue between the product and the broader business.



The idea of managing by a North Star is not new. Many methodologies promote focus with a small set of related metrics and a compelling “True North.” In the early 2010s, [Sean Ellis and the growth hacking movement](#) helped popularize the structure of the North Star that inspired this book. We use the framework ourselves in product development at Amplitude.

The North Star workshop helped Tia break through the frustrations she’d been experiencing. As she learned more about the framework, Tia realized that her team had been speaking three languages: the language of the customer (needs, goals, experiences, delight); the language of the product (features, workflows, releases); and the language of the business (vision, differentiation, revenue, growth).

“There was nothing to really tie those things together,” she observed. “And I think this is why we were going in circles. That seems to be the key benefit of North Star: connecting those different perspectives.”

In this book, we will teach you about the North Star Framework, describe how to run a North Star workshop at your company, and help your team converge on a North Star Metric and supporting Inputs. We also cover how to make it stick, when to adapt, and how to integrate the North Star into your day-to-day product development approach.

As for Tia, she’s still using the skills and tools she learned at that North Star workshop in New York City. Her career has progressed, and she’s now introduced the framework at a new company, where she’s successfully adapted

the framework to a new product, team, and development process. She's having better conversations, working with more alignment, and making more impact.

That's what we want for you.

Chapter 1.

About the North Star Framework

In this chapter, you will learn:

1. The definition of the North Star Framework
2. The structure of the North Star Framework
3. The three critical goals of the North Star Framework

What is the North Star Framework?

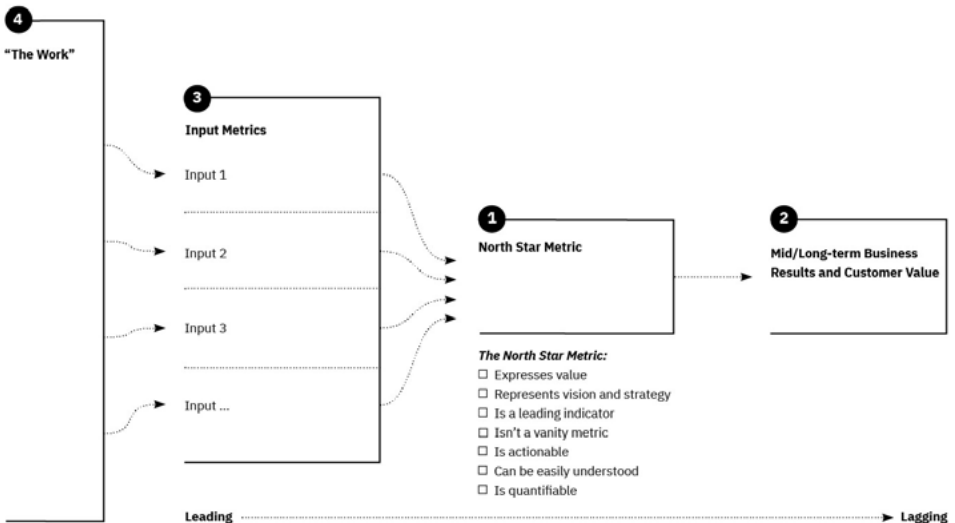
The North Star Framework is a model for managing products by identifying a single, crucial metric (the North Star Metric) that, [according to Sean Ellis](#), “best captures the core value that your product delivers to [its] customers.”

In addition to the metric, the North Star Framework includes a set of key Inputs that collectively act as factors that produce the metric. Product teams can directly influence these Inputs with their day-to-day work.

This combination of metric and Inputs serves three critical purposes in any company:

1. It helps prioritize and accelerate informed but decentralized decision-making.
2. It helps teams align and communicate.
3. It enables teams to focus on impact and sustainable, product-led growth.

Put together, the metric and the Inputs look like this:



This simple tree-like framework of a single metric and influencing Inputs serves as a scaffold containing assumptions, beliefs, and causal relationships. Once you've put it together and tested it in the field, it serves as a sort of formula, an equation that indicates your company's and product's fundamental characteristics.

The Elements of the North Star Framework

1. THE NORTH STAR METRIC

The heart of the North Star Framework is the **North Star Metric**, a single critical rate, count, or ratio that represents your product strategy. This metric is a leading indicator that defines the relationship between the customer problems that the product team is trying to solve and sustainable, long-term business results.

For example, in 2005, when Netflix was still focused on shipping DVDs, the Netflix product team established a North Star Metric of percentage of customers placing three or more DVDs in their queue during their first session with the service (see North Star in Action: Netflix). The team understood that this key statistic encapsulated Netflix's differentiation strategy. Increasing this would improve both customer value and key business results—like customer retention and, ultimately, subscription revenue.

“The heart of the North Star Framework is the North Star Metric, a single critical rate, count, or ratio that represents your product strategy.”

2. RESULTS AND VALUE

The North Star Metric is a leading indicator of sustainable **business results and customer value**. As you see it change (ideally improving!), you can expect your business results to change accordingly.

3. INPUTS

The Inputs are just as important as the metric. These are a small set (3-5) of influential, complementary factors that you believe most directly affect the North Star Metric, and that you believe you can influence through your product offering.

For example, Instacart, a same-day grocery delivery and pick-up service, identified four Inputs into a North Star Metric of **total monthly items received on time**. They need (1) lots of customers placing orders. Those orders ideally contain (2) lots of items. Instacart needs to fulfill (3) lots of orders. And (4) the orders need to be delivered on time.

Inputs can vary a great deal by industry, business model, and a product's unique characteristics. The key is to identify the key factors that contribute to the North Star Metric for your business. We view the North Star Metric as a function of key Inputs that are both descriptive and actionable.

“North Star Inputs are a small set (3-5) of influential, complementary factors that you believe most directly affect the North Star Metric.”

4. “THE WORK”

A North Star Metric and Inputs should be connected to the tasks of research, design, software development, refactoring, prototyping, testing, and such. We call this “**the work.**” Teams have successfully connected a variety of development methods to their North Star. No matter how your team operates, the work you do should align to the strategy that’s guided by your North Star.

One North Star

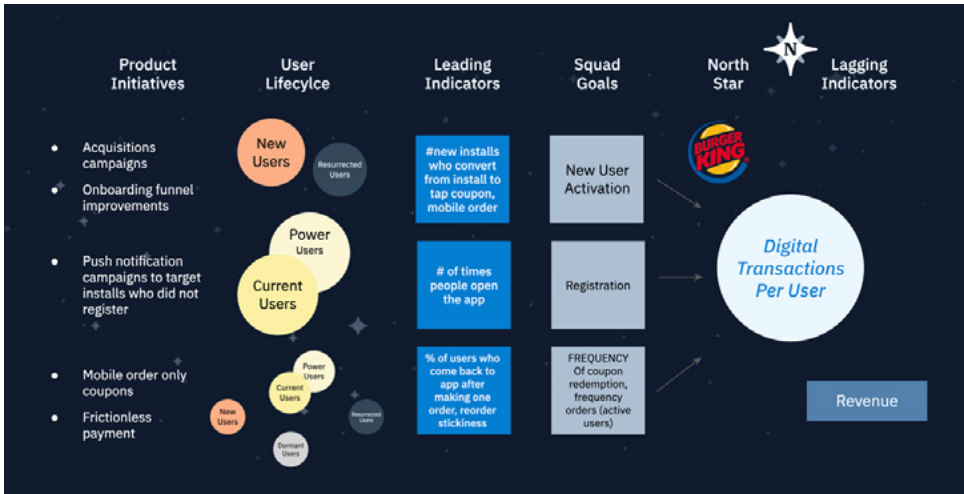
An obvious characteristic of the North Star structure is that it features just one North Star Metric. Certainly, larger enterprises, with multiple divisions, different product management and product development departments, and different customer bases could have different North Star Metrics, each with their own Inputs.

But if a team is contributing to a single profit and loss (P&L), with a single product development department, and a single product or even a product portfolio that serves a single customer base, they should strongly consider having a single North Star, comprising one metric and its Inputs. For example, it’s unlikely that one product leader should be managing more than one North Star.

See [Things to Watch Out For](#) for more information on the trap of multiple North Stars.

A Real-World Example: Burger King

Burger King’s digital team used the North Star Framework to define a North Star Metric called Digital Transactions Per User with three Inputs: new user activation, registration, and frequency. They then mobilized teams (called “squads” in Burger King’s organization) to drive these Inputs, as illustrated in the following figure.



The Burger King squads are able to trace the feature work that they prioritize through their development processes first to these Inputs, and then to their Digital Transactions Per User North Star Metric. For example, one squad prioritized a “mobile order only coupons” initiative to drive the “frequency” Input—a factor in the metric.

“[Our North Star Framework] is actually what we use across the teams to drive growth.

—Elie Javice, Head of Technical Product Management at Burger King

Elie Javice, head of technical product management at Burger King, says “[Our North Star Framework] is actually what we use across the teams to drive growth... All of us are aligned to the same goals: we want to drive brand love and sales. But if we set those as goals, we will all go in different directions, without focus. What this framework actually gives us is focus to work on the same things, together.”

KEY CONCEPT: PRODUCT-LED

The North Star Framework works especially well in organizations that aspire to be more product-led.

Product-led organizations believe their surest path to sustainable growth is through identifying opportunities to solve problems for customers and satisfying those opportunities with their product. A product-led organization optimizes team structures, funding cycles, communication channels, and other processes to ensure the success of its products.

To be clear: Calling an organization “product-led” doesn’t mean it is led by the department or job title called “product management” or, as shorthand, “product.” **Product-led means being guided by the potential of products and product teams.**

Product-led organizations shift from this...	To this...
Deliver requirements	Solve the customer’s needs
Product as cost center	Product as profit/growth center
Specifications and delivery	Missions, experiments, and bets
Build MY solution and prove it works	Explore problem, validate solutions
Handoffs and silos	Cross-functional collaboration
Slower feedback loops/Guessing	Faster feedback loops/Informed decisions
Pageviews and clicks	Experiences, interactions, behaviors

Chapter in Review

- .The **North Star Framework** is a model for managing products by identifying a single, crucial **metric (the North Star Metric)**
- .In addition to the metric, the North Star Framework includes 3-5 **Inputs** to that metric.
- .The North Star Framework helps teams **prioritize, communicate, and focus on impact.**
- .The North Star Framework can help businesses become more **product-led**, where they optimize their structures and processes to ensure the success of their products.

Chapter 2. The North Star Checklist

In this chapter, you will learn:

1. The characteristics of a strong North Star
2. What a North Star is not

North Star Checklist

1. It expresses **value**. We can see why it matters to customers.
2. It represents **vision and strategy**. Our company’s product and business strategy are reflected in it.
3. It’s a **leading indicator** of success. It predicts future results, rather than reflecting past results.
4. It’s **actionable**. We can take action to influence it.
5. It’s **understandable**. It’s framed in plain language that non-technical partners can understand.
6. It’s **measurable**. We can instrument our products to track it.
7. It’s **not a vanity metric**. When it changes we can be confident that the change is meaningful and valuable, rather than being something that doesn’t actually predict long-term success—even if it makes the team feel good about itself.

EXPRESSES VALUE

A good North Star Metric **represents what customers value about your product**.

When teams fail to connect their North Star Metric to customer value, they risk leading their business down the wrong path. This means that simple counts of users, like “Daily Active Users” or “Registered Users,” are not optimal North Star Metrics, as they say nothing about what your customers value.

REPRESENTS PRODUCT VISION & STRATEGY

The North Star Metric represents the strategy of your business and your product. Once you have determined your North Star Metric, see if you can find your product strategy and vision within it. If you’ve built a strong North Star, you should be able to—at a high level—understand your company’s product strategy and your product’s vision by looking closely at the North Star.

“Each strategy we had at Netflix—from our personalization strategy to our theory that a simpler experience would improve retention—had a very specific metric that helped us to evaluate if the strategy was valid or not. If the strategy moved the metric, we knew we were on the right path. If we failed to move the metric, we moved on to the next idea. Identifying these metrics took a lot of the politics and ambiguity out of which strategies were succeeding or not.

—Gibson Biddle, Former VP of Product at Netflix

We generally advise that your North Star should be unique to your business, expressing your company's and your product's strategy and mission. However, some businesses may have a mission that's not particularly differentiated. That's okay. If your business succeeds by executing well on a commoditized product, for example, don't worry if your North Star might not feel particularly unique. Maybe your execution is what differentiates you.

LEADING INDICATOR OF SUCCESS

Some metrics tell us what has already happened to our business; these are **lagging** indicators. Other metrics predict what will happen to our business; these are **leading** indicators.

A good North Star Metric is a **leading** indicator of business success. This is why metrics like “Monthly Revenue” or “Average Revenue per User (ARPU)” aren’t optimal North Star Metrics: They tell you what happened in the past rather than predicting future results. Ideally, your North Star Metric is predictive of medium-to long-term sustainable growth.

For example, if you’re running a subscription-based product, you might consider annual revenue from subscribers to be a key metric, but it’s a lagging indicator. Instead, a subscription-based business could identify characteristics that correlate with a user who is likely to renew her subscription, and then build a North Star around that. If a user frequently runs a certain report showing the status of her customers, does that correlate to renewing a subscription? Perhaps that’s a hint that your North Star may be related to the information in that report.

