

Advances in Project Management Series¹

What Stakeholder Management should learn from Sales and Marketing

By Jake Holloway

Technical capabilities aside, the difference between a good and a bad project manager often comes down to how effectively they manage the people that have influence over their project - or on it's perception (i.e. stakeholders.) And to be clear about what I mean about 'managing stakeholders', it's not simply about informing, engaging and involving them. It is about persuading and motivating them, handling their objections, forming and changing their opinions, getting them to influence others and even marginalising them if they are becoming obstructive. These outcomes, I will argue, need the discipline of Project Management to adopt some of the skills and processes from Sales and Marketing.

This is particularly true inside matrix organisations. These are organisations that run multiple projects which compete for resources and have to move work packages through functional teams. The functional managers and resource owners become powerful stakeholders who can cause significant issues if not motivated to support the project in question. Project managers really have their work cut out in driving their project through a series of functions in order to achieve progress.

Likewise, senior managers around an organisation running a portfolio of projects, even if not directly connected, may have very high levels of influence over a project and how it is perceived, particularly if they want it to fail for professional or personal reasons.

The challenge of managing stakeholders

Many a new project manager, with their PM certificate in one hand and a copy of an authoritative project management textbook in the other, has come up against difficult stakeholder behaviour which completely baffles and sometimes even terrifies them. For example;

- Teams that are demotivated, or worse
- Senior Executives who want to kill the project ("anti-sponsors")
- Functional managers who appear to arbitrarily delay their work, or execute it poorly
- Gatekeepers who obstruct progress, seemingly without reason

¹The *Advances in Project Management series* includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>. See the author's profile at the end of this article.

- Internal customers or users who will not ‘accept’ or sometimes actively do not want the project deliverables
- Sponsors who want to achieve impossible deadlines with half the cost and the wrong or inadequate resources

The textbooks, methodologies and consultants, it appears, don’t really tell project managers how to deal with these people.

It was to help project managers navigate this difficult and overlooked part of our profession that motivated Professor David Bryde, Roger Joby and I to write “A Practical Guide to Dealing with Difficult Stakeholders”, available from Gower Publishing.

The main perspective of the book is to deal with people/stakeholders as they really are, not as how one wants them to be. This requires using effective stakeholder management techniques to influence people and groups.

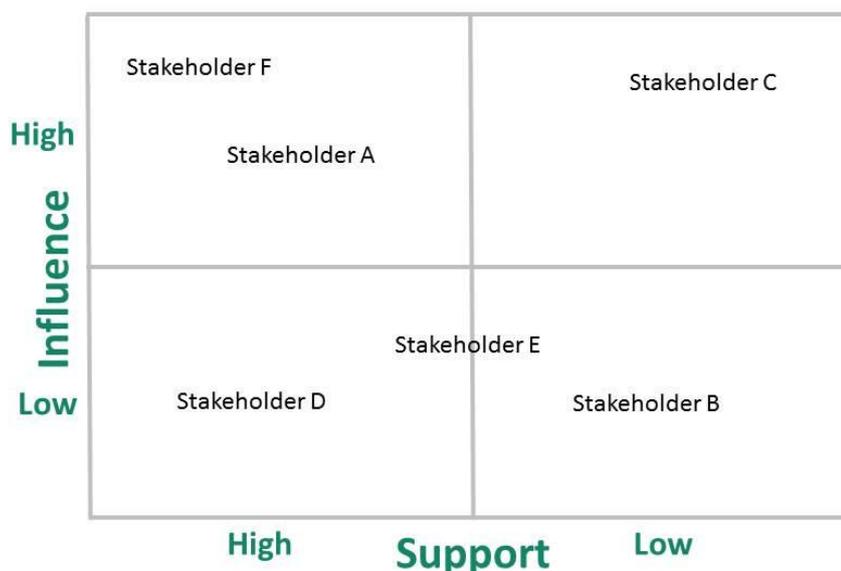
Project managers should be systematic about dealing with the situations that they need to manage. It is what separates us from everyone else just trying to “get stuff done.”

These are recommended techniques for taking a systematic approach.

