Stakeholder Management Pty Ltd

ADVISING UPWARDS
HELPING YOUR MANAGERS HELP YOU

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Introduction

Perceptions of success or failure are heavily influenced by the effectiveness of an activity's communications, and relationships, with its stakeholder community. Studies have consistently shown a critical factor in creating successful outcomes is the active support of senior stakeholders, particularly the sponsor. Successful managers understand this and are willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure that their senior stakeholders understand the project's needs and fulfil their support roles. This requires the manager to be skilful at *advising upwards*, using effective stakeholder management techniques to engage the support of senior executives and to manage their expectations.

Expectations are not 'fixed'; effective communication, containing advice that is accepted and acted upon, helps make expectations realistic and achievable, as well as helping gather the support required for success. Crafting this advice to senior management to make good decisions and achieve the required outcomes is as much an art as a science. Communicating for effect requires a clear understanding of the objective of the communication and the skills to create messages that are focused on the 'right' people, at the 'right' time and carry the 'right' information in the 'right' format.

The main point of this paper is that being conscious of the information needs of senior executives will build the essential relationships, through recognising its mutual foundation– what the activity needs and what the stakeholder expects. The paper is organised as follows: firstly a discussion of the dimensions of success, from the perceptive of both the economic value - return on investment (ROI) – and stakeholder *perception* of success based on expectations understood and managed. The second section defines stakeholder engagement within the framework of the ***Stakeholder** Circle* methodology and in particular *upwards,* senior stakeholders whose support is essential for success and whose perceptions will define success or failure in their own terms based on whether they believe their expectations have been met. The third section discusses the elements that will ensure greater chances of successful engagement of these stakeholders, through building credibility and developing robust relationships, and through ensuring that senior managers have access to the information they need to fulfil their responsibilities and build their own reputation and credibility.

Definition of Success

Understanding the dimensions of success

There *should* be no need to define what success means: theoretically it is already done before the work is approved and funded. The organisation *should* have defined success through its business strategies, and through the strategic objectives that result from them. The project or other activity *should* have defined as part of the project charter or scope statement not only the objectives of the work but also the critical success factors – 'what success looks like'. However, at all levels of an organisation success is poorly understood, or only understood from the perspective of the 'iron triangle' –on time, within budget, to agreed scope and quality. While it is important to meet these requirements, additional criteria must be considered when seeking success from the standpoint of an organisation's senior stakeholders.

Success is defined in www.dictionary.com as

- favourable or prosperous termination of attempts or endeavours,
- attainment of wealth, position, honours,
- successful performance or achievement,
- a person or thing that is successful.

Success Criteria is defined as: *A definition in measurable terms of what must be done for the project to be acceptable to the client, stakeholders and end-users who will be affected by the project* (Office of Government Commerce UK 2009). This definition recognizes that 'what success means' may be

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different for each stakeholder depending on their needs and expectations of the outcome of the work. Exhibit 1 shows a view of success for an organisation's activities that recognises the diversity of stakeholders and their view of the value of that activity (Bourne 2009). In this view success requires attention to <u>all</u> of the following:

- Alignment of the activity to the organisation's strategic, operational or tactical objectives (*delivery of value*);
- Understanding and managing the expectations of stakeholders, and fulfilling these managed expectations (*managing relationships*);
- Appropriate, timely and consistent involvement by users and managers (*managing relationships*);
- Timely (fearless) management of risk (*managing risk*).