ACTIONABLE

Your North Star should be something you believe you can **influence** or do something about. This means it shouldn’t be a measure of a broader market trend or reflect real-world realities that would be true whether your product existed or not.

For example, a team building an HR app to improve companies’ employee experience and retention might consider “Customers’ Lifelong Employees” an aspirational North Star Metric, but broader trends in the economy and labor market will make it difficult for the team to influence this metric.

“Your North Star should be something you believe you can influence or do something about.”

UNDERSTANDABLE

The North Star shouldn't be so arcane or abstract that you can't easily explain it to non-technical people or express it in plain language. A simple test: As you develop your North Star, describe it to someone who knows your business but lacks deep technical knowledge. If it's a good metric, they'll be able to quickly understand it without much trouble.

MEASURABLE

If you'll never be able to configure your products and processes to collect the data needed to track and communicate the North Star Metric, it's not a good metric, even if you can imagine it is a strong indicator of value to the customer.

For example, the team responsible for a digital platform dedicated to producing thought-provoking short films might love the idea of increasing the number of people who silently reflect on the films as they lie in bed at night. However, it would be difficult to design processes and products that discern the thoughts of customers lying in bed. So a better North Star Metric might be customers sharing insights in a community discussion—something that can be implemented and tracked. In this example, the number of customers sharing their insights, a measurable metric, is a **proxy metric** for the number of customers pondering the films, which is tougher to collect.

“Don't fall into the trap of thinking that your North Star must be something you can measure with your current data and tools.”

However, don't fall into the trap of thinking that your North Star must be something you can measure with your current data and tools. In many cases, with just some [light instrumentation](#) and investment in new tools, or even just improvements in communication and relationships, you'll be able to measure what you want.

NOT A VANITY METRIC

Some metrics might make you feel good about your team's performance or your market in the short term, but don't actually tell you about your product's long-term success. Be wary of choosing these **vanity metrics** for your North Star Metric.

Example Vanity Metrics:

- Daily Active Users
- Ad Impressions
- Number of Downloads
- Page Views
- Registered Users
- Story Points Delivered
- Time on Page

"A question I ask my workshop attendees," explains Amplitude's Senior Engagement Manager Parth Mistry, is "if this metric were to go up, would you be able to state unequivocally that this was a good or bad thing? And perhaps more importantly, what action can I take as a product manager or marketer based on this information?"

While it might make your team feel good to know that you had the most activity you've ever had on your inquiry page, or that this month your team had better development velocity than ever before, those metrics won't actually tell you about the success of your product, and shouldn't be used as your North Star Metric.

Example: Going Beyond Vanity Metrics with the "Happy Deliveries" North Star

A delivery app had considered potential North Star Metrics like "People Opening the App," "Scheduled Deliveries," or "Early Deliveries." But there was a problem. These metrics masked the real drivers of retention and customer lifetime value (LTV).

However, the team behind the delivery app conducted research with customers which concluded that valued deliveries were neither early nor late. Instead,

these transactions simply had no issues—what the team ultimately called “Happy Deliveries.” The company found that Happy Deliveries are highly correlated with retention, which drives customer lifetime value. Thus, Happy Deliveries became the North Star Metric.

What the North Star is Not

As you consider what makes a good North Star, also recognize what the North Star Framework is not — though it can work alongside and inform many of these related models and concepts. See [Tips on Using the North Star Framework with Related Topics](#) for more information.

The North Star Framework is not:

- Your roadmap
- Your software development process
- A prioritization framework
- A goal-setting framework, like OKRs or Focus Cards, though the North Star can be a strong foundation upon which to base goals
- Management by Objectives (MBOs)
- Perfection (no framework is!). Many successful product teams have used other methods with much success. We think that’s great, and we encourage those teams to keep doing what they’re doing.

Chapter in Review

- . A good North Star satisfies a number of criteria. Use the checklist to evaluate your own candidates for a North Star Metric and Inputs.
- . A North Star is not the same as your roadmap, prioritization framework, or performance management system.
- . No framework is perfect. If you are successfully using other methods and techniques, by all means keep doing what you're doing.

Chapter 3.

Getting Started: Running a North Star Workshop

In this chapter, you will learn:

1. Suggestions for conducting your own North Star workshop
2. Who should participate in your initial North Star workshop
3. Several activities you can complete as a team
4. What you should expect to accomplish by the end of the workshop

Running your Own North Star Workshop

In just an hour or two, teams can run their own North Star workshop to identify candidates for their North Star Metric and Inputs.

In a focused, collaborative North Star workshop, colleagues from different parts of the organization come together, participate in generative activities, and produce some pretty incredible results. **With just a little preparation, you can run your own North Star workshop to kick off your North Star journey.**

A North Star workshop doesn't need to be overly complex. We've run many successful workshops in just 60-120 minutes. At the end of this workshop, your team will develop strong candidates for your own North Star Metric and Inputs.

Some teams then conduct additional workshop sessions to precisely define their North Star metric and Inputs, to strengthen the connection between their North Star and their strategy, or to align the North Star to their existing development processes. Other teams address these deeper topics outside of workshops. Whether you do this deeper work in additional collaborative workshop sessions or in smaller subteams, we suggest you **start together** in a focused workshop session.

A TYPICAL AGENDA FOR A 120-MINUTE NORTH STAR WORKSHOP:

- **15 minutes:** Opening discussion on the reasons for the North Star
- **15 minutes:** Activity: Identify the game you are playing
- **15 minutes:** Discussion and activity: What makes a good (and bad) North Star
- **15 minutes:** Discussion: The structure of the north star and Inputs
- **15 minutes:** Activity: Identify a North Star for another product
- **45 minutes:** Drafting your own North Star and converge

Who to Include

North Star workshops are most successful when the team has the following characteristics:

- **A skilled facilitator.** Someone on the team will need to serve as an unbiased facilitator for the workshop. The facilitator will set the agenda, organize the meeting, lead discussions, and guide the team through activities.
- **Familiarity with the framework.** The team certainly doesn't need to be an expert on the North Star Framework. We've seen successful workshops where none of the participants had ever worked with the framework before. However, at the very least, the facilitator should familiarize himself or herself with the framework's structure, connections, and implications. We suggest the facilitator read this entire playbook before the workshop and distribute it to workshop participants.
- **Diverse group of experts.** Participants should cover the fundamental areas of your product and business: engineering, finances, design, product management, analytics, sales, and marketing. This should also include key decision-makers and organizational influencers.
- **Data and Insights.** Colleagues with key insights about customer needs and behavior, market data, and other qualitative and quantitative insights are vital. You should also include people who frequently interact with your users and customers and can represent their point of view.



COACH'S TIP

Qualitative insights are as important as quantitative data

Don't neglect qualitative research. Remember, your quantitative data is a reflection of what people do with your product now. To create an effective North Star, discover how people want to use your product and describe their needs and priorities. Stories are as important as statistics.

- **Systems thinkers.** Recruit colleagues who are comfortable with using conceptual models, understanding dynamic behavior, recognizing interconnections, identifying feedback, and creating simulation models. See Krystyna Stave and Megan Hopper’s [What Constitutes Systems Thinking?](#): A Proposed Taxonomy for more on systems thinking.



COACH’S TIP

Create safety by reiterating the purpose of the North Star Framework

One common trap is confusing the North Star Framework with a cascading goal framework to track employee performance. Remember, the North Star Framework’s purpose is to use metrics and Inputs to guide a product’s ability to satisfy customers and contribute to business success, not to monitor employee performance.

Psychological safety is an important part of building a successful team because it allows people to speak their minds, raise objections, or make mistakes without fear of punishment or loss of status. You can foster a psychologically safe environment by openly pointing out your own mistakes, celebrating challenges to decisions, and fostering an environment where team members can safely take risks.

Why is this important? Often, the first big hurdle is fear that this new model will be used to measure or even control employees. When viewed that way it can be pretty threatening.

A safer approach is to emphasize that the team is accountable for one thing: iterating on the model and ensuring it reflects reality. Often, that language and perspective is enough to quell people’s fear.

HOW MANY PEOPLE SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN YOUR WORKSHOP?

While you want diverse representation, **avoid including too many people in your initial North Star workshop**. According to Stanford Business professor Robert Sutton, “larger teams place often overwhelming ‘cognitive load’ on individual members.” Sutton, who studies the composition of effective teams, says people are most effective when working in groups of “[seven plus or minus two](#).”

Our guideline: keep your group as small as possible, provided you include representation from each critical discipline in your company. Eventually, you will end up building a broader network of advocates, but for now, you’re selecting key contributors to help you get the North Star off the ground.

Workshop Opening Discussion

Ground your team in shared understanding about the North Star Framework.

We like to start a North Star workshop with a healthy discussion about the reasons we’re gathering, the problems we’d like to solve, or the changes we’d like to make.

Here are some questions to pose during your opening discussion:

- What would it look like if we had a greater sense of impact in our work?
- Do we all clearly understand our product strategy? What prevents us from having clarity?
- What does it mean to be product-led?
- How is our investment in product now connected to future business performance? What’s the relationship between product work and our financial results?

Workshop Discussion: Identify the Game You are Playing

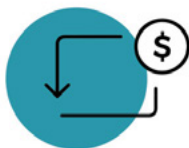
Your company is likely playing one of three games. Understanding which one can help you identify your North Star.

Based on our research of products at over 11,000 companies and analysis of three trillion user actions, Amplitude has categorized digital products into one of three possible **games**.

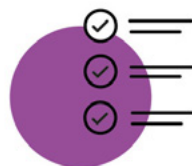
Attention Game



Transaction Game



Productivity Game



- The **Attention** Game
How much time are your customers willing to spend in your product?
- The **Transaction** Game
How many transactions does your customers make in your product?
- The **Productivity** Game
How efficiently and effectively can someone get their work done?

At your workshop, you should discuss these games. The question for participants: *which game is our business playing?*

While you might think you are playing all of these games, we've found that encouraging workshop participants to pick a single game is most fruitful.

For example, if you are playing the **Productivity** game, you must understand that your user chooses your product because she has a job to do. She wants to do it efficiently and without errors. In fact, a measure of success may be that she's using your product less.

This is very different from the game of **Attention**, where time spent in the product is more likely to indicate satisfaction. You know you are successful when your user is absorbed in your product and using it more.

If you're playing a **Transaction** game, on the other hand, you have a different set of challenges: helping customers find the right product for their needs, enact transactions effortlessly, and track production and delivery.



COACH'S TIP

Stay focused on value exchange

The game should be **tied to the event that creates value**. For example, we've worked with the app team for a major sports league. In their app you can consume free content but also buy different variations of a season pass for premium content, including broadcasts of games. Their initial reaction to a North Star discussion was that they're playing the transaction game because the user is purchasing a season pass. But a user could buy the pass, never see a single game, and stop their subscription. So that's not quite right. Instead, their game is attention. That's the value exchange.

If you're not certain which game you're playing, ask yourselves which of these sets of statements most closely corresponds to your product, or which of these products is most similar to yours.

YOU ARE PLAYING THE ATTENTION GAME...

If you find yourself saying this:

- Our business benefits directly if customers spend more time with our product.
- We want customers' mindshare.
- Customers use our product to read, watch, listen, and play.

Or your product is similar to this:

- Facebook (social networking)
- Netflix (online video)
- Atlanta Journal
- Constitution (newspaper)

Example of an **Attention** oriented North Star Metric:

- **Company:** Atlanta Journal-Constitution (newspaper)
- **North Star Metric:** Regular readers
- **Definition:** Number of subscribers consuming more than 7 articles per month

YOU ARE PLAYING THE TRANSACTION GAME...

If you find yourself saying this:

- Our business benefits directly if customers participate in the economy using our product.
- We want customers' wallets.
- Payments and commerce are important to us.
- Customers use our product to purchase, order, measure, transact, and track.

Or your product is similar to this:

- Amazon (retail and logistics)
- Walmart (discount retail)
- Progressive Insurance (personal insurance)

Example of a **Transaction** oriented North Star Metric:

- **Company:** Walmart (discount retailer)
- **North Star Metric:** Full Carts
- **Definition:** Number of monthly purchases that contain over a certain number of items.

YOU ARE PLAYING THE PRODUCTIVITY GAME...

If you find yourself saying this:

- Our business benefits directly if customers efficiently accomplish tasks using our product.
- Efficiency and achievement are important to us.

- Customers use our product to make, work, complete, configure, and build.

Or your product is similar to this:

- Salesforce (business & customer management software)
- Adobe (design and publishing software)
- LexisNexis (legal research)

Example of a **Productivity** oriented North Star Metric:

- **Company:** LexisNexis (legal research)
- **North Star Metric:** Actionable Searches
- **Definition:** Percentage of searches that return results selected by users within the first five results.



Workshop Activity: What Makes a Good (and Bad) North Star

Review the characteristics of a good North Star—and try to identify a bad one.

During your workshop, spend some time reviewing the North Star checklist. Ask yourselves how this checklist applies to your own product. For example, discuss what it means for a metric to be aligned to your product vision, or what a common vanity metric might be at your organization or in your industry.

One activity we've found fruitful is to spend a few minutes brainstorming what would be a terrible North Star for your company. These anti-examples free participants' thinking, and they can set boundaries that will be helpful when you are actually defining your metric and Inputs later on.

Workshop Discussion: The Structure of the North Star and the Product Formula

You can think of the North Star Metric and its Inputs as a kind of formula or equation.