Stakeholder mapping

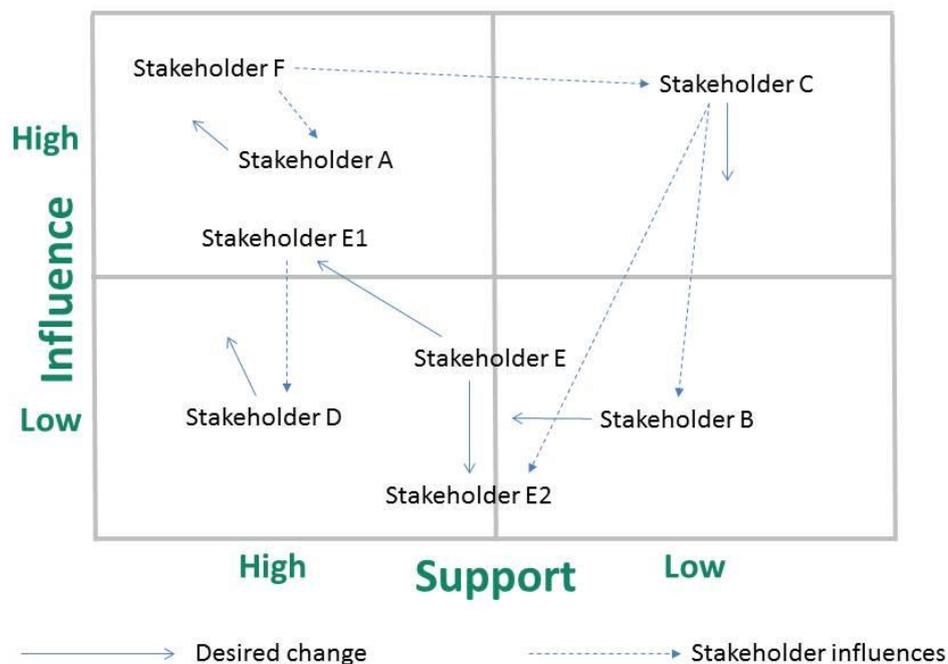
Most project managers nowadays will have encountered the notion of stakeholder mapping; typically plotting stakeholders as individuals and groups on a support-influence matrix.

Stakeholder support-influence matrix



However this doesn't particularly tell you much about what you want to achieve via stakeholder management, or how the stakeholders influence each other. For this reason I prefer a more dynamic version of the standard matrix.

Dynamic stakeholder support-influence matrix



In the above example, Stakeholder E is a group, some of whom I plan to improve their level of support and make them more influential, and some who I don't believe will change their neutral level of support and who I want to make less influential within the organisation. This is an effective strategy for a group of stakeholders where you can change some of their minds, but not all of them.

The diagram also models which stakeholders have influence over which others. It shows the negative influence of Stakeholder C and makes it visible how important it is to either change their level of support, or try to reduce their influence over the project.

Stakeholder management objectives

Using the dynamic stakeholder support-influence matrix you can determine some objectives for each individual stakeholder or group, and start to devise approaches to achieve those objectives. This is where it becomes difficult.

Stakeholder management techniques do not always come easy to project managers, who have often followed technical career paths. This means that they have not been selected for promotion based on their people or influencer skills, or emotional intelligence, and typically will not have picked up much marketing or management training or experience. For this

reason I am not a fan of automatically making the best technical team member the project manager.

Where can we find great stakeholder management techniques?

Broadly speaking, there are two professions that routinely deploy the skills required for stakeholder management; salespeople and marketing professionals, particularly advertisers.

For individual stakeholders – look at how salespeople operate

Salespeople are good at persuading and influencing individuals. They alter how their ‘prospects’ perceive products and services, manipulate decision-making processes, understand and empathise with their concerns and desires. Often they need to look beyond the obvious business requirements to see the personal requirements that are also at play. As with great poker players, they “play the person, not the cards.”

They then plan sales meetings, campaigns and intermediate objectives about getting ‘access to power’, ‘influencing the basis of decision’, ‘building investment in decisions’, ‘creating internal champions’ and so on. They are naturally good at using powerful persuasion techniques that play on psychology such as ‘social proof’ and decision making biases.

If you think about it, if the job of managing stakeholders is to persuade, influence, empower and sometimes divert and dissuade, then these are the very same skills. For these reasons project management should take from sales professionals the skills and techniques needed for managing individual stakeholders.

