

Series on Effective Stakeholder Engagement¹

Assess Your Stakeholders' Attitudes

By Dr. Lynda Bourne

Some stakeholders will love your project and be happy to provide the support you need, others will hate it and many will simply ignore it. Successful project delivery requires three key steps; for all of the 'important stakeholders'², you need to:

1. Assess their current attitude towards the work.
2. Determine a realistically desirable attitude to expect of the stakeholder that will optimise the chance of success.
3. Work out what needs to be done to shift stakeholders from their current state to the desired state.

Attitudes can range from actively supportive of the work through to active opposition to the work, and the stakeholder may be willing to engage in communication with you (even if they hate the work) or refuse to communicate (even if they support the work).

Both measures are important; to change a stakeholder's attitude, you first need to be able to communicate with them! In fact, the only ethical tool you have to support or change stakeholder's attitude towards the work is various forms of communication. Even if you only want to maintain a stakeholder's current level of support communication is essential to monitor the situation and avoid nasty surprises.

The Stakeholder Circle methodology separates this critical assessment of 'attitude' from the prioritisation of stakeholders based on power, urgency and proximity to deal with the full spectrum of attitudes a typical project is confronted with.

The first step in the **ESEI** approach to assessing attitudes involves identifying the level of receptiveness and support of each stakeholder. The ranges are:

- Receptiveness:
 - 1 = Completely Uninterested - Refuses to accept reports
 - 2 = Not Interested - On mail list but unlikely to read reports
 - 3 = Neutral - Receives Reports
 - 4 = Medium - Indirect personal access

¹ This series of articles on effective stakeholder engagement is by Lynda Bourne, PhD, Managing Director of Stakeholder Pty Ltd (Australia) and author of the books *Stakeholder Relationship Management* and *Advising Upwards*, both published by Gower (UK). Dr. Bourne is one of the world's leading authorities on program/project stakeholder relations. Her author profile can be found at the end of this article.

² Based on your stakeholder prioritisation discussed in:
<http://pmworldlibrary.net/article/stakeholder-identification-and-prioritization/>

5 = High - Direct personal contacts

- Support:
 - 1 = Active Opposition
 - 2 = Passive opposition
 - 3 = Neutral
 - 4 = Passive support
 - 5 = Active support

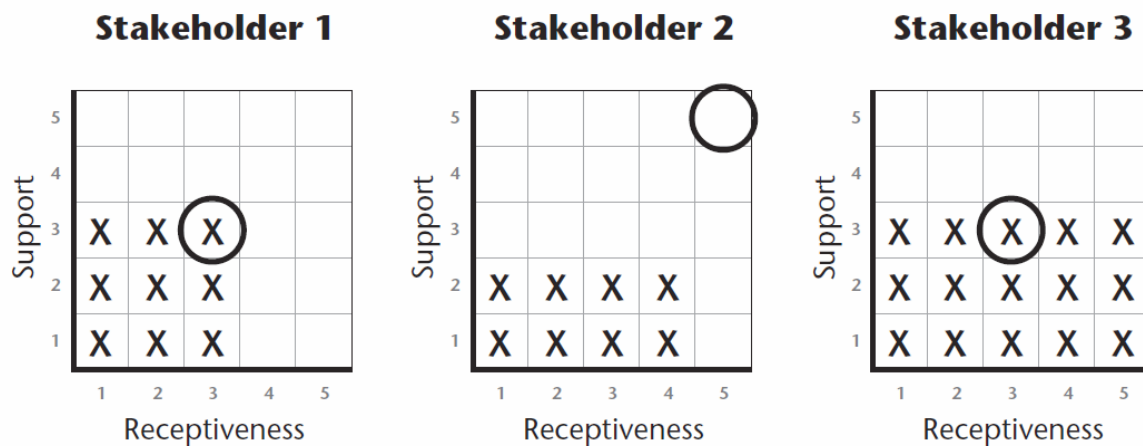
One way to make the assessment process relatively objective is to identify a person who is 'just within' each of the categories (eg someone who is just in the 'Passive support' category) then by comparing the level of support of another stakeholder to the 'minimum benchmark' stakeholder it is easier to determine if the level of support is about the same or better in which case the stakeholder will score a 4 (or a 5 if they are deemed equal or more supportive than the next categories benchmark). If the level of support is lower, the stakeholder would score a 3 or lower. The critical outcome from this process is not to rank stakeholders against some abstract benchmark, rather to build a comparative order so that an optimum communications plan can be developed.