Delivery of Value	**Managing Risk**	**Managing Relationships**
Appropriate and consistent use of management tools, processes and methodologies *Requires commitment of team members, and encouragement of managers, to use tools, processes and methodologies*	Identification and management of risk *People account for a large proportion of risk:* • *Not delivering as committed* • *Not supporting work and outcomes consistently* • *Focus elsewhere (personal career, other work)* • *Not interested*	Managing the expectations of stakeholders *Expectations not met, or perceptions of failure that will affect how stakeholders view the work or its outcomes. Stakeholders may not continue to support work that they perceive is not achieving to their expectations.*
Alignment of the outcomes of the activity to organisation strategy *A governance body of senior management should be responsible for decisions on which work should be funded and resourced.* *The governance body also depends on advice regarding the work and whether it continues to deliver to the organisation's business requirements.*	Development of strategies for managing in environments of uncertainty *Strategies will include regular progress reports on:* • *Tactical delivery of value (time, cost, scope)* • *Delivering business strategy* • *Procurement strategies to ensure sustainable mix of risk and cost sharing with suppliers, for long term relationships*	Appropriate, timely and consistent involvement by users and managers *Research has identified that a primary cause of failure is lack of appropriate involvement or removal of support by those who are impacted by, or can impact the work or its outcomes: the <u>stakeholder</u>.*
Appropriate skills and knowledge	Appropriate skills and knowledge	Appropriate skills and knowledge

Exhibit 1 – How elements of success merge

Exhibit 2 shows this view and the importance of information in every aspect of success defined in this way.

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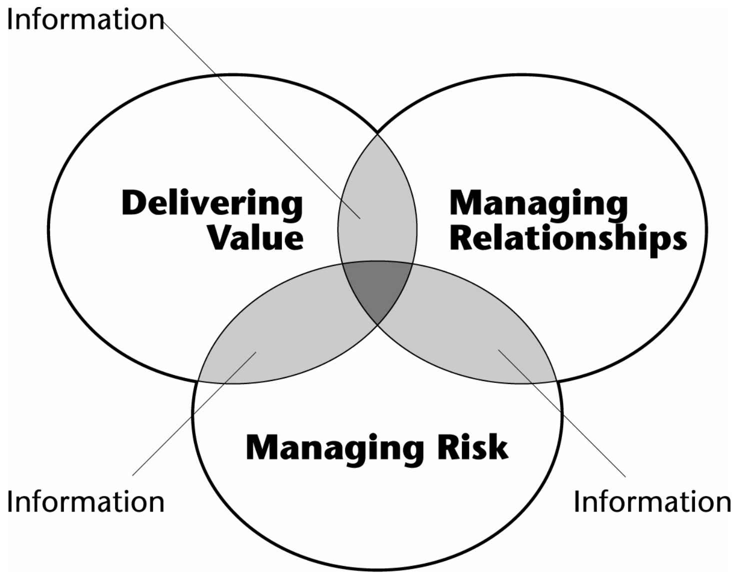

Exhibit 2 - A balanced view of success: information is the key

In other words, successful management and delivery of an organisation's activities depends on balancing the conflicting requirements of:

- Managing within the constraints of time, cost and quality;
- Meeting the expectations of important stakeholders.

The key is in the information that is produced and provided to stakeholders, in the format and content that most effectively meets the needs and preferences of important stakeholders: the *right information* provided in the *right way* at the *right time*.

The importance of communication

Communication is the provision of information. Communication is necessary for building and maintaining any relationship, family, friendships or work relationships. There is no other tool for building and maintaining relationships. he objective is to meet stakeholders' expectations and to ensure that they perceive the work to be successful. The important aspect of communication for success is that it must provide each important stakeholder with the information to ensure that the (personal or organisational) value they expect from the work is being achieved.

Value

In the corporate world tangible 'value' is known and understood in financial balance sheets and often focused on 'shareholder value'. The intangible definitions of 'value' are less easy to measure. It is about the human element – stakeholders such as the customer, employees, the public, users of a product. Most organisational reporting will be focused on the tangibles – financial elements that can be measured. Failure to consider how other stakeholders perceive organisation value, and add organisation value, is failure of the organisation to be as effective as it can be (Hamel and Prahalad 1994). An organisation's assets and structures – tangible and intangible – are the result of human actions (Sveiby 1997). Organisations all depend ultimately on people for their continued existence, whether the efforts are directed towards maintaining and building the organisation structurally, or working to create relationships within the organisation or external to the organisation. Therefore the total market value of an organisation is the total of tangibles (measureable assets) AND the assets related to human competences, which can be knowledge, skills, experience, social networks (Sveiby 1997).

