

## **Advances in Project Management Series<sup>1</sup>**

# **Rolling Back from the Power/interest Matrix: A New Approach for Role Based Stakeholder Engagement in Projects**

**By Lou Horton and Ann Pilkington**

It is widely acknowledged that a successful project needs well managed and effective stakeholder relationships, but sitting down with a blank sheet of paper and attempting to understand the stakeholder landscape is a daunting task. Turning that piece of paper into a tangible and sustainable relationship that benefits the project, and the organization, is harder still.

Many projects and programmes adopt the power-interest matrix in an attempt to codify and order the process for identifying stakeholders; yet this approach privileges a certain type of stakeholder at the expense of many others who are needed to make the project successful.

This paper argues that it is not the combination of power and influence that should determine a stakeholder's worth to a project, but rather that person's role in the organisation. Engaging stakeholders in this way provides increased opportunities for sustainable change and benefits realisation.

The value of effective project stakeholder engagement has been recognised since Pinto and Slevin's<sup>2</sup> influential identification of the ten critical success factors for projects. Rated at 4 and 9 client (i.e. stakeholders) consultation and timely communication were deemed to be essential for a project's success. Yet research into the failure of projects repeatedly refers to inadequate stakeholder engagement. How can this be when stakeholder theory and tools are built into project methodology? Do we need to think differently about how we approach stakeholder engagement?

### **Characteristics of the power/interest model**

#### **Focus on hierarchy**

The power-influence model is probably the prominent project stakeholder tool. It is drawn from the management literature<sup>3</sup> and has been taken up by public relations in order to guide PR strategy with links to PR reputation and issues management. In a project context, use of the model is based on the premise that if a stakeholder is

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<sup>1</sup> The Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. The articles are coordinated by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>.

<sup>2</sup> Pinto, J. K. and Slevin, D. P. (1987) Engineering Management, IEEE Transactions on p22-27

<sup>3</sup> Mendelow, A. (1991) Proceedings of 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Information Systems. Cambridge, MA, cited in Exploring Corporate Strategy, Johnson, G. and Scholes, K. (2002)

positive about a project they are less likely to cause problems thus avoiding issues and crises for the project team. Moving powerful, interested stakeholders to a positive position is thought to link strongly to project success. However, this approach drives effort towards a coterie of powerful, interested individuals in an organization, who may have the strategic vision but may lack vital practical knowledge – knowledge which can make all the difference to a project.

Following the power-interest model therefore often leads to projects planning a hierarchical construct of engagement that ignores practitioners in favour of senior management. With attention directed towards those deemed powerful there is a significant likelihood that the project is disenfranchising stakeholders who have the potential to contribute pragmatic advice. Consequently the project's stakeholder engagement approach is building inherent risk into the successful delivery of the change.

### **Focus on 'positivity'**

The focus on positive perceptions can be problematic. Too often the objective of stakeholder engagement – if indeed an objective has been articulated – is to win the support of stakeholders predominately through the selling of benefits. Of course every project team wants stakeholders to view the project positively. However, this isn't always realistic.

The well-established change curve demonstrates how it is only post-implementation that stakeholders start to accept and maybe enthuse about the change that a project is introducing (Fig 1<sup>4</sup>). This means that projects can spend a lot of time endeavouring to enthuse stakeholders when in fact this isn't a realistic outcome, at least not in the short to medium term. In the meantime relentless 'why this is good for you' messaging does nothing to move stakeholders through the change curve.

Projects by their very nature intend to change the status quo, and what is good for an organisation is not always good for an individual. A method based primarily on selling the benefits of a project risks alienating those who feel the project is affecting their employment or psychological contract with an organisation. Underpinning many stakeholders' reactions are fears that power is being transferred from their business-as-usual function into the project. To the stakeholder, this can feel like a criticism of their work. Too often business change managers are left to sell unpalatably positive messages to stakeholders who cannot reconcile the project's intentions with what it means for them and their jobs.