For groups – look at marketing professionals

Marketing professionals - particularly advertisers - are good at influencing whole groups. They map the psychology, desires and needs of audiences. They understand how these audiences make decisions and what imagery and messages they respond to. They determine what media they consume and look for the best way to reach them. They measure how well they are getting their messages across and whether or not they are making a difference to their behaviour.

These are the very effects that project managers want to achieve when they engage with larger groups of stakeholders. You want them to support and prepare for the project’s deliverables, provide input, go out of their way to review documents. This all requires more than just being ‘informed’, it requires them to believe that it’s the right thing to do. Just as advertisers want us to feel that buying a Big Mac or Oreos cookies is the right thing to do.

For these reasons project management should take from advertising professionals the skills and techniques needed for managing stakeholder groups.

Don't forget using your own experience

The final set of techniques we should be adopting and codifying, comes from within. I cannot count the number of project managers who have informed me about their plan to 'communicate' or 'engage' with stakeholders about the project by creating a Project Newsletter. My heart sinks at this point. So I ask them, "do you ever read Project Newsletters? For example did you read the one last month about the new Timesheet system?" The answer is invariably no. I say, "no of course you didn't. No-one ever does." So the technique is called "apply some of your own human experience" – AKA common sense.

Just for a second put yourself in the mind of the stakeholder(s) and imagine what it is like to be them. What are the pressures on them? How much interest do they have in your project? How much time do they have? What are their influences and who do they take instructions and opinions from? Think about your own pressures, influences, objectives and desires. Are they always visible and obvious? Do you imagine that stakeholders are compliant and transparent whereas you are not?

Stakeholder management plan (example, summarised)

Using the dynamic support-influence matrix above I have created a few entries for three of the stakeholders showing techniques from Sales and Marketing. Note that, in reality, I would not document this plan because of the high confidentiality and short half-life – these people-centric plans change quickly as you understand motivations.

Stakeholder	Objective	Actions and Techniques
A (individual, positive and influential)	Sustain and improve high support, use their existing influence, make more influential	Understand and reinforce the reasons for their support (good questioning, reading their feelings, supporting their reasons) Use their influence (questioning to understand who they can influence, persuasion techniques to encourage them to use influence, teaching them how, providing materials/messages to influence/sell internally)
C (individual, negative and influential anti-sponsor)	Understand and handle objections in meetings, reduce influence particularly over B and E2	Understand their objections (interviewing them – or more likely others, picking up on internal informal communications), Objection handling (Using project meetings to handle objections up front in non-confrontational way, use Stakeholder F as Exec support)
E (group, not influential, neutral)	Understand them, separate into persuadable and non-persuadable, determine channels that reach them, Measure impact of comms	Understand their real feelings and needs (Random surveys using neutral/non-leading questions, interviews, focus groups), Determine the comms channels that they use (analytics data, response data, experiments), Measure response to messages (web/intranet/email/social analytics data, reach/recall surveys/experiments)
E1 (persuadable)	Improve their levels of	Support campaigns (design messages to meet

subset of group E)	support, use their influence over E2	needs/desires, use social proof statements, create vision using before/after statements/imagery), Use as social proof (collect support statements/true stories, real people)
E2 (hard to persuade subset of group E)	Discourage from objecting, reduce their influence over others	Objection handling (understand objections and create responses for each, use objection handling backed up by positive ‘pro’ stories in message design i.e. ‘social proof’), provide no support for negativity (make project communications relentlessly positive and assuming success, emphasize benefits)

Summary

Stakeholder management needs to progress from ‘informing and engaging’ to ‘influencing and persuading’.

It may sound contentious and Machiavellian to look at stakeholder management as sociology and politics, but as you manage larger and more complex projects this will become essential to the success of your projects.

My approach is to ‘left-shift’ this learning by drawing on the disciplines that use persuasion and social psychology as a completely normal and codified part of their approach.

<http://www.pmi.org/learning/publications-project-management-journal-guidelines.aspx>

About the Author



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Jake Holloway of the Xceed Group has worked as a Project Manager, Management Consultant and Sales & Marketing Director. He has managed and sponsored 100’s of projects and portfolios, led the creation of new products and businesses and has been involved in designing, building and implementing project management systems. Jake is a co-author of “[A Practical Guide to Dealing with Difficult Stakeholders](#)”, available from Gower Publishing.