From these definitions two parts of the discussion are in place – communication with stakeholders (information) is essential to success as is ensuring that each important stakeholder perceives that he or she is receiving the value they expect (expectations) from the outcomes of the work. If a stakeholder perceives value he or she will be inclined to be more supportive than if the outcome is not successful, according to his or her unique understanding of 'what success means'. The next part of this paper describes a structured methodology to assist teams to understand who the important stakeholders are and what their expectations, and therefore, information needs are.

Stakeholder Relationship Management

Stakeholder relationship management and its contribution to organisational value – 'why people matter'

> "*Many consumers and investors as well as a growing number of business leaders have added their voices to those urging corporations to remember their obligations to their employees, their communities and the environment even as they pursue profits for shareholders… corporations do not operate in a universe composed solely of shareholders. They exist in a larger political and social entities and are subject to pressures for other members of those networks…"*(Martin 2002).

If organisations must focus on achieving value beyond 'shareholder value' how might they go about doing this? Firstly organisations must identify who their stakeholders are – the 'right' stakeholders - and then work to develop robust relationships with this stakeholder community. This relationship will only be effective and sustainable through a structured and consistent approach based on the information needs of the project and the stakeholder.

Stakeholder Management Methodology

The ***Stakeholder** Circle*® methodology is examined in detail elsewhere (Bourne 2009): for this paper it is sufficient to describe the five steps which guide the team through the essential activities to identify important stakeholders for any time in the lifecycle of the work to be done, and develop the most appropriate communication strategies for engaging these stakeholders. The five steps are:

- *Step 1 – identify* all stakeholders and document their expectations;
- *Step 2 – prioritise*;
- *Step 3 – visualise:* map the current stakeholder community, showing each stakeholder's relative importance, power and influence;
- *Step 4 – engage* through understanding each stakeholder's attitude to the activity and develop targeted communication;
- *Step 5 – monitor* the effectiveness of this communication.

Stakeholders' Influence

The methodology categorises stakeholders according to *directions of influence*; how they may influence the work or its outcomes, or be influenced by the work or its outcomes. These directions are: *upwards* (senior managers), *downwards* (the team), *sidewards* (peers of the team's manager) and *outwards* (outside the activity). Managing the expectations and gaining the support of each type of stakeholder depends on understanding how best to manage the relationships described by these categories.

Managing *upwards* is about developing and maintaining robust relationships with those senior managers whose support is vital to sustain organisational commitment to the activity. Managing *downwards* is about managing the team (often overlooked by organisational leadership). *Sidewards* refers to the peers of the manager. It defines communication approaches to ensure collaboration rather than competition. Managing *outwards* involves considering the needs and impacts of a large group of stakeholders external to the activity, and often external to the organisation. This group includes a diverse group ranging from governments to voters, and clients or customers to suppliers. Each of these *outwards* stakeholder groups will have different requirements of the work or its outcomes. Exhibit 3 describes the network of stakeholder influence – *directions of influence*.