It's important that workshop participants understand the basic structure of the North Star Framework, including the metric and Inputs. Initially, participants might focus on determining a metric only, when in fact the relationship between the metric and the Inputs is critical. It's the Inputs that are the actionable factors that, in combination, contribute to the North Star Metric. We like to think of the Inputs as the causes that are likely to produce an effect.

THINK ABOUT YOUR NORTH STAR AS A FORMULA

To determine your metric and Inputs, think conceptually about your North Star as a formula or equation (though few North Stars and Inputs act as true, mathematical functions). As you do, consider the things that you, the product team, can truly influence. The North Star Metric is a function of a handful of

factors. How would you define those factors? While this formula approach oversimplifies all the stuff that makes a business succeed, it's a helpful metaphor for isolating the most important and actionable factors.

“To determine your metric and Inputs, think conceptually about your North Star as a formula or equation.

A COMMON INPUT PATTERN: BREADTH, DEPTH, FREQUENCY, AND EFFICIENCY

One heuristic that we have found helpful when teams are coming up with Inputs is considering Breadth, Depth, Frequency, and Efficiency. The Inputs to a North Star Metric often follow this pattern, which can easily be adapted to different contexts.

For example, a somewhat straightforward North Star Metric for a high volume e-commerce business like Instacart is “total monthly items received on time by customers.” Using the breadth, depth, frequency, and efficiency heuristic, the Inputs for this North Star Metric could be:

- Breadth: number of customers placing orders each month
- Depth: number of items within an order
- Frequency: number of orders completed per customer each month
- Efficiency: Percentage of orders delivered on time

No matter the industry you're in or the game you're playing, you can often adapt Breadth, Depth, Frequency, and Efficiency to fit your product.

Workshop Activity: Build a North Star for Another Product

To free your thinking from constraints, warm up by coming up with your own, hypothetical examples of North Star Metrics for products you are familiar with.

For example, pose this challenge to your workshop participants: “Many of us have used OpenTable to book reservations at a restaurant. Let’s think of a good North Star for OpenTable.” Then break into small groups, imagining you are on the OpenTable product team.

OpenTable Product

- OpenTable allows people to discover restaurants, read reviews, and make online reservations.

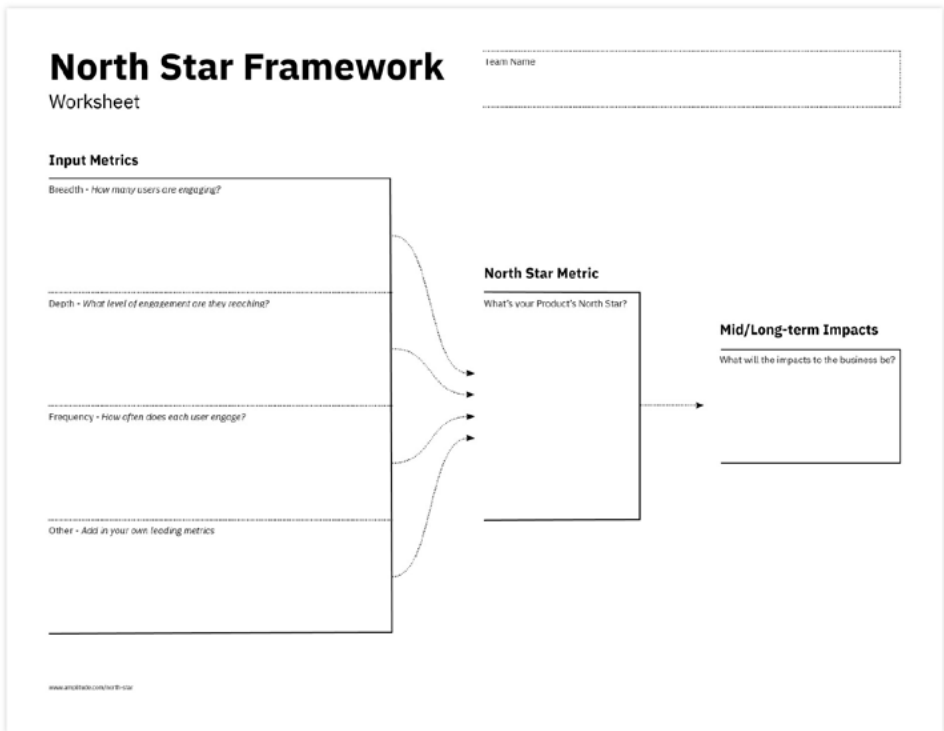
OpenTable Business Model

- Free for diners
- Restaurants pay a base platform subscription fee, and a per-reservation flat fee

Each group should:

- Identify the game you are playing.
- Determine your Product North Star Metric.
- Break down the North Star into key Inputs that you can use as building blocks for a product growth model.

This worksheet can help teams work through this challenge.



You also can show teams a completed worksheet for another product, like this worksheet for Spotify.

North Star Framework

Worksheet

Team Name Spotify

Input Metrics

Breadth - How many users are engaging?

- # of premium trial users
- # of premium subscriptions
- # of users listening on more than one device

Depth - What level of engagement are they reaching?

- Avg # of hours/session
- Avg # songs shared per user per month
- # of recommended songs/session

Frequency - How often does each user engage?

- # sessions/week
- median usage interval
- 2-day weekly stickiness of radio

Other - Add in your own leading metrics

North Star Metric

What's your Product's North Star?

- Time spent listening to Music by Subscribers

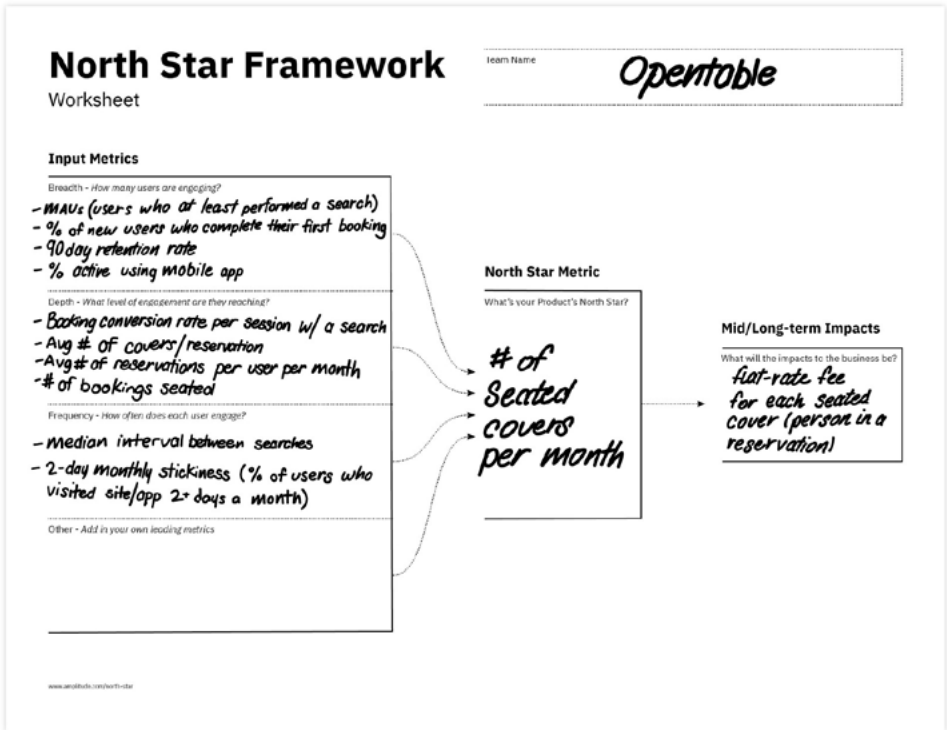
Mid/Long-term Impacts

What will the impacts to the business be?

- monthly subscriptions from premium users

www.amplitude.com/north-star-playbook

Keep the following cheat sheet handy if teams have any trouble.



At the end of the exercise, everyone should share their worksheets and discuss why they chose the metric and Inputs for this other product.

Workshop Activity: Collect Candidates for Your Own North Star

Everyone on the team should define their own candidate for your North Star Metric and Inputs.

All the initial discussions and warm-up activities should help you with the most significant activity of the workshop: working on your own North Star. Start by getting **candidates** from your participants.

Rather than everyone collaborating aloud, we like to use a **silent brainstorming technique** for this. Ask everyone on the North Star team to spend 5-10 minutes in a silent brainstorm with the blank worksheet used in the OpenTable activity above.

To help the participants, you might share the checklist of criteria on a screen, so everyone can think about what makes a good North Star Metric.



COACH'S TIP

Why Silent Brainstorming?

Typical brainstorming sessions tend to be dominated by a handful of vocal quick thinkers—the introverts and deliberators are stifled. Secondly, teams quickly start building on the first few ideas suggested and don't give enough consideration to entirely different approaches.

We prefer silent brainstorming, where teammates are given time to quietly consider a problem on their own, and then they each share their ideas in pairs or small subgroups and build on them, before sharing with a larger group. Silent brainstorming works especially well with fill-in-the-blank templates or other simple constraints.

PAIR AND SHARE

After spending time in silent reflection, it's great to pair up with a partner. Partners can share their ideas with each other, refining each other's concepts.

Finally, share candidates with the group. Evaluate them against the checklist and look for differences and commonalities. Some teams prefer a more formal process with voting, ranking, and sorting (e.g. Bubble Sort), or scoring each candidate metric against each item in the Criteria for a Good North Star checklist. That's fine, but keep in mind that it is the conversations that really count.

Rachel Bethany, Amplitude's manager of APAC Customer Success and workshop veteran, remarks, "Teams always seem surprised or concerned when there is debate and disagreement generated by the North Star presentation, but I usually think those are the best moments. It makes it so clear—so quickly—where teams are not well aligned and what the impact of that is."



COACH'S TIP

Just Get Some Candidates on the Table

If you and your team are stuck, get a handful of candidates on the table. Don't worry about being "right." Throw in some terrible North Star Metrics for fun and contrast. You'll find that some candidates make more sense than others, and that talking through options can help surface implicit beliefs.

You also can develop options quickly with the help of a fill-in-the-blank template.

Here's one we like:

"I would be more confident that our current product strategy was working to set us up for sustainable long-term growth, if I observed an increase in **(insert customer characteristic behavior or characteristic)**, which we could measure by **(insert formula and tactics for measuring).**"

For example, here is a completed template for a hypothetical company:

“I would be more confident that our current product strategy was working to set us up for sustainable long-term growth, if I observed an increase in **customers thoughtfully reflecting on our content**, which we could measure by **the number of posts made in ‘reflections’ discussion board after viewing a film.**”

A trap to watch out for is getting bogged down in the specifics of the definition (for example, ‘should it be users with 5 or more actions in 3 days, or 7 or more actions in 4 days?’) before coming up with a metric concept that is powerful and engaging.

Conclude the Workshop by Converging

During your workshop you’ve had generative discussions and likely developed a wealth of ideas. **Conclude by converging:** coming to agreement and confirming and documenting your decisions. What game are you playing? What are your strongest candidates for a North Star Metric and inputs? If you don’t have one or two leading candidates, what can you eliminate? And, what additional information will you need to finalize your decisions?

Some teams are able to dive right into defining the metric at the end of just one workshop. Often, though, this happens through follow-up discussions (see Chapter 4: Defining Your North Star for helpful facilitation tips). Whether you do it now or later, the next step will be precisely defining your North Star Metric and its Inputs.

Chapter in Review

- .You can conduct your own North Star Workshop in 1-2 hours.
- .A small, cross-functional group is a good structure for a North Star team.
- .To align a team and uncover assumptions, identify which of three games you are playing: Transaction, Attention, or Productivity.
- .Before working on your own North Star Metric and Inputs, discuss another product as a warm-up.
- .At the end of the workshop, collect candidates for your own metric and Inputs, pair and share, and then converge on the decisions you've made.

North Star in Action: Netflix and the North Star

Fifteen years ago, Netflix wasn't the media giant it is today. High-speed streaming technology wasn't yet widely available, and Netflix still was battling traditional video retailers to satisfy the movie-watching public through its innovative distribution model of DVDs mailed to consumers.

At the time, retention was a challenge for Netflix. Notably, the first month retention for new members, during their critical free trial period, was 88%, which meant that 12% of members were abandoning the service after just one month. There was plenty of room to improve retention of new members, and improving it could significantly affect Netflix's business performance.

Gibson Biddle, then the V.P. of Product at Netflix, knew that improving retention would require patience, and he realized that retention was a lagging indicator, not a leading indicator. He needed to identify a leading indicator metric that his team could directly influence. He needed a North Star.

So Gibson and his team dug into their data and customer patterns and discovered a characteristic that proved to be a leading indicator of retention for new members: the number of DVDs in a new member's queue. They learned that if a customer had multiple movies waiting in their queue, that customer had become a more engaged user of the service and was thus far less likely to unsubscribe. So they chose to focus their product work on a very specific metric: the percentage of members who added at least three DVDs to their queue in their first session with the service.

“At Netflix, we knew that improving retention was the critical metric to improve—it would improve both customer and shareholder value. But retention is very hard to move and A/B tests for retention require lots of time to see a meaningful difference,” said Gibson. “So we developed more sensitive proxy metrics. Our ‘Percentage of new members who add at least three titles to their queue during their very first session with the service’ is a good example.”