The current levels of support and receptiveness for the stakeholder are shown in a 5 x 5 matrix, the S/H Profile.

The next assessment is to determine a 'realistic target' for each stakeholder; this may be equal to, or lower than the current assessment, slightly better or significantly better than the current situation.

Having assessed the stakeholder's current level of engagement, the target level of engagement and the difference between the two, a communication plan needs to be developed to enhance or maintain each key stakeholder's levels of receptiveness and supportiveness. This planning process is needed for each of the important stakeholders 'one-size does not fit all'! For example, if an important stakeholder is both actively opposed and not interested in information about the project, he or she will need a different engagement approach compared to a stakeholder who is highly supportive and encourages the personal delivery of messages.

The figure below illustrates three stakeholder engagement levels indicating the baseline engagement level 'X', and the target level planned at a future time 'O'.



From this information you can start to plan your communication strategy:

- Stakeholder 1 needs a maintenance strategy to keep the current status in place, possibly just forwarding routine reports.
- Stakeholder 2 may need a 'heroic' communication effort to build the level of support needed, particularly if the person is important.
- Stakeholder 3 is a different challenge - do you scale back the communication effort and risk alienating the person or do you 'play safe' and keep communicating at the level wanted by the stakeholder?

Important stakeholders whose attitude is less supportive than needed require carefully directed communication. Others may simply require routine engagement through more general 'PR', or simple reporting (the process of stakeholder engagement will be discussed later in this series).

If this all sounds like hard work it is! But it's far less work than struggling to revive a failed project. This theme is central to my new book: ***Making Projects Work, Effective stakeholder and communication management***³. The underlying theme of both the book and the **ESEI** approach to stakeholder engagement is the proposition that the cheapest and easiest way to achieve a successful outcome is to invest the effort needed to obtain the support you require from your stakeholder community. If you do not, the same stakeholders will help you fail.

³ See: <http://www.amazon.com/Making-Projects-Work-Stakeholder-Communication/dp/1482206668>

About the Author



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Dr. Lynda Bourne is Managing Director of Stakeholder Management Pty Ltd – an Australian based company with partners in South America and Europe. Through this global network she works with organisations to manage change through managing the relationships essential for successful delivery of organisational outcomes. Lynda was the first graduate of the RMIT University, Doctor of Project Management course, where her research was focussed on tools and techniques for more effective stakeholder engagement. She has been recognised in the field of project management through her work on development of project and program management standards. She was also included in PMI's list of 50 most influential women in PM.

She is a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management (AIM) and a Fellow of the Australian Computer Society (ACS). She is a recognized international speaker and seminar leader on the topic of stakeholder management, the Stakeholder Circle® visualization tool, and building credibility and reputation for more effective communication. She has extensive experience as a Senior Project Manager and Project Director specializing in delivery of information technology and other business-related projects within the telecommunications sector, working as a Senior IT Project Management Consultant with various telecommunications companies in Australia and South East Asia (primarily in Malaysia) including senior roles with Optus and Telstra.

Dr Bourne's publications include: [Stakeholder Relationship Management](#), now in 2nd edition, published in 2009, [Advising Upwards](#) published in 2011, and [Making Projects Work](#), published in 2015. She has also contributed to books on stakeholder engagement, and has published papers in many academic and professional journals and is blogger for PMI's *Voices on Project Management*.

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