EP 14 - If A Triangle Were A Lens

🎙️ **www.ChrisKreuter.com/CDWI**

> *I'm a junior product designer for a consumer products company. This is my first job out of college and I've been happy here for over two years. But now we've got a new manager, who is pressuring us to rush our work out the door. I take pride in my work but this pressure is stressing me out to the point where I want to quit. What advice do you have on handling this situation?*

- My favorite framework for creating & delivering products & services is a triangle whose 3 points are:

  Fast

  Cheap

  Good
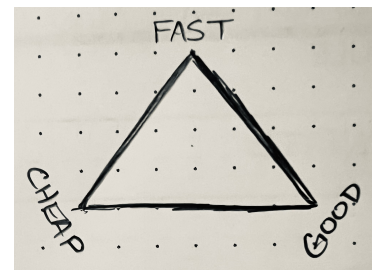
- For lots of things in life, especially product design, you normally get to control two, allowing the third run amok:

  - **Fast & Cheap:** Crank out cheap, low-quality products as fast as possible.

- - If you're designing products you'd find in an Oriental Trading catalog, this trade-off makes sense.
    - Many of the quick busy-work projects you might hire on a website like fiverr or mechanical turk fall into this pairing
  - **Fast & Good:** You're laying out the cash to ensure high-quality engineers, designers and manufacturers are focused on your project. You're making heavy investments in the equipment and systems to ensure the highest quality and repeatable, reliable performance despite the speed.
    - For products, think modern cell phones
    - For services, think emergency room medical staff (or 24 hr plumbing services)
  - **Cheap & Good:** These products and services are often slow-burns. The focus is on craftsmanship, the passion of those working on it.
    - A well-crafted novel perhaps? (chriskreuter.com) 😉
    - Wikipedia is a good example of a service that falls under this pairing

- Our asker a junior designer.
  - This means they're a cheaper option than more senior designers/managers in your company.
  - If pressuring is being placed directly on you instead of the entire team: This may make one of the points on the triangle obvious.
  - The rush to get it out the door is another.
  - So, the question then becomes: ***What kind of product are you designing?***
- Putting your production into its proper context can be hard to accept early on in your career.

- Depending on your product, you may have serious reservations about making tradeoffs in you design process.

- Realize that you're likely to never have a perfect situation or environment to do your best work.

- The triangle trade-off often exists - knowing this is vital to working <u>within</u> your constraints instead of <u>against</u> them.

- ***What does done look like on your current project?***

  - Are you putting make-up on a pig?

  - Are you polishing a cannonball?

  - Or are you producing something that could harm someone if it fails?

- In serious cases: It's important to try and present your concerns in terms relevant to your manager's position, not just yours:

  - Risk assessment

  - Customer specifications/requirements

  - Adherence to industry standards (for example: ISO, IEEE, UL certifications)

- Avoid being put in a position to fail.

- Or to become a scapegoat:

  - If your hurried project fails to sell or has a flaw, would it be easy for your manager to point their finger towards you, putting your job and/or reputation on the line?

  - If so - a solution will be documenting: Asking questions, getting sign-offs on the trade-offs.

  - You can do this innocently - using your junior level to your advantage: Simple e-mails under the guise of understanding, for example.

- Never compromise yourself. If you're asked to cross a line - refuse. No product or service is worth going against your principles. Or the law.

- What's the worst thing that can happen: They fire you?

  - At this point, the manager will need to provide justification to their bosses, you may or may not get to say your piece, then you're seeking a new job.

- There's plenty of jobs out there. This is easier when you're only 2 years out of school. Gaining experience across multiple types of organizations is a great strategy.

- You'll also be exposed to different company cultures - especially to their philosophies, policies & procedures related to the design & production process.

- You're going to have many more jobs and/or gigs in your career - go into each with your integrity intact and mind open to learn.

- Remember: *You are not the product*

  - It's the company's product.

  - Don't conflate your ego, or sense of self-worth with the decisions of a company.

  - But this isn't always the case: Be aware when a product you're designing or service you're providing will directly affect your reputation!

  - In these cases - which trade-offs matter the most *to your customer*?

    - Are they expecting a fast delivery?

    - Are they expecting high quality & reliability?

    - Are they expecting you to stick to a strict budget?

  - Being open with them about these trade-offs, or even the framework you're using can make a huge impact on ensuring a successful delivery to their expectations.

  - This same approach may also help our asker if they treat their manager as their customer.

- Consider that there may be scenarios at play that you're not aware of:

  1. The company may be facing financial pressures. Maybe they need products to sell quickly to generate profits, however small or short-term. Perhaps its to reassure investors, or satisfy an open contract nearing a deadline with late delivery penalties.

2. There may be pressure to be first to market. The strategy is to get a first generation product out in the world, despite its flaws. Then iterate a second edition or software updates to address market feedback.

3. Your manager may be motivated by personal benefits such as bonuses or commissions. These may be awarded for financial savings targets, or quantities of work produced by their department.

4. Your manager may recognize that you're polishing proverbial cannonballs, and forcing you to confront the trade-offs necessary to fit the type of products you're designing.

- Managers aren't always willing or able to tell you the complete reasoning behind their decisions.
  - This isn't to say you can't ask them:
    - They're likely to be intrigued that you care to ask
    - It shows you care and want to learn!
  - Recognize that management motivations are rarely sinister. These motivations may be in the best interests of the company & product!
  - Or they might have flaws in understanding. Perhaps they have blindspots on the design side: Are they a business expert who lacks the domain knowledge of electrical engineering? Pointing these out may change your situation & their perspective.
  - But realize that they may not have the permission or complete visibility to share with you the nuances driving the decision.

◯ **Episode 10 Quote:**

from Notes On A Nervous Planet by Matt Haig

> *Try to work, where possible, in a way that makes the world a little better.*

> *The world shapes us.*
> *Making the world better makes us better.*