At the time, only 60% of Netflix's customers had three or more DVDs in their queue during the first month, which left a large portion of customers for Gibson and his team to focus on. They honed in on ways to make their

product work increase the percentage of customers who put three or more DVDs in their queue, and most of their work focused on making the service simpler.

That single metric, the percentage of new members with at least three DVDs in their queue became their obsession, their North Star. They were able to prototype and deliver a number of innovative product features and user experience improvements that both simplified and encouraged users to build their queues.

Over time, Netflix increased this North Star Metric from 60% to 90%, where 90% of customers had at least three DVDs in queue. And this directly influenced first month retention. According to Gibson, an improvement of just two percentage points in first month retention (from 88% to 90%) had a significant influence on Netflix's business results and profitability. Netflix has been able to repeat this approach with other key strategies, including their streaming service.

It's no exaggeration to say that the careful, customer-centric implementation of a North Star Metric and the North Star Framework, combined with a disciplined focus on innovation and execution, fueled Netflix's ability to become the cultural behemoth that it is today.

“With their North Star, the Netflix team was able to prototype and deliver a number of innovative product features and user experience improvements.”

Chapter 4. Get Specific: Defining Your North Star

In this chapter, you will learn:

1. About the two parts of a North Star Metric, the name and the definition
2. How to define your North Star's Inputs
3. How to test your Inputs

The Dance of Uncertainty

As teams converge on a North Star Metric, there is often a dance of uncertainty. Teams bounce among “Yes, that metric idea makes sense,” “But how would we measure that exactly?” and “Oh wait, I think what we really want is something else entirely.” As the idea solidifies, the discussion slowly turns to how they could define the metric.



COACH'S TIP

Remember, Your North Star Will Evolve

Don't get paralyzed by thinking that your North Star needs to be perfect. While it should be precisely defined, it will likely still change and evolve as you learn more. The key is to build a North Star that's directionally accurate, and then adapt as you learn. Early stage startups (or companies new to the framework) might find themselves modifying their North Star Metric every six to 12 months. More established organizations shouldn't need to change their North Star Metric that frequently. Every 12 to 36 months is more typical.

The Name and Definition

A North Star Metric and each of its Inputs should have both a name and a definition. While the name and definition are important for metric and Inputs alike, pay particular attention to the name and definition of the metric. The name of your North Star Metric should be engaging and descriptive, something pithy and punchy that inspires the organization. The definition should be precise and clear, explaining exactly how you'll measure it.

When you define the metric, you are completing this template: **Our North Star Metric is called X, which we define as Y.**

Andrew Chen, Silicon Valley investor, entrepreneur, and writer, emphasizes the importance of branding your North Star. “You have to be able to explain it to other people,” [writes Chen](#). “So make it dead simple to talk about, repeat it

over and over, and generally simplify it to the point where a lot of your growth product roadmap is focused on moving the metric up.”

Too Vague:

Our North Star Metric tracks subscribers who share our content.

A Better Choice:

Our North Star Metric: Frequent Content Sharers (FCS). Definition: The number of unique subscribers who share an average of two or more articles per week during the previous 12-week period.

The definition of your metric should cover both your product’s current market, functionality, and performance and its potential future. There will always be a healthy tension between what you are (the current state of your product) and what you want to be (some new reality you want to enable with your product). For a first pass, brainstorm the actual behaviors that might align with the concept behind your North Star Metric and Inputs. For example, if your product is designed to encourage regular meditation, you might observe prolonged streaks of daily meditation sessions.

When converging on your North Star Metric and Inputs, consider the following questions:

1. How will changes in this metric impact your decision-making? What decisions are you hoping to inform? If you have historical data, “try on” the various changes in the metric over the months or years.
2. What doesn’t this metric tell you? Are any of those questions or uncertainties more important to address?
3. Assume that all product development activities stopped. Would the metric increase? For how long? Why?
4. In his talk, “[Performance... It’s for People!](#),” Web Performance Consultant Andy Davies argues that, “Your analytics are skewed. They’re biased towards visitors who’ll tolerate the experience you’re delivering.” How does your chosen metric account for this?
5. Will you eventually be able to generate this metric continuously or frequently with minimal effort?

6. How is the metric affected by seasonality, day-of-the-week, and day-of-the-month effects?
7. Is it possible (and helpful) to compare this metric across various account and user cohorts? Ideally, there is value in viewing it in isolation and across cohorts.
8. What will be your signal to revisit this metric? Assuming you revisit it periodically, what tests will you run to determine that it is still useful?



COACH'S TIP

Don't Get Bogged Down Trying to Find the Perfect Metric

Some teams get stuck believing that only a rigorous, statistically refined model will suffice for their North Star Metric, or that not having one points to an irreparable flaw in their business model. Not true! With most products—especially if you're thinking about long-term impact—the relationship between the metric and long-term impact are rarely that clear cut. Asymmetric opportunities often lurk where there is uncertainty.

For example, Amplitude's North Star Metric, Weekly Learning Users (WLUs), is defined as the count of active Amplitude users who have shared a learning that is consumed by at least two other people in the previous seven days (see "North Star in Action: Amplitude's North Star Metric and Inputs"). You might wonder how we came up with exactly two or more users. Did we just pull that out of thin air? Or did we have a bullet-proof case for those precise numbers? The reality is that these numbers aren't magic. A learning consumed by two other people is great; three is even better; one is better than zero. We're more confident about some things and less confident about others.

The important thing is to identify thresholds that are both aspirational and achievable. Once you've done that, don't get too worried about whether you've selected the perfect threshold. The important thing isn't the exact number, but the combination of customer behaviors that our North Star represents. It's consistent with our strategy, and we're open about our uncertainty.

Getting Inputs Right

Inputs are the handful of factors that, together, produce the North Star Metric. **They are as important to the North Star Framework as the metric is.**

Dana Levine, Amplitude product manager, explains why Inputs are so important. “A big trap is when teams attempt to move the North Star Metric directly, rather than trying to move Inputs that roll up to the North Star.” He continues, “A good North Star Metric is the result of a combination of things that a team can do something about. Identifying those things, working on them, and seeing how the North Star Metric responds is far better than trying to game the North Star directly.”

Just like the North Star Metric, the Inputs should have both a name and a definition.

The following fill-in-the-blank template can help you determine the Inputs to your metric:

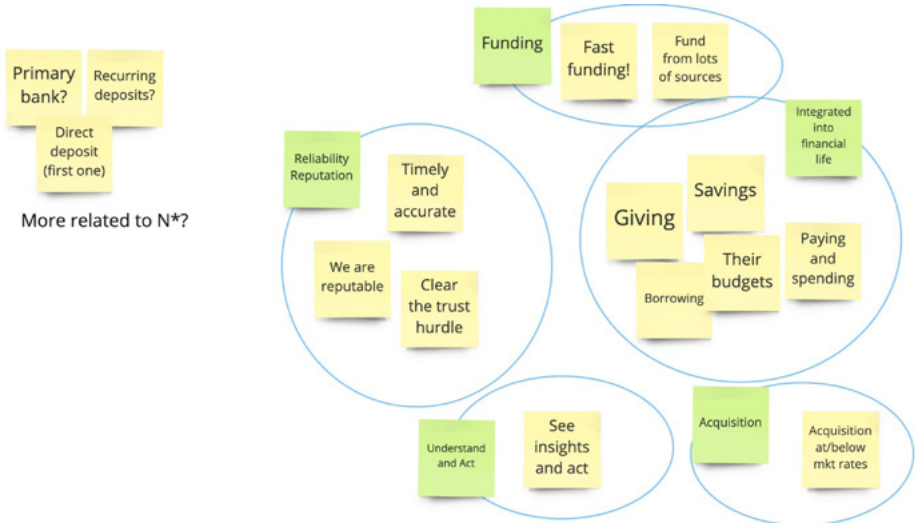
I believe that < NORTH STAR METRIC > is a function of < X, Y, and Z >. I also believe that there is some independence between X,Y, and Z (e.g. movements in one aren’t immediately felt in the others).

Mind-mapping is a helpful technique for identifying Inputs and metrics. Start by noting your North Star Metric, or even just a candidate for it, on a whiteboard. Then collaboratively note relationships and concepts in clusters.

Your mind map will undoubtedly start out somewhat messy, like this:



Then, refine the map by combining related concepts, eliminating extraneous information, and reinforcing the relationships between elements, like this:



Spend time editing and clarifying the concepts in your mind map so that the metric is at the heart of it and the contributing factors are all neatly named and defined at a high level, like this:

Funding Effectiveness

Speed and variety of sources

Understanding and Acting on Insights

Insights drive spending/saving behavior

Financial Life Integration

They are integrating the bank into different areas of their financial life

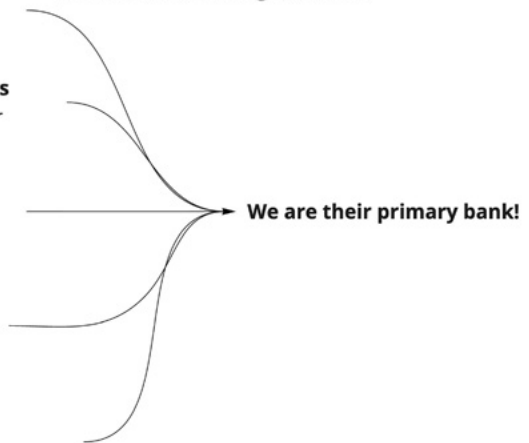
Trust, Reliability, and Reputation

Their trust is \geq to other major banks

Conscious Consumer Acquisition

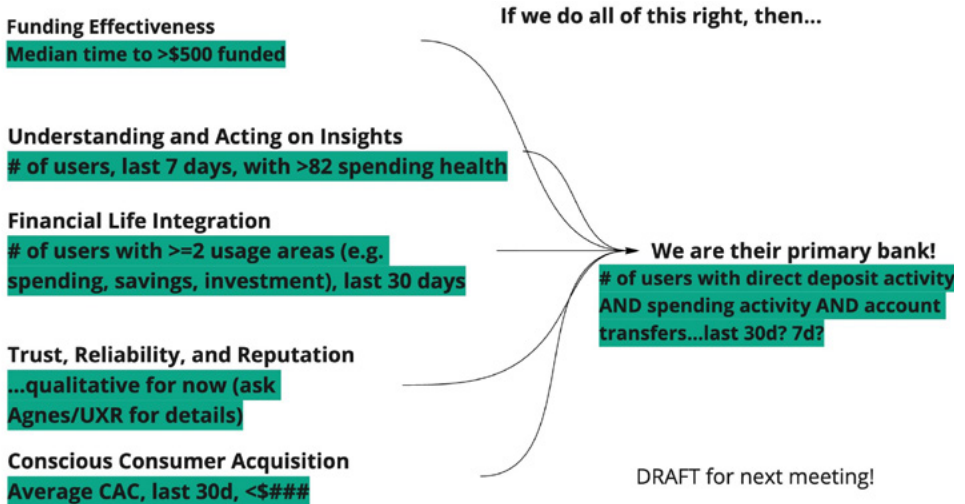
At or below market costs
The "right" consumer, high LTV

If we do all of this right, then...



We are their primary bank!

Once you have your Inputs defined at a high level, you'll find it much easier to tackle the challenge of defining an exact metrics for each Input.



Testing Your Inputs and North Star

If your Inputs are too broad or too lagging, you may struggle to focus your efforts and measure impact. On the other hand, if the Inputs are too specific and prescriptive, you may struggle to identify innovative solutions to address them. For example, an Input like “Satisfied Customers” may be too broad. An Input like “Positive Reviews on Social Media” may be too narrow.

Here are a couple ways to test these Inputs:

INPUT TEST 1: THE GREENFIELD TEST

For this test, forget about current roadmaps, missions, or other restrictions. Instead, focus on generating new ideas. Pose this question to the team:

“How many opportunities can you come up with in two minutes to influence this Input?”

You can use this format:

We have an opportunity to improve [an Input] if we could [some change in behavior, outcome]. Potential interventions we might try to exploit that opportunity include [features, experiments, etc.].

If the team quickly runs out of ideas, then you might need higher level Inputs. If they are swimming in ideas, many of them overly broad, then you should get more specific.

INPUT TEST 2: THE ROADMAP CHECK

For this test, do consider your current roadmap or work in progress. Make a list of current initiatives and discuss how they could influence the Inputs you have chosen. In many cases, you'll see a clear link. Sometimes, the link is implicit and contains a host of assumptions worth chatting about. Have these discussions! In some cases, you can't see the link between the roadmap item and the Input. This is a good signal that your set of inputs is missing some factor of your North Star—or that you're working on something that isn't actually valuable.



COACH'S TIP

These Activities May Feel Circular! That's Okay.

This process of defining a metric and its Inputs often goes back and forth, and you may not go in this exact order. That's okay! This isn't a linear process. First, you converge on the metric, but then defining it becomes difficult. So you go back to the metric and adapt it a bit. Then you add Inputs and realize that you've gotten too specific or too broad, so you refine the metric again. This is all perfectly normal and even healthy.

Sharing Your Work

You've got a trove of material now: background research and data, decisions about the game you've played, notes from your workshop, and, most notably, your North Star Metric and its Inputs. To clarify the decisions you've made and discussions you've had so far, share your work with colleagues.

A simple way to share is to present your North Star work at an all-company meeting. But beyond that, we suggest you socialize the North Star repeatedly, in all sorts of forums, both formally and informally—and encourage your co-workers to share it as well.

