Influence Your Stakeholders for Success

Stakeholders can derail projects and prevent change from happening. Learn how to engage them and garner their support.

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Today’s Environment
As most project leaders know, strong support from key project stakeholders can make or break project success – especially if the project has a broad impact across the organization. Understanding and managing stakeholders’ engagement and garnering their support is a must-do for project leaders.

Point B’s Perspective
An effective way to visualize how project stakeholders will impact your project is to map them on a grid that indicates their importance to project success and their level of support for the change the project will produce.

Try to move and keep key stakeholders in the upper right-hand quadrant, by making sure they see how project benefits align to their strategic or department goals.

Perform a stakeholder analysis. The purpose of stakeholder analysis is to capture important stakeholder information in a way that allows team members to structure stakeholder engagement and target communication strategies to each one’s position and interests. This information can then be consolidated to identify project impacts and minimize the risks of developing conflicting communication strategies. The process consists of developing a simple 2x2 grid and following these four simple steps:

1. Define your stakeholder groups.
2. Assess each stakeholder group along the following two dimensions – level of importance to project success and current level of support for change.
3. Place each stakeholder group on a 2x2 grid.
4. Develop strategies to move the most important stakeholders into the upper-right quadrant where they will become visible advocates of the project.
Move key stakeholders to the upper right quadrant. Prove that stakeholder priorities and business goals align with the benefits the project will deliver. If stakeholders can envision personal or departmental success because of your project, then they will become an advocate. Show them an exciting and successful vision of the future. Show them a simple roadmap to that future. Help stakeholders see themselves in a successful outcome. A common pitfall is to present a vision that’s too complicated or vague to be communicated in five minutes. Simplicity and clarity are essential. For those who remain neutral about the project, ask about the risk of inaction. Often, helping stakeholders see that the risk of the status quo outweighs the risk of change will help garner support.

Determine the level of resistance amongst the stakeholders. Stakeholders will fall into three categories: those who are advocates for your project, those who are neutral, and those who are detractors. Influential stakeholders who are detractors—who do not support the project or actively work against your efforts—may ultimately derail the project. Strive to change detractors into neutral supporters, by working hard to understand their point of view. In some cases, detractors will not change no matter what strategy you invoke. Rather than invest additional effort in this group, focus instead on increasing the number of influential, supportive stakeholders. Numbers matter.

Develop a coalition of supportive stakeholders. For small as well as large initiatives, develop a coalition of influential stakeholders who are visible advocates for the project. You can identify visible advocates by the behaviors they exhibit. Supportive stakeholders use their organizational power to legitimize the change and ensure it takes place. They assign people the time and resources to make the change happen. They hold meetings to openly discuss concerns, solve problems, and build commitment. They use multiple forms of communication to maximize ownership of the change. They continue to pursue goals constantly, even under stress and over long periods of time. They sustain their commitment by attending presentations, reviewing documents personally, and freeing time in their schedules to support the ongoing effort.

Maintain stakeholder support. Plan for and create short-term wins. There’s nothing more powerful than seeing success repeatedly unfold. Slide presentations may be effective early on, but after a while, stakeholders will lose interest if there is nothing new to show. Leveraging success builds acceptance and momentum. Try to hold executive reviews at least every eight weeks to demonstrate tangible progress. Early in the project, focus on deliverable production and milestone achievement; these will demonstrate that the team has a credible plan. Later on, focus the team on producing meaningful prototypes or work products that advance the project. Be careful, however, not to declare victory too soon. Other common pitfalls include leaving short-term successes up to chance, and, for large projects, failing to score meaningful successes within the first year or two.

The Bottom Line
Influential stakeholders who are detractors—who do not support the project or actively work against your efforts—may ultimately derail your project. By understanding where your stakeholders fall in the organization, you can take steps to win their support. With it, you’ll most likely enjoy a successful project outcome.