EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Spine and Leaf

A Product Delivery Blueprint for the AI Era

Customer empathy is the foundation. Technology depth is the new ceiling.

THE SHIFT

The PM role was forged when high-fidelity artifacts were expensive. That constraint has lifted. Most organizations are using the new tools to write a faster PRD — running yesterday's process with today's tools. The methodology does not move. **The goal of this paper is to ask the better question: what is the best outcome a PM can bring to the table now that the cost curves have moved?** The answer proposed here is a Spine — the immutable customer narrative — and a set of Leaves — high-resolution artifacts each stakeholder consumes directly, without translation.

THE MODEL

SPINE	The immutable core narrative. Problem, user, success metrics, scope. Written from customer empathy. Two to four pages, plain language. Every Leaf must trace to it.
LEAVES	Five canonical artifacts the PM produces directly. **The Leaves are code — a change to the Spine propagates to every team's resolution.**

Leaf	For	Eliminates
Architecture	Architects, infra, security	Ambiguity about Build vs. Leverage; system-design loss from prose
Engineering	Frontend, design system	Wireframe-to-DOM loss; missing states (loading, empty, error)
Go-To-Market	Sales, exec, design partners	Strategy-to-pitch loss; abstract concept-to-business-value loss
Design	Designers, UX research	Static-to-living-interface loss; trust signal ambiguity
Compliance	QA, audit, support	Spec-to-test loss; ambiguity about what was actually committed

THE RHYTHM (TWO-WEEK CYCLE)

Day 0	PM produces Spine + first draft Leaves. Alignment cost paid up front.
Days 1–2	Single alignment session. Artifacts do the work; meeting confirms.
Days 3–8	Parallel execution: engineering, GTM, design partners — all start day three.
Days 9–12	Integration. Traceability matrix reconciles each Leaf against Spine.
Days 13–14	Ship. Same artifacts that aligned the team now align the customer.

WHY NOW

Empathy is the floor. A poorly understood user produces a hollow Spine — and the new tools amplify whatever truth or untruth the Spine encodes.

Depth is the ceiling. The Build vs. Leverage decision is a product decision. Depth is what makes a PM credible enough to propose it and disciplined enough to defend it.

Speed is the dividend. Alignment is paid in artifacts before the sprint, not in meetings during it. Two-week cycles deliver what four-week cycles used to.

ADOPT IT IN ONE CYCLE

- **Pick one in-flight project with a reasonably clear Spine.**
- **Write the Spine in plain language (2–4 pages). Solicit pushback. Freeze.**
- **Add the Engineering Leaf this sprint. A coded prototype, even rough.**
- **Add a second Leaf (GTM or Architecture) in cycle two. Compliance in cycle three.**

One day, AGI will do everything. Until that day arrives, we have to raise our baseline based on the ecosystem we have. Using the ecosystem without raising your baseline is a recipe for failure.

The wave is here. The methodology is the surfboard. *See companion white paper for the full argument.*