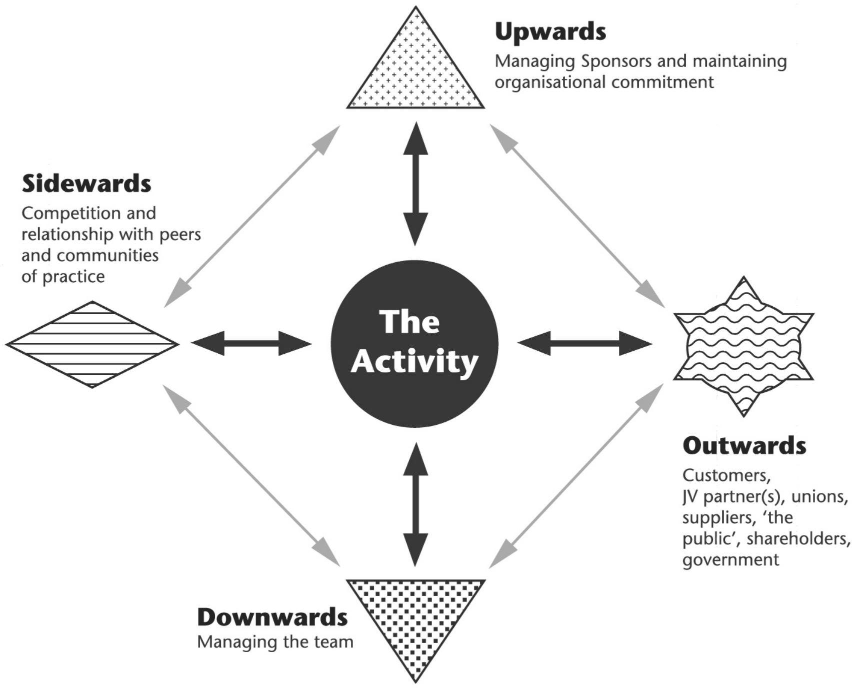

Exhibit 3 – *Directions of Influence*

While all stakeholders identified in this methodology are important, the focus of this paper will be on those *upwards* stakeholders who represent the organisation's leadership team and its commitment to the outcomes of the activity.

Managing (or advising) upwards

Upwards stakeholders may still consider that success is 'on time, on budget and delivering the specified scope' (the *iron triangle* of the project environment) and that the team must deliver to these criteria (Meredith and Mantel Jr 2000). However, the reality is that senior management stakeholders, particularly the sponsor, must play a far more active and overtly supportive role to ensure a successful outcome (Englund and Bocero 2006). It is part of the manager's role to not only recognise this principle, but also to do whatever is necessary to ensure that senior stakeholders understand and fulfil the requirements of the sponsor role (Thomas, Delisle and Jugdev 2002). This is about creativity in relationship management (Goldsmith 2007).

The importance of an effective sponsor

Studies have consistently shown (Englund and Bocero 2006; Crawford and Brent 2008), that the active support of stakeholders from the senior leadership team, particularly the sponsor, is a critical factor in creating successful outcomes for organisational activities. This requires the manager to build and maintain robust relationships, and focus on engaging the support of executives through targeted communication based on managing their expectations (Oschadleus 2004; Bourne 2010). Effective communication helps change perceptions and helps adjust expectations to make them more realistic and achievable (Carlone and Hill 2008), as well as helping to acquire the ongoing support necessary for successful outcomes (Quirke 2009).

The role of the sponsor is seen to be vital to success (Englund and Bocero 2011 (in press)) even though the roles and responsibilities are yet to be clearly defined or agreed. *Sponsor* is defined in the PMBOK as providing the financial resources for the project (Project Management Institute 2008). The Office of Government Commerce (OGC) defines the sponsor role as the interface between ownership and delivery. Characteristics of this role (Office of Government Commerce UK 2008) are:

- Adequate knowledge and information about the business and the work of the activity or its outcomes to be able to make informed decisions;
- Ability to network effectively, influence people, and build and maintain robust relationships with stakeholders within and outside the activity.

There is agreement that the support of the organisation's executive management is essential to success, yet stories of the 'accidental sponsor' abound (Englund and Bocero 2011 (in press)). The *sponsor* roles and responsibilities may be perceived as onerous or time-consuming if the individual designated as sponsor does not understand the objectives of the activity, or the role, or is not interested in doing so. Since it is such a vital role to organisational success and is in many ways the key project leadership role it is essential that organisations develop a 'sponsor culture' (Englund and Bocero 2007).

