

Series on Effective Stakeholder Engagement¹

Communicating for Effect

By Dr. Lynda Bourne

There is no point in communicating with anyone if you do not want an effect; you are wasting their time and yours! Communication is the way we influence other people's thoughts and actions, therefore every communication should be focused on achieving a desired effect on the person's attitude or behaviour. The effect may be:

- To prevent any deterioration in a currently satisfactory attitude;
- To improve a currently unsatisfactory attitude;
- To stop or reduce damaging or negative actions or behaviours;
- To ensure or encourage supportive actions or behaviours.

The challenge is knowing which effect you need to create, and then based on the priority of the stakeholder and the importance of the change (from the perspective of both timing and significance) choosing the optimum communication approach.

In earlier articles I've discussed the relationship between *stakeholder perceptions and project success*² and the *three types of stakeholder communication*³. Project Relations (PR) and 'reports' cover off the needs of most of the stakeholders who are *not critical at this time*, with minimum effort. This article is focused on the 'directed communication' needed to change the attitude or behaviour of the small group of critical stakeholders who need to be doing something differently to support the successful delivery of your project.

Each directed communication is focused on one stakeholder to achieve a desired change in their attitude, behaviour, or both. Maybe a functional manager needs to stop obstructing your project and actively support the loan of some key resources for critical work, or the sponsor needs to approve some additional funding.

The first step in this process is defining precisely what you need from the stakeholder. You also need to prioritise these communications so you focus most of your effort on the most important changes you need *at this time*⁴.

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 See: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/ESEI-03-Stakeholders_and_Risk.pdf

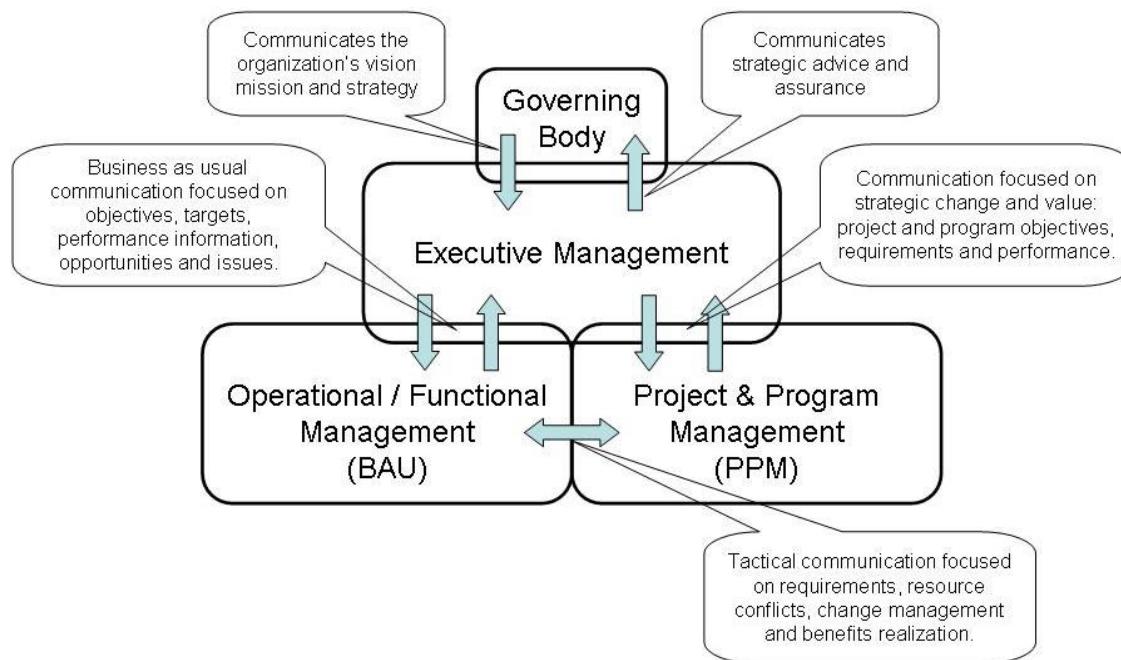
³ See: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/ESEI-08-three-types-of-communication.pdf

⁴ The **Stakeholder Circle**® methodology helps determine who is important 'at this time', see: <http://www.stakeholdermapping.com/stakeholder-circle-methodology/>

The next step is to describe and understand the elements of the stakeholder's uniqueness; national, professional and generational culture traits; as well as gender, personality and 'their reality'. This information feeds into the next stage of planning the communication⁵.

