

Practical Stakeholder Engagement



As we all know the problem with good practice is it slowly slips away as we respond to time pressures and expediency and bad habits take root. We know what's supposed to be done but settle for a comfortable second best until it's too late. However, it is never too late to refocus on implementing basic good practice in all areas of project management, including stakeholder engagement.

Four of the basic 'good practices' that help you engage with your team and other stakeholders are:

1. Listen well and respond promptly

This is the first lesson in stakeholder engagement for a project manager dealing with demanding and influential stakeholders: listen well¹, then respond promptly to stakeholder requests, moderated as appropriate based on your level of need and the stakeholder's priority. Responding promptly to a request shows you respect the person making the request; but responding does not mean 'agreeing' or 'dropping everything else'. An appropriate response may be to say 'no' or to schedule an action at an appropriate future date.

2. Connect with others who share your goals

Stakeholder engagement is required when you cannot achieve your goals alone, particularly goals that you share with others. You cannot achieve these goals without ongoing, effective stakeholder dialogue. This includes connecting with your team, networking with your peers and building 'organizational currency' for use in the future when you need to influence others².

3. Commit to consultation before decision making

Don't try and engineer in advance the outcomes of stakeholder dialogue. An open discussion, without prejudicing any of the outcomes in advance, almost always results in a better decision. If stakeholders think you are just trying to persuade them to accept an outcome that is already set in stone, they will turn off and become cynical³. However, if you've already made a decision respect your team and pass on the information, don't pretend to consult.

4. Keep the focus on common goals

In project management this is easy - a successful project outcome benefits everyone. Project managers sometimes fear that stakeholder engagement will force them into doing things they may not want to do. This is unlikely to happen if you focus your communication and engagement activities on the common goals

¹ For more on *effective listening* see:

https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf

² For more on *organisational currency* see:

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

³ For more on *decision making* see:

https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf

you share with your stakeholders⁴. The dialogue then becomes a discussion about options for achieving shared goals, not a series of demands by either party.

None of this is 'rocket science', but achieving an effective engagement with your stakeholders, leading to a constructive dialogue that helps create project success does need planning, processes and time. It's all too easy with all of the other pressures to see these simple steps as 'low priority' activities and ignore your stakeholder community until it's too late and you have a major crisis on your hands – This is the year you move beyond crisis management⁵.

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⁴ For more on the **relationship between deliverables and goals** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1042_Outputs_Outcomes_Benefits.pdf

⁵ See **Stakeholders - from confrontation to engagement**:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1040_Stakeholders_confrontation_to_engagement.pdf