The 'zone' and how to operate within it

The nature of an organisation's work often triggers change, and with that change comes uncertainty and anxiety, affecting not only the team but also the organisation's leadership. Being 'not in control' is often viewed as management incompetence (Watkins 2003). The expectation is that management should be able to anticipate important potential changes and put in place controls to ensure that only the intended outcomes are realised. But managers (or anyone) only ever work with part of the picture and can never predict the full extent of issues that the work may encounter. This is the 'zone' of unpredictability (Bourne 2011 (in press)): introduction) that exists between the clearly defined strategies of the organisation and the tactical work to deliver that strategy. When *unknown unknowns* cause unplanned outcomes within the 'zone', the reaction of senior management is often to perceive that the activity out of control. The solution of choice is usually to introduce more or more rigorous and/or aggressive control mechanisms such as more detailed or frequent reporting, change team personnel, or impose an additional layer of management.

Uncertainty and ambiguity affect everyone in the organisation, at all levels: senior management is not exempt even though they are often the initiators of the change. Managers often respond to this uncertainty by applying any new solution that promises to be effective (Watson 1994). The situation is exacerbated by the inability of each group to see the point of view of the other. The nature of these asymmetric relationships (power) means that those at the top cannot understand the impact of the changes and controls they impose, and those at the bottom cannot understand the reasons for management requiring these changes.

Focus on Upwards

The Manager's Dilemma

To understand more about what it means to be an executive in a large organisation, it is important to explore the nature and culture of organisational leadership: what leadership is, what it takes to reach an executive position, and the demands of decision-making in today's competitive environment. This

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section of the paper will briefly examine the reality of the culture of today's leaders and organisational executives.

Personal styles and characteristics for successful leadership have been defined as creativity, analysis and judgement, resilience and persuasiveness (Kinder and Robertson 1994). Other writers have identified energy, self-confidence, integrity and emotional maturity (Yukl 2002); 'emotional intelligence': self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness and social skills (Goleman 2006). Personal styles and characteristics for leadership success include a combination of:

- Creativity;
- Analysis and judgement;
- Resilience and persuasiveness; and
- Emotional maturity often described as 'emotional intelligence'.

The paradox of leadership

These contradictory expectations create a paradox. This paradox is the ambiguity of an organisation's requirement of their leaders to be 'heroes': the symbol and actual chief of the organisation *combined with* the expectation that their leaders will be inclusive, delegate, and think strategically (Watkins 2003). This is a 'tall order' for any person, no matter how charismatic, strategic, creative, persuasive or emotionally mature. It also assumes that individuals who have attained positions of power within an organisation have all these characteristics.

These leadership virtues are responsible for the cult of the *CEO as hero*. Jim Collins (2001) developed a hierarchy of leadership qualities and characteristics culminating in level 5 leadership. Level 5 leadership is defined as a blend of 'humility and will' that moves a company to sustainable greatness. The current culture of 'CEO as hero' equates to Collins' level 4 leadership. This is the paradox of leadership – the qualities that Collins, and researchers over the last five decades, identified for most effective leadership do not necessarily result in the CEO or other executives as being the 'front man' of the organisation or the one who has to make all the decisions, or 'lead the troops into battle'. The level 5 leader is a strategist, recognises the path that an organisation must take for success, but also empowers the management team to meet the challenges.

Newly appointed executives struggle to make the transition to the ranks of the senior leadership team (Watkins 2003). His study of Fortune 500 organisations identified four broad categories of challenges for new executives:

- Letting go of 'hands on' detail and thinking/acting more strategically *(the big picture)*;
- Develop new and unfamiliar skills and behaviours in an environment with new rules *(learning on the job)*;
- Managing upwards *(they have to do it too!)*;
- Balancing early wins with realistic goals *(getting 'runs on the board').*

The transition strategies that these new executives reported as being successful included:

- *Managing upwards* through clarifying expectations of key stakeholders on objectives, goals and leadership styles;
- Building alliances and support structures through establishing personal credibility with stakeholders and understanding the culture (of the organisation, but also of the leadership team – the peers of the executive);
- Focus on personal reinvention – substituting skills, values and behaviours not appropriate to the new role with those that were now appropriate.