Organizing the work you've done, presenting it to colleagues, and discussing the North Star across your company will help you prepare for your next challenge: putting your North Star into action.

Take Time to Celebrate

At this point, you and your team have defined a North Star, including both a metric and its Inputs. Congratulations! This is a good time to do something to thank your co-workers for their contributions and publicly celebrate your progress. We recommend cheese.

Chapter in Review

- . After your workshop, precisely define the North Star Metric and Inputs.
- . The metric should meet certain criteria; review the checklist to confirm you've selected a good metric.
- . The metric and Inputs should each include a name and a definition.
- . Inputs are the three to five factors that produce the North Star. The North Star acts like an equation or formula that is produced by these Inputs.
- . Be sure to share your North Star with colleagues and celebrate your successes.

North Star in Action: Amplitude's North Star Metric and Inputs

Amplitude's North Star is designed around a North Star Metric that Amplitude calls **Weekly Learning Users (WLUs)**. Amplitude defines WLUs as “the count of active Amplitude users who have shared a learning that is consumed by at least two other people in the previous seven days.”

This North Star represents Amplitude's most valuable user persona, the Advocate, who shares context to drive decisions and take action in an organization. Amplitude's product strategy is to be learning-driven, providing insights to cross-functional teams. WLUs represent this strategy. The core belief underpinning this North Star Metric is that Amplitude brings forth deliberate learning that compounds with collaboration.

Amplitude has identified three Inputs to WLUs that are related to activating customers and encouraging users to create and share their insights. Each Input is a key facet of Amplitude's team-focused, learning-focused strategy.

These Inputs are:

- **Activated Organizations (AO).** These are organizations that have exceeded five WLUs.
- **Broadcasted Learnings (BL).** These are things like charts, dashboards, and notebooks consumed by two or more people in a seven-day period. In other words, the user “broadcasts” something they learned, and someone checks it out.
- **Consumption of Learnings (CoL).** These describe the total reach of the BLs in an organization. Maybe that one notebook ends up being viewed by lots of people.

Abbie Kouzmanoff, Product Manager at Amplitude, explains the value of the WLUs North Star like this:

“First, our North Star Metric focuses on customer value and the exchange of value. We experimented with using Weekly or Daily Active Users (WAUs or DAUs), but Active Users doesn’t really tell us anything about the value that was exchanged. Second, WLUs represent Amplitude’s unique product strategy. It is not generic. And finally, WLUs connect the customer value we are trying to create as a product team with the business impact that the executive team in our company ultimately cares about.”

By using WLUs and its Inputs in the North Star Framework, Abbie’s team is better able to evaluate and prioritize feature requests and deliver a product that satisfies customers and builds Amplitude’s business. For example, after implementing WLUs as their North Star Metric, Abbie’s team evaluated a request for a “Bulk Editing of Records” feature, a common request in B2B products. Because of the North Star, they asked, “How does this impact Broadcasted Learnings, Consumption of Learnings, and WLUs?” By asking that question, they were able to see past the surface request to understand the deeper impact on how Amplitude’s users create and share insights.

The team discovered they could solve the customer problem behind the bulk editing of records request and drive the Inputs to the North Star Metric with a new “templating” feature. This feature works for advanced users but also gives new users a starting point—a template—for creating new learnings, thus speeding up their journey to becoming a Weekly Learning User. In this way, the Amplitude product teams addressed the customer’s problem through product improvements that directly affected the Consumption of Learnings Input and therefore improved their North Star Metric.

Chapter 5. Troubleshooting: Fixing Issues and Avoiding Traps

In this chapter, you will learn:

1. The two categories of problems you might experience as you build your North Star
2. How to improve shared understanding by mapping beliefs, aligning your North Star to your product vision, and identifying your key value exchanges
3. How to identify and avoid common traps

Some teams are able to converge on a North Star Metric and its Inputs after a short workshop session and a bit of follow-up. Other teams require more facilitation, collaboration, and troubleshooting. And that is OK. **You want your North Star to reflect the heart of your product strategy and your value to customers, so it's worth taking time to resolve misunderstandings and ensure alignment.**

The difficulties teams experience often fall into two categories: struggling with shared understanding, or falling into common traps.

Category 1: The team needs shared understanding

If you're experiencing this, try:

- Surfacing beliefs
- Connecting the North Star to your product vision
- Understanding key value exchanges

Category 2: The team needs help avoiding common traps

If you're experiencing this, watch out for:

- Jumping immediately to "Can we measure that?"
- Focusing on the North Star Metric only, not the Inputs
- Insisting you need more than one North Star Metric
- Letting current dysfunction overwhelm your ability to improve

If you are facilitating a North Star workshop, we recommend that you read this chapter so you can be prepared for misunderstandings or challenges that might bubble up. With these actionable tips in your back pocket, you'll be able to cut through conflict and align your team.

Creating Shared Understanding

Often, if a team seems to struggle to converge on its North Star, it's because teammates lack a common understanding of their product's purpose or what customers value. If your team is struggling with shared understanding, we suggest you dig into **beliefs**, your **product vision**, and **key value exchanges**.

BELIEFS

Every person in an organization approaches a business problem or product opportunity with **beliefs** and **biases**. These often describe:

- Assumptions about what your customers value
- Assumptions about causation or results of actions
- Theories about where the market is going
- Predictions about technology trends
- Conjecture about competitors' strategy or position
- Opinions about the value you provide to your market

We've found that **identifying these beliefs can help you define and implement an effective North Star**. If you fail to uncover the beliefs of your colleagues, you may leave unresolved tensions within a team, miss opportunities to align, and overlook unique perspectives about your product.

The following are examples of statements that contain beliefs.

- "I am sure that customers aren't able to use the product successfully without the advice of our implementation services. We need to increase our investment in implementation services to stay ahead of our competitors."
- "Machine learning is the next big thing in this industry. We need to have a chatbot driven by machine learning to keep up."
- "This kind of technology will become a commodity in 3-5 years, rendering our efforts to build this in-house obsolete."

- “Customers leave us because we can’t easily integrate with their third-party systems.”
- “If we don’t improve the mobile app to the level of our competition, we’ll never take market share from them.”
- “After the next election, the regulatory environment affecting our product will change.”

HOW TO IDENTIFY BELIEFS THAT INFORM A NORTH STAR

One simple way to identify beliefs: Ask your North Star team to spend a few minutes independently filling in one or more of these templates. The goal at this point is to cast a wide net that catches biases and assumptions, so be sure to remind your team that there are no wrong answers.

- Our direct competition is [.....]. We are disrupting legacy options like [.....]. In turn, [.....] may disrupt us.
- One technology change that will affect us is [.....]. This change will impact us because [.....]. As a response, we will [.....].
- I think the real reason we win new customers is because [.....].
- I believe [some behavior in our market] is due to [reason].
- If we focus on meeting [a specific customer need], and do that extremely well, we will have some leeway when it comes to [less important challenges].



COACH'S TIP

Designers and Developers Should Embrace Belief Elicitation

Many product designers are concerned that decision makers don't understand the ROI of user experience (UX). Similarly, developers often struggle to explain the value of non-feature or non-customer-facing work, like tooling, refactoring, and technical debt reduction.

Belief mapping is a great opportunity to get these concerns on the table. Developers should explain what they believe will happen if technical debt continues to mount. Designers should outline how they believe that under-investment in UX will result in customer pain.

Connecting the North Star to Your Product Vision

Your business may have already done the important work of crafting a product vision statement. These existing statements of product vision can be great catalysts to teasing out a good North Star.

As your team defines your North Star, review your product vision statement.

Ask yourself: *What does this statement say that is distinct or foundational? What can we learn about our product's value from this statement?*

EXAMPLES OF PRODUCT VISION STATEMENTS THAT CAN INFORM A NORTH STAR

Here are a couple hypothetical vision statements of fictional products. Note how these statements contain insights about the product's value that might help a product team design a good North Star.

HYPOTHETICAL VISION STATEMENT 1:

“For the film aficionado, our documentary streaming service is the world’s most authoritative source of expertly curated short films, expert commentary, and informed community.”

What we learn from this statement:

- The product isn't for everyone; it's for aficionados.
- The product doesn't endeavor to be comprehensive. A relatively small selection of films is a feature, not a bug.
- The films in the service's library are short.
- “Authoritative” is a key characteristic of the service.
- The service is differentiated from competitors through quality of curation, commentary, and a community of like-minded people.

Questions this statement raises:

- Does the company differentiate through deep technical expertise in video streaming?
- Communities are hard. How will the company build a community?

HYPOTHETICAL VISION STATEMENT 2:

“For the boutique maker of bottled goods, our label-design app is the most reliable way to produce high-quality but affordable label designs that fit your manufacturing workflow while distinguishing your product on the shelf and your brand in the marketplace.”

What we learn from this statement:

- This product isn’t for huge brands; small, boutique customers are the target.
- Reliability is critical.
- Affordability is a distinguishing characteristic.
- The labels need to fit into a manufacturing workflow.
- The customer’s real value is how a label distinguishes its product and brand.

Questions this statement raises:

- Does the app need to integrate with third-party applications?
- How is the label-design app distinct from more generic and widely available layout and graphics production tools?

Some teams find that their vision is too broad to inform their North Star—or maybe the vision doesn’t exist at all. Such teams should consider revisiting their beliefs and collaboratively defining their product vision.

There are many models for writing a vision statement. One simple template was popularized by Geoffrey Moore in [*Crossing the Chasm*](#):

For [target customer] who [need or opportunity], the [product] is a [product category] that [key benefit]. Unlike [competitive alternative], our product [statement of primary differentiation].



COACH'S TIP

Don't Manufacture Certainty when Formulating Your Strategy

We've seen it happen repeatedly: when a team is expected to finalize a strategy, they may manufacture certainty. The team equates their uncertainty with a lack of confidence or skill. So they manufacture a strong point of view, even when—below the surface—there are a lot of questions lurking. Your North Star and Inputs should represent your current thinking, wants, questions, and all.

For example, a team we worked with was under a great deal of pressure to come up with a personalization strategy. Their presentations were impressive, and they incorporated this element into their North Star Framework, but the team glossed over key assumptions about the limits of personalization.

The North Star and Key Value Exchanges

Even with complex products, **you can typically isolate a handful (3-6) of essential actions or events where customers derive value from the product.** These **key value exchanges** demonstrate the true essence and intent of the product. If possible, they should be reflected in your North Star.

To identify key value exchanges, visualize the customer journey. As you do, note those important moments where your product solves a problem for the customer or enhances a customer's ability to accomplish a goal. **These moments—where the customer's investment in time, attention, energy, money, are rewarded with meeting their needs—are the key value exchanges.**

Tristan Harward, a UX Manager at Rapid7, recommends starting with a short collaborative activity to make a high level map of all the activities your users go through in your product. "Try to brainstorm or capture every major thing users do or accomplish on post-its, then identify what's most valuable afterward by voting or rating," suggests Tristan. "That way, you'll get a more complete view of the journey to value."

“By organizing the key activities in your product, you’ll start to see patterns in value you might not have picked up on otherwise, and that’s a good start.”

—Tristan Harward, UX Manager at Rapid7

To jump-start your North Star process, it’s useful to capture your existing shared understanding of your customer experience. It’s even better to include existing research that you may have already done, or to follow up with additional research to understand what your users really value. As Tristan says, “By organizing the key activities in your product, you’ll start to see patterns in value you might not have picked up on otherwise, and that’s a good start.”

For many products, some key value exchanges happen outside the actual product—for example, the concert-goer arriving at their chosen seat is a key value exchange for a ticketing app. Don’t exclude these important stories just because they don’t occur within the product itself. You may also find yourself guessing about the customer journey, or using an idealized version of the journey. This is a good signal to either do a bit more research, or to make those assumptions explicit (e.g. “We’re not exactly sure if this is what our customers are doing, but this is our best guess at the moment”).

EXAMPLES OF KEY VALUE EXCHANGES:

- The delivery arrives intact outside your apartment in under 30 minutes
- Monthly account reconciliation was successful
- A collaborator makes their first comment on your design
- “Wow. This music recommendation is actually pretty decent.”
- Based on the logging, it looks like the SDK is working

- Your significant other says, “Yes!”
- Your medication arrives before you need to call for a refill
- Your student was pre-registered for the next courses in their degree plan at days and times that fit their preferences

Avoiding Common Traps and Resolving

Avoid these common problems as you design your North Star

Has your team struggled to converge on a North Star? First of all, that’s normal (and valuable). If you’re struggling, spend some time digging into potential causes of this disagreement and divergence.

We’ve noticed several challenges that teams might experience.

1. JUMPING IMMEDIATELY TO “CAN WE MEASURE THAT?”

Yes, “measurable” is a characteristic of a good North Star on our checklist, but watch out for getting too concerned too soon with determining exactly how you’ll calculate the metric or its Inputs. This is especially common for companies with a long history of struggling to predict customer success. They disregard promising concepts because they aren’t yet sure how to measure them.

It’s important to focus on important decisions and on reducing uncertainty, as Douglas W. Hubbard’s book [*How to Measure Anything: Finding the Value of “Intangibles” in Business*](#) reminds us.

Myth: When you have a lot of uncertainty, you need a lot of data to tell you something useful.