When planning the communication its important to remember different people literally see the organisation, and your work, in completely different ways! An effective communication frames at the information being exchanged from the perspective of the receiver and focuses on the aspects that are important to them. The diagram below is a starting point.

Suppose you want to spend additional budget on a technically superior storage device for well supported technical reasons. The expenditure may be justified, but if you need to persuade various managers to support the proposal talking about the 'technical superiority' in terms of reliability being increased from a 99.85% to 99.89% or read time reduced by 5 nanoseconds per gigabit won't achieve it for you.



Depending on who you are communicating with, you need to explain the benefit in their terms:

- Operational managers may be influenced by improved efficiency and 'a better experience' for their staff making it easier to realise benefits;
- Executive managers by lifecycle costing information and operational risk reduction;
- The Board of Directors by the overall cost effectiveness and positioning the organisation as a 'market leader'.

What is likely to work depends very much on the nature of the individual, and importantly, getting their attention! To be successful in attracting the attention of busy executives, you

⁵ See: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/ESEI-09-communication-planning.pdf

need to create a 30-second 'wake-up call' that will cut through the thousands of other messages circulating in your organisation to get the executives attention. You cannot communicate unless you get the other person's attention first; so your 'call' must persuade the person that the rest of the information is also of value to them. Only after you have their attention will your more complex messages be heard and possibly acted upon.

The solution is in two parts 'What's In It For Me' (WIFM) and appealing to a person's emotions. WIFM appeals directly to the attention and decision-making functions of the human brain. The amygdale, a part of the brain, rules much of our actions and behaviour. It determines in a fraction of a second what we pay attention to. It will pay no attention at all unless it can immediately see WIFM.

In addition, your 30-second 'wake-up call' needs to be not only direct and simple but also it must appeal to the person's emotions. Pleasure and fear are equally effective emotions, so the call should either worry the executive or make him or her feel good.

Finally, the 'wake-up call' cannot focus on a third party, such as you or your project. The amygdale is expert at screening everything that doesn't directly interest it, including things that are abstract, complex or about someone else. Uninteresting or confusing messages are rejected in the blink of an eye, before the rational and analytical areas of the brain have a chance to begin the thinking process.

Once you know what you want and understand the best approaches to use to engage the person, you need to plan the communication strategy by designing carefully targeted information exchanges. Strategies for achieving this can range from casual coffee meetings, to formal presentations using a range of different media and messengers. Some stakeholders you can approach directly, others need to be influenced through your network of contacts. Any **organisational currency**⁶ you or your team have accrued can be highly beneficial, but needs to be spent carefully.

Then you have to implement the plan and actually communicate!

The final step in the process is to regularly assess the effectiveness of the communication and adjust the plan as necessary to ensure that the stakeholder becomes appropriately engaged in supporting the project's objectives.

This process may sound like hard work (and it is) but it is far better to invest in effective stakeholder engagement and as a consequence access the support and resources needed to make your project successful, than to under invest and fail because you do not have the support and resources needed for success. This is the key message in my latest book, **Making Projects Work: Effective Stakeholder and Communication Management**⁷. You only ever get one chance to make a project successful!

⁶ For more on **organisational currency** see:

http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1025_Influence_without_authority.pdf

⁷ To buy the book see: <http://www.crcpress.com/product/isbn/9781482206661>

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 focused 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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To see previous articles in this series by Lynda Bourne, visit her author showcase in the PM World Library at <http://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/dr-lynda-bourne/>