The challenges and transition strategies that the new executives recognised they needed to be successful in their new role *are exactly the same* as the challenges and strategies that managers within the organisation must use to manage the relationships with these same executives (senior stakeholders)! The qualities of leadership that have been described in this section match the requirements of the executive from the (Watkins 2003) study and provide a starting point for identification of the characteristics that project managers require from a *sponsor*.

Understanding how to work within the power structures of the organisation is important to acquire because access to resources (financial, human, material and informational) must be negotiated. The project manager is often without organisational authority or status and so must rely on other attributes to achieve the organisation's outcomes. These attributes are summarized as the ability to:

- Build credibility through the reputation for successful management and leadership;
- Develop and maintain networks as a source of influence and access to power;
- Be willing to operate within the power structures of the organisation;
- Understand the expectations of stakeholders and to communicate in the language that matches their own roles and experience;
- Recognise that the groundwork must be laid *before* a crisis occurs through targeted communication of progress, including fearless but fully analysed reporting of issues or risks;
- Help the sponsor assist the manager and team deliver success to the organisation.

Managing a senior manager's optimistic expectations needs a strong relationship between the team and its stakeholders. Consistency, perseverance and determination are important in building respect. The development of stakeholders' perceptions of the individual's personal credibility, wider personal and professional relationships, contacts and networks are all essential elements that go towards building the respect needed to change senior stakeholders' perceptions. These wider relationships must be built not just 'for the project' but maintained long-term.

Effective communication

The basis for an effective communication plan is defining for each stakeholder (Oschadleus 2011 (in press)):

- The purpose of the communication: what do the team need to achieve through the communication;
- The most appropriate information: to meet the expectations and requirements of the stakeholder;
- The most effective message format and delivery method.

Irrespective of how well the communication strategy and plan are crafted, other factors must be considered:

- The different levels of power or influence between the team and the stakeholder;
- Role of the stakeholder:
    - Sponsor or other political activity supporters may require exception reports, briefing data sufficient to be able to defend the activity; and *no surprises*;
    - Middle managers who supply resources need timeframes, resource data and reports on adherence to resource plans and effectiveness of resources provided;
    - Staff working on the activity and other team members need detailed information that will enable them to perform their roles effectively;
    - Other staff need updates on progress, particularly information on how it will affect their own work roles;
    - External stakeholders will also require regular planned and managed updates on the work, its deliverables, its impact, its progress;

- Credibility of the messenger and the message: the more the team has worked to build trust and a perception of trustworthiness and competence the more readily a stakeholder will receive, and act on, information;
- The relevance of the information to the recipient;
- The format and content of the message: the most appropriate level of detail and presentation style will also assist in ensuring that information is received and responded to in the most suitable way;
- The cultural expectations – national, generational (Higgins 2011 (in press); Khor 2011 (in press)).

Conclusion

Advising upwards is a difficult skill for project and program managers to acquire. Different stakeholders will seek value in different outcomes, depending on their position in the organisation and their expectations. Expectations can be personal such as increase in personal reputation or personal power, or they can be organisational or managerial such as increased revenue or reputation for the organisation or department as a result of the outcomes of the work. Effective communication to important stakeholders must recognise this and ensure that the messages provide information to either enhance the achievement of the value itself or provide information to assure the stakeholder that this value proposition is being delivered. If senior stakeholders understand that their expectations are being met their perception will be that the work is successful. It is this delivery of value to senior stakeholders through effective communication that builds the reputation of the team for delivering the work's objectives, builds their credibility and feeds the 'virtuous cycle' that ensures the support of senior stakeholders when it is needed. This is *advising upwards:* and the message is if your senior stakeholders trust you and know that the work you are leading will help them achieve their expectations – whatever the expectations happen to be – they will be open to your advice on how best to help you continue to be successful in your work to deliver successful outcomes within the organisation.

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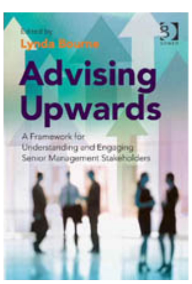

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For more information on the book see:
https://mosaicprojects.com.au/shop-advising-upwards.php

Or visit the publishers web site:
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