Fact: If you have a lot of uncertainty now, you don’t need much data to reduce uncertainty significantly. When you have a lot of certainty already, then you need a lot of data to reduce uncertainty significantly. In other words—if you know almost nothing, almost anything will tell you something.

For example, say you're converging on the idea of Project Health as a North Star Metric. You agree that Project Health is a hallmark of your product strategy, and your sales team already pitches Project Health to the market. However, you aren't yet measuring Project Health—you don't even know how you would measure it. Don't disregard the metric. Instead, identify how you might measure it, even if it's imperfect. After all, you need to start somewhere. If you could simply reduce uncertainty regarding your claims and focus, imagine what that might be worth.

2. FOCUSING ON THE NORTH STAR METRIC ONLY, NOT THE INPUTS

Even after teams review the product formula and examples of the combined effect of a North Star Metric and Inputs, it can be difficult to shift focus from driving the metric to driving the Inputs. By design, the North Star Metric is not immediately actionable—the Inputs are where you apply actions. If you find yourself thinking only about the metric, revisit Inputs. Do some brainstorming or group mind-mapping about the formula of Inputs that produces the metric, and vice versa. It is perfectly normal to jump back and forth between the two. Try the depth, breadth, frequency, and efficiency heuristic, asking the team how it translates to your product and business.

“By design, the North Star Metric is not immediately actionable—the Inputs are where you apply actions.”

3. INSISTING YOU NEED MORE THAN ONE NORTH STAR METRIC

Workshop participants are often sure that their company needs more than one North Star. Certainly, in some cases, when a company has distinct lines of business with different customer bases, this might be true. However, the number of times one metric will suffice outnumbers situations that require multiple North Stars by a large margin.

Here's an example. A large bank has dozens of consumer banking "products" (savings accounts, checking accounts, investment accounts, etc.). From a balance sheet and organizational chart perspective, it makes sense to call each of these things "products." But do customers view these as distinct products? Or do they view the bank as a single product: a trustworthy partner in their quest for financial independence? In this case, a single North Star for all consumer banking products is usually appropriate.

Challenge the need for multiple North Star Metrics. Look for real boundaries in terms of users, their needs, and the strategy to meet those needs. Note where products are actually "packages" or add-ons.

4. LETTING CURRENT DYSFUNCTION OVERWHELM YOUR ABILITY TO IMPROVE

In workshops, we often observe a moment when the real world catches up to a team. They start with enthusiasm, but then realize that their company has so many problems that they fear they can't ever actually change. It's the classic "it'll never work here" syndrome, exacerbated by the lack of a common framework.

Your company may currently do many things imperfectly. You focus on vanity metrics, chase short-term revenue, run a feature factory, crank out features to close deals, organize around the tech stack (not value streams), or routinely abuse metrics and KPIs. That's natural, and shouldn't prevent you from making progress towards the North Star Framework. There are two strategies here that can be especially effective:

- **Start where you are.** Get it all on the table. What is the current strategy, imperfections and all? How does all that prescriptive work map to that strategy? How does that A/B testing really map into customer satisfaction?

Acknowledge imperfections in what you're doing now, but don't let them stop you from making progress. Just start using the language of the framework, socialize assumptions, and slowly chip away.

- **Start small.** Don't try to do too much. Pick a product scope you have an ability to impact, even if it just represents a small percentage of your company's business. Then build and test a North Star—the metric, the Inputs, the results they impact—for just that portion of your company or product portfolio.

Chapter in Review

- . Everyone approaches a business problem with preconceived beliefs. Identify these beliefs to become more aligned and to converge on a North Star.
- . A good North Star reflects your product vision.
- . Key value exchanges, the moments where your customer experiences the value of your product, can help you identify your North Star.
- . Watch out for a handful of common traps and issues.

Chapter 6. Making the North Star Framework Stick and Changing Your North Star

In this chapter, you will learn:

1. How to sense if your North Star is working
2. What traps to watch for as your North Star is established
3. How to re-evaluate and even change your North Star

How to Sense if Your North Star is Working

Over time, the North Star should result in **improved business performance and happier customers**. Even before that, though, you may observe changes within your company. The following are some signals that the North Star framework is working for your organization and your product:

- Team members can explain how their day-to-day work connects to the North Star Metric.
- You are more confident about the impact of your work and the quality of your decisions.
- Team members report improved morale and cohesion.
- You seem to hear and be able to say “no” more easily, and with more evidence.
- The “battle of ideas” shifts to discussions about impact and experimentation.
- You notice more productive collaboration.
- People use similar language.
- More people can coherently describe your product strategy.
- Non product-team members start to use the language of the framework, like “Inputs” or “our North Star.”
- The North Star Metric is mentioned at large company meetings.

When to Change Your North Star

At some point, a business may recognize that the North Star is no longer effective. Maybe your market has changed or your business is at a different stage. No matter the reason, at some point you could find that your original North Star no longer predicts business success.

Recognizing this and making this change requires insight, transparency,

humility, and communication. At Amplitude, we found ourselves in this situation after implementing our original North Star, Weekly Querying Users.

Changing Amplitude's Original North Star

This section was written by Amplitude's VP of Product Justin Bauer.

In early 2017, we were a small product development team of about 20 people. Though we were still in our early stages, we knew it was important to have a metric that we could use to drive clarity, communicate progress to the rest of the organization, and hold product accountable to driving business outcomes for the company.

As a product analytics solution, our main value proposition was helping product managers and analysts answer questions, so we decided to use a 'query' as our indicator of value. That was important to us because our main differentiator from other analytics products was that Amplitude users didn't just view dashboards, they explored the data deeply to understand what drives user behavior. So, we aligned around a metric we called weekly querying users (WQUs) as our North Star. This worked really well for us—we found that not only did WQUs reflect customers getting value out of Amplitude, but that this was also a leading indicator of our ability to retain and expand accounts to grow our business.

Over time, however, we recognized that this metric wasn't truly reflecting the type of impact we wanted to have with our customers. Our mission isn't to help users build better analyses—it's to help companies build better products. And building a product is a team sport. By focusing only on users who query, we realized we were limiting the potential of our solution.

EVOLVING THE NORTH STAR

Changing a North Star Metric, especially at a company as analytically oriented as ours, is no small task. We started out doing what we do at our North Star workshops: examining our product strategy.

One of the changes we had made was deepening our focus on collaboration and exploration to help customers get to impact faster. By customer impact, we meant completing the “Build > Measure > Learn” loop (we’re big fans of loops at Amplitude).

We dug into our data to figure out how we could best represent a user completing the loop. We looked broadly across a multitude of factors: everything from Amplitude engagement and feature adoption to customer product velocity and usage of instrumentation.

We also did a deep network graph analysis to understand the relationships between users in our product. By looking at network structures and how they evolved over time, we could see how connectedness differed for our most successful customers compared to those who hadn’t fully adopted the platform.

Based on all of this, we ran correlations against our contract data and compared that to our existing WQU metric. Ultimately, we landed on a definition that we felt was simple enough for people to understand, yet robust enough to be a strong driver of revenue for Amplitude and capture value delivered. We call it the “Weekly Learning User” (WLU).

A WLU is a user who is active and shares a learning that is consumed by at least two other people in the previous seven days. It represents our most valuable user persona—the Advocate—who shares context to drive decisions and take action in an organization.

In addition to adapting our North Star, we also wanted to identify the key leading indicators of this new metric so that we could align our teams to that strategy. We identified three new Input metrics for our team to set goals against: Activated Organizations, Broadcasted Learnings, and Consumption of Learnings.

1. Activated Organizations: Activated Organizations (AOs) are organizations that have reached at least five WLUs. We have found that once we reach this threshold, there is a high likelihood that this customer will continue to grow with us.

2. Broadcasted Learnings: A chart, dashboard, or [Notebook](#) is considered

to be a “Broadcasted Learning” (BLs) when it is consumed by two or more people within a seven-day period. By measuring the total number of high-quality learnings, we are able to get great insight into the health of our accounts.

3. Consumption of Learnings: Consumption of Learnings (CoLs) measures the total reach of all BL. This is our best proxy of how deeply an insight is shared across the organization. CoL measures the total reach of BL in an organization within a seven-day period.

BENEFITS OF THIS CHANGE

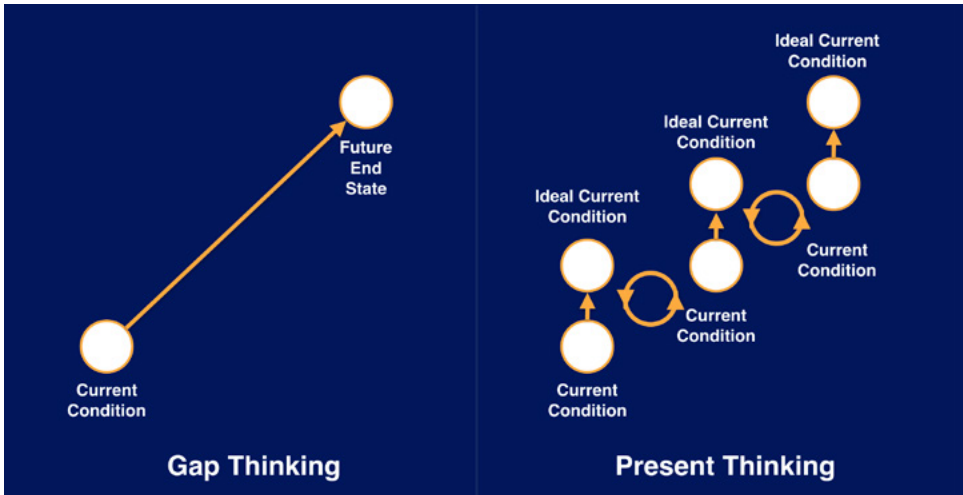
We believe our new North Star Metric better reflects our current product strategy—the value that we are delivering to our customers—and is a good leading indicator of revenue for the company. In the past six months, we’ve seen a 50 percent increase in the number of WLUs per active organization.

We’re now exploring how to integrate our North Star into other parts of our company. For example, how can our Customer Success team use WLUs, BLs, and CoLs to track the health of a partnership? Can we trigger training sessions or campaigns with customers based on their likelihood to activate? How can we use these metrics to help our Account Management team identify customers that are likely to expand so they can establish a relationship with that account months before renewal? These are questions we’re looking forward to tackling as we build upon our new North Star Metric.

Keeping Your Momentum

In our experience working with product teams, many organizations trying to implement the North Star Framework succumb to what product development expert Jabe Bloom describes as gap thinking, which causes them to lose momentum and revert to old patterns.

In a gap thinking model, teams examine the current condition, envision a future state, and attempt to define and close the gap between the two.



The **major problem with gap thinking, as it relates to any change effort, is that teams become vested in a fixed endpoint that never materializes.** They inadvertently devalue the present. There’s a lot of long-term planning and execution and long feedback cycles. When they don’t achieve the future—when they don’t close the gap—they lose steam and give up.

If you find that your efforts to identify and implement a North Star for your product are losing momentum, you might be guilty of too much gap thinking.

Bloom contrasts gap thinking with present thinking. In present thinking, you recognize the reality of the present and work to change it. Present thinking asks, “Where are we? What do I need now? How do I improve the current way of working?”

Teams that successfully implement frameworks like the North Star Framework

are never “done.” They are always learning and grappling with uncertainty. The real muscle to develop is continuously checking to see whether your North Star Metric and Inputs represent your current beliefs, product vision, and product strategy—then refine accordingly.

To make the shift to present thinking, consider Jabe Bloom’s present thinking questions:

- “Where are we?”
- “What do I need now?”
- “How do I improve the current way of working?”

Applied to the North Star Framework, the present thinking questions look like this:

- “Can we align our current efforts more closely with our chosen Inputs?”
- “What decisions do we need to make today and in the near future? Is the framework supporting those decisions? If not, how can we adapt it?”
- “Can every team member trace current work to the North Star Metric? If not, what new context might we provide to help make the connection?”
- “Has our confidence level in our chosen Inputs and North Star Metric increased or decreased in the last couple weeks? Why?”
- “What have we learned recently? Let’s revisit our beliefs, value exchanges, etc. to see what needs tweaking.”

Chapter in Review

- . After you've implemented the North Star, you may start seeing changes in culture, communications, customer behavior, and business results.
- . You should regularly revisit your North Star to ensure it reflects your strategy and predicts results.
- . Don't be afraid to change your North Star if it is no longer working.
- . To maintain momentum, try shifting from gap thinking to present thinking.

Chapter 7. Putting the North Star into Action

In this chapter, you will learn:

1. How to think about the relationship between your North Star and your daily work
2. About levels of bets and how to place them
3. How to integrate the North Star Framework with other methods and practices, like OKRs, roadmaps, and organizational design

So Now What?

Amplitude has facilitated hundreds of North Star Framework workshops. Some teams leave the workshop, identify a metric and Inputs, and then quickly fit the North Star into their workflows. For other teams, putting the North Star into action is not so easy. From such teams, we've heard statements like this:

“OK! We've defined our North Star and everyone seems to have buy-in. But now what? How do we actually do it? I mean, we have a whole product process and prioritization model, and development teams already are following a roadmap filled with features. How do we decide what to work on?”

These are not small challenges. Without integrating the framework into how you work, plan, prioritize, and review progress, you'll miss out on the North Star Framework's benefits.