### **Focus more on timing**

A good project will be reviewing its stakeholder grid (power/interest matrix) on a regular basis, but the tool itself does not aid with decisions around timing. A common error on projects is to attempt to engage with all stakeholders from the start when in fact, those who will use the new service may not be impacted for some time.

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<sup>4</sup> Pilkington, A. (2013) *Communicating Projects*, Gower, Farnham

Once the engagement process has started, it must be maintained because an expectation has been raised. Thus projects are left in the position of trying to maintain interest when really there isn't much to say – it becomes engagement for the sake of it. Stakeholders will eventually disengage because the approaches that they are receiving are neither relevant nor timely. More worryingly, when this approach is repeated by a number of projects it results in a stakeholder receiving a mass of probably irrelevant communication about multiple initiatives with the result that really important messages are being missed.

The power/interest model is not without value but perhaps it is time to rethink the way that project stakeholders are analysed and engaged and think differently about who is engaged, when and how.

### **Rethinking project stakeholder analysis**

Freeman's<sup>5</sup> 1984 30-year old definition of a stakeholder remains fundamentally unchanged for use in project management methodology. For Freeman, and many project professionals, a stakeholder is: 'Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's purpose and objectives'. What this statement doesn't do is prompt the project professional to ask what stake an individual holds in a project or why that person should be engaged, i.e. what does the project need from him or her and when?

These may seem to be very project-centric questions, but they are driven by the underlying need to make the project an ultimate success. However It can be argued that It is far more project-centric (and in fact a fallacy) to believe that projects need nothing from stakeholders. Once this is understood, the engagement plan begins to write itself.

An effective project/stakeholder relationship relies on both parties being clear about what each needs from the other and in order to achieve this a role-based approach to stakeholder identification can be adopted.<sup>6</sup>

- **Sponsors:** these stakeholders set the direction, hold the budget and can release resources. Typically, this is the group most likely to be identified by the power-influence matrix.
- **Shapers:** these stakeholders get involved in the design stage (this could be the design of an IT system, new ways of working, policy or a product). Failure to engage this group during design is most likely to cause behaviours that exhibit the 'not invented here' syndrome, which challenge a successful implementation and adoption.

<sup>5</sup> Freeman, R. E, (1984) Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach. Pitman, Boston

<sup>6</sup> Pilkington, A. (2013) Communicating Projects, Gower, Farnham

- **Schedulers:** these stakeholders are often ‘gatekeepers’ they can get things done and make the implementation of the project happen. They are also often the group most likely to alert projects to practical risks and issues relating to plans.
- **Users:** These stakeholders are the change targets, and will use the new service, adopt different ways of working etc. (According to what the project is delivering.)

Throughout the project lifecycle individuals are likely to fulfil more than one of these roles but may not always be able to identify which role they are fulfilling. It is the project’s responsibility to help stakeholders understand why they are being engaged at each stage and what is wanted of them.

This approach represents a significant difference to the ‘hearts and minds’ approach of engagement through selling benefits. Instead it focuses on supporting stakeholders in navigating their way through the project lifecycle by creating a pathway that links project objectives and deliverables to the stakeholder’s specific role. Overlay the project plan with that pathway and a powerful communication tool is created.

Identifying stakeholders using this model has four key benefits:

- Drives engagement by role and contribution to the project
- Engagement activity can be timed appropriately
- Objectives can be set that describe what is needed from the stakeholder relationship
- Communication activity can be designed to achieve the objective

The stakeholder becomes clear about where and when they will be involved, and understands the project’s commitment to involving them. In return the stakeholder can identify what help they need to meet the project’s timescales.

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## About the Authors



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Ann Pilkington is the author of *Communicating Projects* published by Gower. She is a founding director of PR Academy which provides qualifications, training and consultancy in all aspects of communication including change project communication and project management.

Information about Ann's latest book, *Communicating Projects, An End-to-End Guide to Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Effective Communication*, can be found [here](#) and at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/isbn/9781409453192>.

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