THE WORK

We call the activities teams use to make their product “the work.” When we use this term, we're referring to day-to-day tasks of product-making: researching, designing, coding, testing, refactoring, prototyping, experimentation, and the like.

Some teams will be more prescriptive and prioritize specific features that target a specific Input. Other teams will be less prescriptive, prioritizing opportunities that are likely to influence specific Inputs, but giving designers and developers autonomy to identify the actual features. No matter which way your team works, **the key is maintaining a clear connection between your work and your North Star.**

Things to Watch Out For

The following are some common reasons that teams struggle to put the North Star Framework into action and to connect it to their work.

- 1.They connect features and things to build immediately to the Inputs, missing out on the important step of defining the opportunity.
- 2.They fail to use enabling constraints like work in progress or process limits, timeboxes, force-ranking backlogs, and structured reviews. These constraints help teams sense and respond. Without them, there's a lot of

“moving around” and less “true work” (to read more about the concept of “true work,” see Jun Nakamuro’s post, “[Re-Translating Lean from Its Origin](#)”).

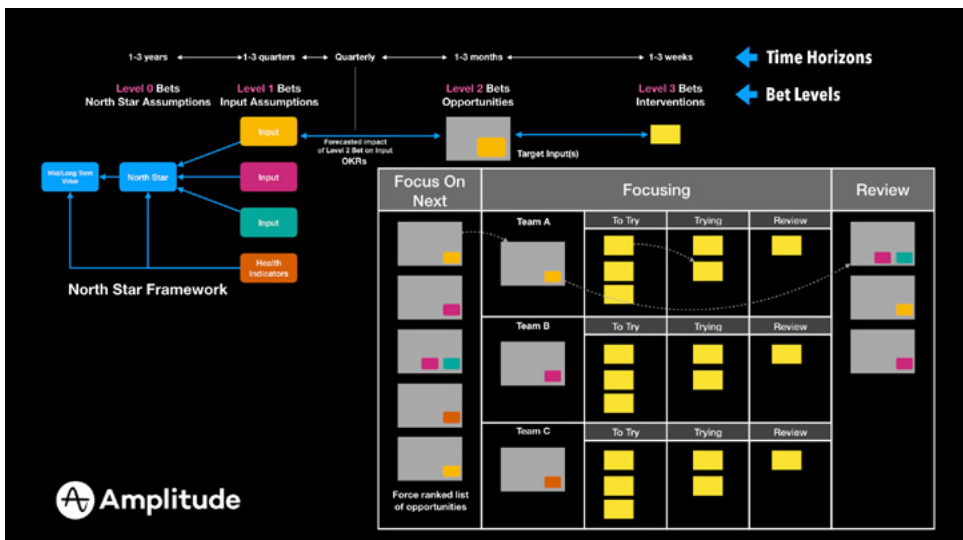
3.They organize around the tech stack, product areas, keeping people busy, predictable shipping features, and moving to the next project, instead of organizing in a way that optimizes directly driving the North Star’s Inputs.

Connecting the Framework to the Work through Levels of Bets

Product teams use a variety of techniques to align strategic frameworks like the North Star to their product development practices. One approach we like is connecting the work to the North Star Framework through levels of bets. Please note, we’re describing this model to explain important principles and to help teams avoid common pitfalls—not to claim that there is just one right way.

In this level of bets model, the North Star is joined to a board-like visualization of work underway and in queue. The North Star and the board are connected through a series of what we call bets. Picture the North Star and the board sitting side by side with decreasing levels of bets labeled across the top, like this:

(Note that in this visualization we “flip” the North Star Framework)



Key features include:

- The **North Star Framework**, including business results, the North Star Metric, and Inputs
- Using Bets and Bet Levels to connect day-to-day work to the North Star Metric
- Different time horizons for different Bet Levels to acknowledge different feedback loop lengths
- A force-ranked queue of opportunities to encourage focus and promote organizing around the North Star Framework across multiple teams
- Explicit review stages to promote learning and not just labeling things “done”
- Changing the language from “to do, doing, done” to “focus on next, focusing, and review,” and “to try, trying, review” to separate opportunities from experiments and encourage learning
- Work in progress limits to improve flow and help identify bottlenecks

CONNECT THE NORTH STAR TO THE WORKING BOARD WITH LEVELS OF BETS

Notice the **connections** among the elements of the North Star, and then the connections between the North Star and the items on the board. You can draw similar lines connecting your North Star and working board.

We call these connections bets. You are betting that the work or the Input will produce the result. The word “bet” is well suited to describing risk, impact, assumptions, and uncertainty.

The more distant the bet is from the ultimate goal of business results, the higher the level. Level 0 and Level 1 bets are connection points within the North Star Framework. Level 2 and Level 3 bets are connected to work on the board. All levels are connected.

Here is an explanation of these bet levels, using the Burger King North Star as an example.

Level of Bet	Type of Bet	About this Bet	Typical time horizon	Example: Burger King
0	North Star bets	Connects the North Star Metric to the success of the company and product	Often lasts years	<i>If we increase digital transactions, our total monthly sales will increase.</i>
1	Input bets	Connects the inputs to the North Star Metric	Revisit every 1-3 quarters	<i>If we improve the rate at which new users register for our digital applications, we will increase total digital transactions.</i>
2	Opportunities	These are opportunities to influence an input. For example, if you know an input is related to the ease of signing up, an opportunity might be to focus on the onboarding experience.	1-3 months	<i>If we make it really appealing for new users to sign up for our mobile product, we'll increase digital registrations.</i>
3	Interventions	The actual interventions you prioritize to pursue the opportunities in level 2 bets. This is the functionality that designers and engineers will work on for the next sprint.	1-3 weeks. If you're using Scrum or similar agile methodologies, these level 3 bets may match your sprint cadence.	<i>If we add a feature where the app includes special mobile-only discounts, it will be more appealing for users to register. So dev team, let's try this feature!</i>

Notice how the Burger King example tells a coherent story spanning the one- to three-week work on functionality (the Level 3 Bets) all the way up to the bets underpinning the connection between the North Star Metric and long-term business results (the Level 0 Bets).



COACH'S TIP

Try “Bets” instead of “Experiments”

I personally like the word experiment. It feels rigorous, scientific, and learning-focused. It feels...right, to me. But, over the years I've shifted my vocabulary to more often refer to bets, and less to experiments.

Here's why

As I worked with more companies and leaders, I started to notice something. Whenever I used the word “experiment,” I would see an executive's jaw tense. They'd nod, but you could sense confusion. “An experiment?” they thought (and sometimes even said aloud). “When will this team stop experimenting and get to work?” Or I would notice that whenever they wanted a team to do something, that same executive would co-opt my language and say something like, “Oh, it is just an experiment! Give it a try!”

I started to use the word “bet,” and noticed something very interesting. Executives, who understand concepts like risk, return, investment, and diversification, dropped their resistance. Bets make sense. Bets can be big or small. Bets can be risky or safe. Good bets can sometimes lose, and bad bets can sometimes win.

With bets, I discovered a language to tease out assumptions and beliefs in a way that was a lot less forced.

Tips on Using the North Star Framework with Related Topics

Perhaps you are already using related tools like OKRs, roadmaps, or feature prioritization formulas. You're probably wondering how to integrate the North Star framework with these tools. Does a North Star Metric and Inputs replace OKRs? Or should you change the way you think about prioritization, non-feature work, or even the design of your org chart?

You can integrate the North Star Framework with other techniques or structures that product teams commonly use:

- The North Star Framework and OKRs
- The North Star Framework and Roadmaps
- The North Star Framework and Prioritization
- The North Star Framework and “Non Feature Work”
- The North Star Framework and Organizational Design

The North Star Framework and OKRs

Many modern organizations use **OKRs** (Objectives and Key Results) to set priorities and monitor outcomes. In [the OKR framework](#), teams set **objectives**, and then define the **key results** that indicate progress towards achieving each objective. Managers measure the OKRs on a regular cadence to ensure the business is working on the right priorities, while tactics or interventions are up to individual contributors or teams.

TIPS FOR USING THE NORTH STAR WITH OKRS

- OKRs are usually point-in-time goals. Teams want to produce a result in a timeframe. The North Star Framework is less prescriptive about time. Be mindful of this.
- Try framing OKRs as the impact your Level 2 Bets will have on one or more Inputs.
- Be wary of aiming for a quarterly goal that no longer makes sense.
- Watch out for a team packing the quarter with deliverables instead of focusing on an outcome.
- Some teams find that linking their work to Inputs—and setting goals based on the expected impact of their work on Inputs—means that they can safely retire OKRs.

The North Star Framework and Roadmaps

There are a variety of approaches to **product roadmaps**, from declarations that you'll deliver specific features at specific dates to thematic roadmaps that broadly sequence categories of opportunities without specifying timeframes or actual functionality.

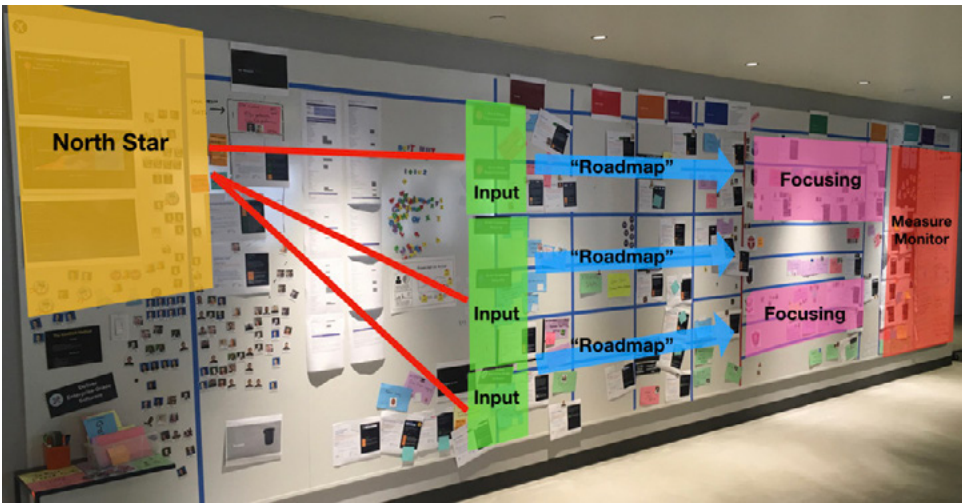
TIPS FOR USING THE NORTH STAR FRAMEWORK WITH ROADMAPS:

- In general, the North Star works best when integrated with theme-based roadmaps that account for uncertainty over time.
- A roadmap should explain how both in-progress and planned work connects with the North Star at a glance.
- When building a roadmap using the North Star, focus on prioritizing the opportunities most likely to drive Inputs.
- Be diligent about following up on completed roadmap items to see if they had the expected impact.
- Consider overlaying your North Star Framework on your roadmap, even conceptually.

Here, for example, is an actual physical “roadmap,” in the form of a kanban board, with a North Star and its Inputs as integral parts of the board design.



The board maps to the components of the North Star Framework as follows:



Keith Nottonson from Optimizely describes the power and purpose of this visualization:

“The benefits of a large physical information radiator have always felt obvious to me: visibility, transparency, and alignment on both the process and the work. It is one thing to argue over a line item in a spreadsheet, an issue in a ticketing system, or an update on a slide; it’s an entirely different matter to be confronted by all the work in flight in relation to each other as they navigate through the various stages of a system’s workflow.

The wall also helped us evolve our processes over time. It allowed us to move from focusing only on what was in development to an end-to-end customer kanban board.”

It can be hard to wean your organization off of prescriptive, timeline- and feature-based roadmaps. **Be patient and focus on impact.**

Try to link all of the “work” on your roadmap to your Inputs and North Star no matter what resolution it is (problem, solution, big bet, small bet). While it might be a tad demoralizing to do this with prescriptive, solution-centric projects, by establishing this connection, you are clarifying the impact you hope to generate with the project.

Rather than drafting requirement documents for items on your roadmap, **consider developing succinct one-pagers that make your bets explicit and transparent.** A roadmap of one-pagers is far more powerful than a roadmap of one-word project/feature names.

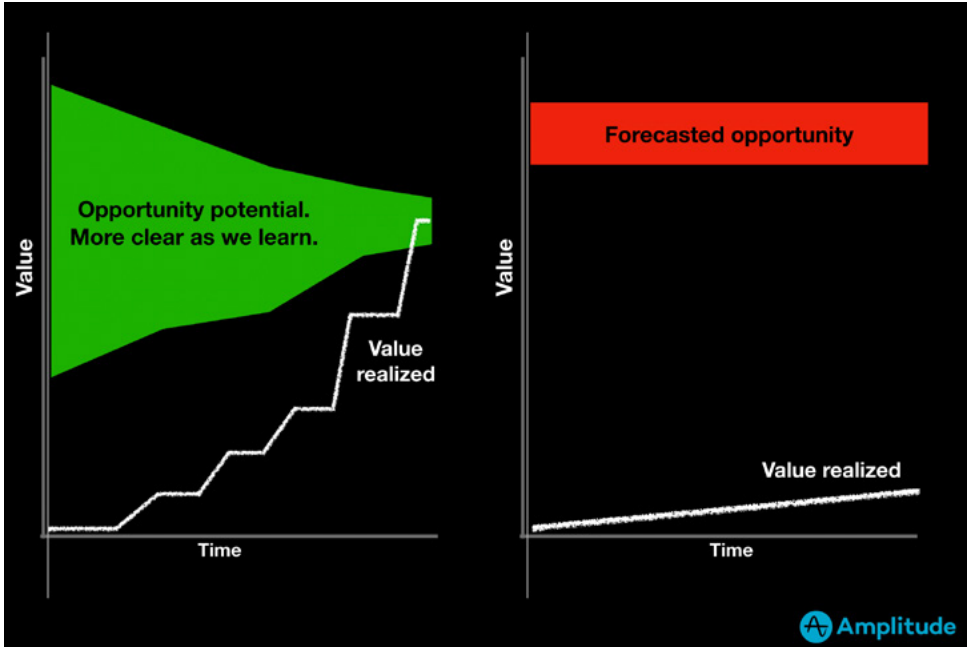
The North Star Framework and Prioritization

Prioritization is an important part of any product manager’s job. In fact, much of product management is making decisions about which of various options a team should work on and why. Prioritization is a complex topic, and treatises have been written about various models.

TIPS FOR PRIORITIZING WORK USING THE NORTH STAR FRAMEWORK:

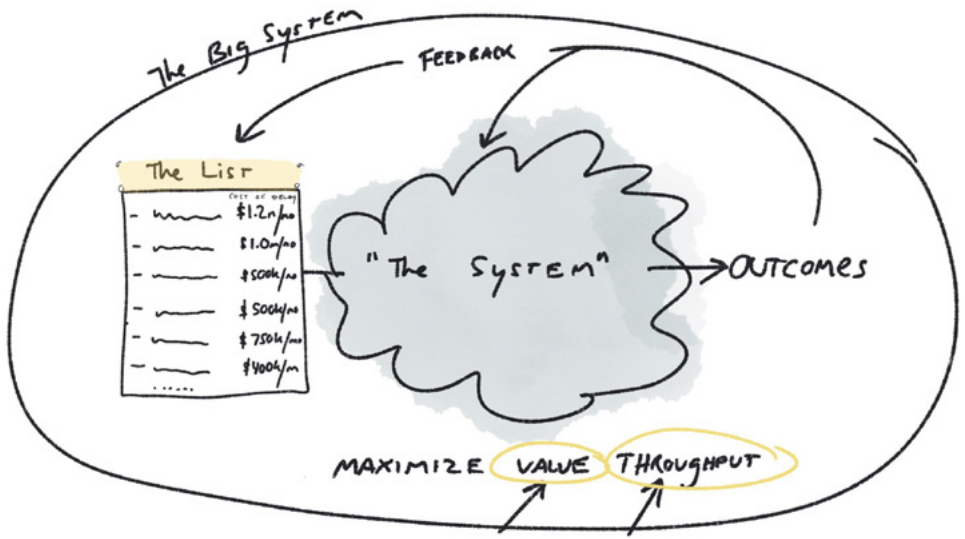
- When prioritizing, consider both the influence of the Input on the North Star and the **likelihood** of the opportunity to drive the Input.
- **A series of small bets** or experiments is preferable to one big bet or experiment.
- Prioritize based on **expected value** or influence, not to maximize the amount of work completed.
- Teams often obsess about duration estimates. Much more valuable—in most product-led situations—is to consider **forecasted value and experimentation** friendliness.
- Don’t be afraid to prioritize multiple experiments or bets against a **single high-value opportunity.**

- **Watch out for big batches** of work with infrequent opportunities to learn and pivot.
- Prioritize to work in ways that support the approach on the left versus the approach on the right:

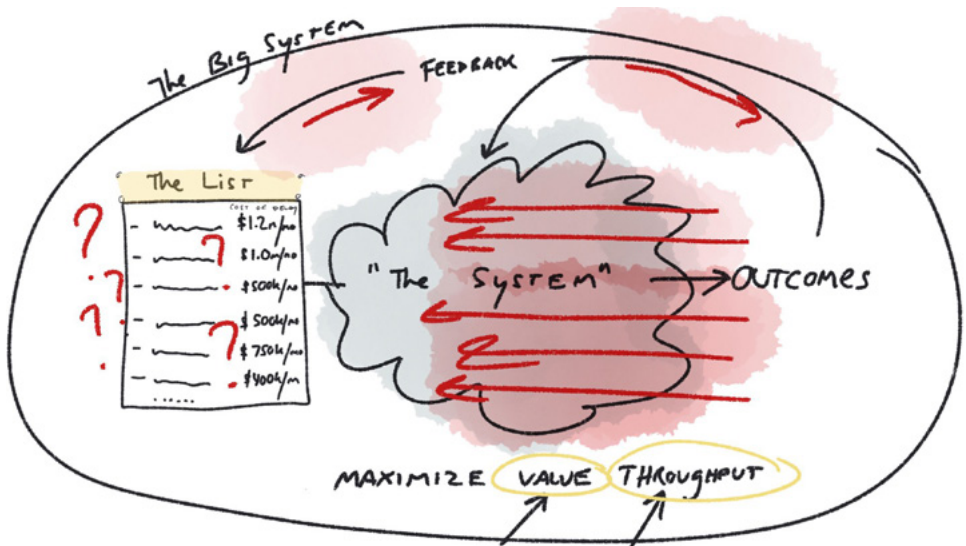


The North Star Framework and Non-Feature Work

One way to think of a product-led company is to imagine the whole company as a value creation system that meets the needs of everyone involved (customers, the team, the broader community, etc.).



The goal of such a system is sustainable value creation, which invariably will involve a lot of support systems. Without functioning support systems—the circulatory, nervous, and digestive systems of the company—you start to see drag on the value creation system, like this:



This is why **we often suggest that teams consider including a system health indicator Input in their North Star**. This Input can cover critical, non-feature factors that users might not directly experience but that indirectly affect the product’s overall quality and the ability of engineers and designers to work effectively. Examples of factors that can drive a health indicator Input include system uptime, cycle times, testing and deployment processes, up-to-date tooling, and even the time it takes for a new team member to get up-to-speed.

Monitoring and course-correcting based on this Input will ensure that the whole system is healthy and set up for long-term, sustainable growth.

Troy Magennis, product development measurement enthusiast, says, “Most important is that health is a balance. It is not just one thing, and you can’t just focus on one thing.” Troy describes six areas to consider when thinking about health indicators:

- Do the right stuff (Valuable)
- Do it predictably (Consistency)
- Do it right (Quality)
- Do it fast (Speed)
- Do lots (Quantity)
- Keep doing it (Sustainability)

Your North Star should already cover **Valuable**. An effective health-related Input would be a composite of metrics related to **Sustainability, Quality, and Consistency**. Though **Speed** and **Quantity** are not the goal (outcomes are the goal), flow metrics can be valuable early indicators of drag and health issues.

TIPS FOR MANAGING NON-FEATURE WORK WITH THE NORTH STAR FRAMEWORK:

- Think of your company as a **value-creation system**. Then identify the top handful of things impacting the flow of value-producing work through this system.
- If possible, visualize non-feature work as opportunities alongside the normal roadmap items. Include these opportunities in the roadmap.
- Consider including a system health indicator Input in your North Star Framework.
- Reframe technical debt as drag on value to emphasize how it limits impact and affects business results.

The North Star Framework and Organizational Design

We recommend that you don't overhaul your org chart when you get started with the North Star Framework, as you'll already have plenty to consider and manage. Once your North Star is performing well and producing a few months or quarters of learning and success, you can turn your attention to optimizing your org structure to get the most out of the North Star.

Tips for designing an organization around the North Star Framework:

- Consider letting a team or group of teams focus on a single Input for an extended period of time. Amplitude refers to this product team structure as pods.
- Organize to minimize handoffs. Start together whenever possible.
- Organize your teams around what is valuable. Resist letting your current organizational structure force decisions about value and priorities. Be cautious about organizing around features, workflows, touchpoints, technologies, actors, etc. that do not align with your North Star and Inputs.
- Remember that there is no optimal organizational structure for product development. As Ben Horowitz, cofounder and general partner at [Andreessen Horowitz](#), [writes](#) in *The Hard Thing About Hard Things*:

Building A Business When There Are No Easy Answers, “The first rule of organizational design is that all organizational designs are bad.”

Chapter in Review

- . A challenge for some teams is connecting the North Star Framework, including the metric and Inputs, to their models and methods for prioritizing daily work.
- . If you can already connect your work to your North Star relatively easily, by all means do so.
- . We like a model in which levels of bets connect a North Star to a board-like breakdown of priorities. Levels of bets enable a team to trace tasks occurring in short timeframes to much longer-term goals.
- . The North Star Framework can be integrated with other models of planning, prioritizing, and managing work, like OKRs and roadmaps.

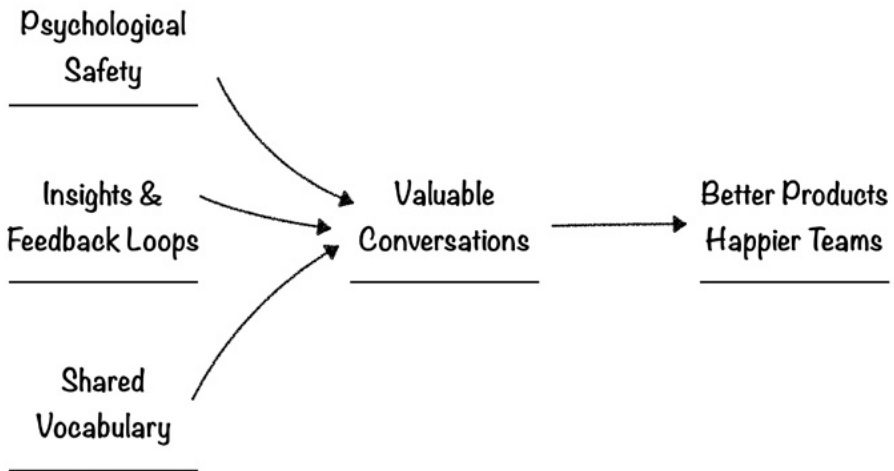
Conclusion

We (John and Jason) have seen the North Star Framework offer many benefits to teams and businesses: better alignment, clearer prioritization, and less wasted work.

What we like most about the North Star Framework, though, is the way it inspires valuable conversations. To identify, design, and implement their North Star, teams step away from screens, Jira tickets, and status updates, and they spend time deeply engaged with one another—sharing ideas and learning.

Yes, the framework and workshop are intentionally oversimplified. Yes, unpacking your product strategy is hard. And yes, you will leave the room with nagging disagreements. But through this work you'll have meaningful conversations: about beliefs and assumptions, strategy and value exchanges, users and customers, Inputs and outputs, leading and lagging, your game and your bets. In these conversations you'll discover what matters to teammates, customers, and business—and as a result, you'll build better products.

The quality of your conversations is the real secret to the North Star—the North Star of the North Star.



Think of all the decisions your team makes weekly. Hundreds? Thousands? Imagine improving those decisions—big and small—even incrementally. You’ll see better results for you, your team, your company, and your customers.

American cyclist Greg Lemond, two-time world champion and three-time Tour de France winner, famously remarked that, “Cycling never gets easier, you just go faster.” Think about this quote as it relates to product. We shouldn’t expect product work to get easier, but we can find ways to make it better, to focus on the meaningful, impactful hard work—the “true work.”

Recently, we spoke with a senior engineer who was frustrated. Her team was in the middle of quarterly planning, and her manager and the VP of Product had just spent their last meeting talking about empowerment, OKRs, and the importance of goal-setting. She described her frustration:

“It feels like they equate empowerment to just letting us do what we want, and then getting nervous—or angry even—when what we do isn’t what they would have done. That is not how I view real empowerment. We’re just spinning our wheels at the moment.”

She went on to describe her view of real empowerment as containing context, a well thought-out strategy, and no sugar-coating. She didn’t want work to be easier; rather, she wanted her work to have more impact. This is the perfect scenario for frameworks like the North Star Framework.

We arranged a short session with her, the VP of Product, the product manager on the team, a designer, and a data scientist from a different product within the company (a neutral third party can be a welcome addition). Within 30 minutes they were exploring some foundational company bets—things they all knew about but that they hadn’t really discussed.

It turned out that the VP of Product was a natural at this kind of strategy gymnastics, but had never really had the opportunity to share that skill. The data scientist talked them out of getting too theoretical (“As much as I want to dig into this...”). The designer challenged some assumptions about their chosen value exchanges (“We don’t know that, and need to do more research”). In 60 minutes, they had a couple of North Star Metric candidates on the table. We skipped around the workshop format—trying Inputs, tweaking the North Star Metric, arguing about “the game,” and tweaking the formula. They were on their way.

We checked in with the senior engineer a couple of months later. Things weren't perfect, but they were better. She didn't "feel like [the team] was making stuff up anymore." Though some features they shipped didn't have the intended impact, the team learned important insights about what customers valued, and the senior engineer shared that it "was pretty valuable information, because those were kind of sacred cows." She was starting to feel "real empowerment."

To reframe Lemond: Product work never gets easier, you'll just have more impact—and maybe a bit more sanity, flow, and satisfaction.

You can do this.

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About the Authors and Contributors

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Much of this playbook is drawn from the experience of Amplitude, a product analytics SaaS company. Some of the content originally appeared in whitepapers, presentations, and blog posts from Amplitude. Amplitude has worked with thousands of product teams and leaders, and we regularly conduct workshops on a variety of product topics, including the North Star Framework. We also use the North Star Framework ourselves.

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