

Managing Difficult Stakeholders

By Sharon De Mascia

INTRODUCTION

We have all experienced them haven't we, the stakeholder who is always negative about every aspect of the project or those stakeholders who just fail to deliver their elements of the project plan? Equally, there are those stakeholders who are downright unpleasant or even hostile. This article looks at why stakeholders can appear difficult and what you can do to manage them more effectively, promote harmonious project relationships and manage those stakeholder relationships that are already difficult.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF HAVING DIFFICULT STAKEHOLDERS?

Working with difficult stakeholders increases the stress levels of the project manager and the project team. It can also create more work, in having to chase up difficult stakeholders and invest time in trying to encourage them to contribute their element of the project plan. These consequences are bad enough but it can get much worse than this. A couple of years ago, I was contacted by a global construction company who were working in partnership with a local authority to deliver a PFI (Private Finance Initiative) build. There had been some tensions between the Construction Company and the Local Authority and by the time that they brought me in, there had been a total relationship breakdown which meant that no work was progressing and the plant was standing idle, at great cost. The moral of this tale then is that difficult stakeholders need to be effectively managed from the outset and on an ongoing basis.

WHY DO SOME STAKEHOLDERS APPEAR DIFFICULT?

Usually when we talk about stakeholders being difficult it is because they are not agreeing with us or they are not doing what we want them to do and so we think of them as being 'difficult'. Stakeholders, however, may appear difficult for a variety of reasons e.g.:

- 1, The stakeholder may not have a sufficient understanding of the project or may be motivated towards a different agenda/goal.
- 2, There may have been insufficient action to engage the stakeholder and make them feel that they are a valued part of the project.
- 3, The stakeholder may have a different way of working which is at odds with the project team e.g. perhaps he is more pedantic or more of a risk taker.

1, UNDERSTANDING THE STAKEHOLDER'S MOTIVATION AND HELPING THEM TO UNDERSTAND YOUR PROJECT.

We often assume that people understand our aspirations and plans. Equally, when we talk to stakeholders, we assume that we understand what their aspirations and goals are. Sadly, both ends of this equation can lead to misunderstandings and conflict with stakeholders. This is something that is easily resolved by using our ears more and asking the right questions to check our understanding.

When we explain things to other people, we often do it quickly and fail to take the time to check that our stakeholders have the same understanding of the project that we have? Usually, we chat to people, send out the project documentation and assume that everyone has a full understanding of what will happen and when. In an ideal world, this would work perfectly, however, we are all busy and we do not read everything that is sent to us. Equally, we process all information through our own lens or view of the world and this can lead to very different understandings and often, misunderstandings.

Consequently, if you want to start a project off on the right foot and minimise the chances of stakeholders turning into 'difficult' stakeholders then you need to check that you have a shared understanding. The best way to do this is to talk to your stakeholders and ask open questions to explore their understanding of the project e.g. what difference do you think this project will make to your department/the organisation? Listening carefully to the answers given in response to your open questions will give you a feel for the extent to which the stakeholder understands the project. Listening is a crucial skill that we all tend to do badly on a day by day basis, in that:

- We allow our minds to wander so that we are not focusing on what the other person is actually saying.
- We interrupt
- We finish words and sentences for people

Try to listen carefully and focus solely on the conversation that you are having with your stakeholder. Then, ask questions to check that your understanding of what they have said is correct, by asking them "So do you meant that....?" "Are you saying that...?"

Once you have a shared understanding of your project, the next step is to understand something about the motivation of your stakeholder i.e. what is important to them? Your stakeholders will always be motivated but not necessarily for the same things that you want to achieve (Miller & Rollnick 2002). The greater your understanding of the stakeholders' aspirations and motivations, the better your chances of being able to convince them of how your project will help them with their goals and the greater your chance of engaging them with your project.

This is not just a formal exercise of asking what their objectives are and then comparing them with the project specification. This is about putting in place the building blocks of a relationship which you can then maintain as time progresses. You need to invest time in demonstrating a genuine interest not only in their work but how they **feel** about their work and the project. This will provide you with a better understanding of what really motivates them. Tell them how you feel about the project that you are trying to deliver i.e. share your passion and enthusiasm and some of it will rub off on your stakeholders.

2, ENGAGE YOUR SHAREHOLDERS

The research into 'Engagement' (e.g. Macleod & Clarke 2009, Gallup 2014) has shown that there are four key activities that project managers should carry out, in order to engage their stakeholders i.e.:

- 2.1 Make stakeholders feel valued
- 2.2 Involve them in decision making
- 2.3 Encourage them to contribute ideas to the project
- 2.4 Ensure that they have the resources to deliver their part of the project

2.1, Make Stakeholders Feel Valued and Involved. Stakeholders will vary in the extent to which they personally need to feel valued and involved but if you invest time in talking to them and understanding their aspirations as described above you will increase their engagement in your project.

2.2, Involve Them in Decision Making. Once again, stakeholders will vary in the extent to which they want to be involved in decision making; however the key is to make sure that stakeholders have the option of being involved. You will need to encourage them to want to be involved as this is all part of the engagement process.

2.3, Give Them the freedom to Voice Ideas and knowing that the project manager will listen. This means giving stakeholders a real voice in the project so that they can offer ideas/comments and know that the project manager will take the contribution seriously. If you have no intention of taking the stakeholder's suggestions on board, don't just ignore the suggestions (remember that you are trying to make stakeholders feel engaged and involved) instead, provide the stakeholder with feedback (preferably face to face if possible) as to why his suggestions may not be the best option at this point. This provides you with a further opportunity to engage the stakeholder and get their buy in because you can ask them for any additional suggestions that they may have which will overcome any issues with their original suggestion.

2.4, Feeling enabled to perform well. This is about the project manager ensuring, where possible, that stakeholders are not only clear about what the project requires of them but that they also have the information and resources they need. The assumption is often made that stakeholders have the necessary resources available to deliver project requirements, however, this is not always the case and part of your

stakeholder engagement role will be about ensuring that they either have the appropriate resource or can acquire it (possibly with your support).

3, IDENTIFYING AND ACCOMMODATING DIFFERENT WAYS OF WORKING

Following his extensive research with management teams, (Belbin 1991) concluded that the compatibility of a team is crucial to its effectiveness. Many subsequent researchers have also reached this conclusion e.g. De Dreu et al (2003). Given that stakeholders are part of the wider project team, it stands to reason that increasing understanding and compatibility amongst team members is more likely to result in the delivery of a successful project. There are various team building methods that can be utilised to facilitate better team working amongst project teams/stakeholders e.g. The Myers Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI). The MBTI can be used to gain a better understanding of individual team member's preferred ways of working and the particular strengths that they can contribute to the team. Once team members gain a better understanding of each other's preferred ways of working, it promotes greater understanding and harmony amongst team members and helps to diffuse any conflict.

The MBTI was developed by Katharine Briggs and Isabel Myers and uses a questionnaire to identify individual preferences. The outcome of the questionnaire is that everyone receives a four letter type that best describes their preferences on the following scales:

- ✚ Extraversion Vs Introversion (where people get their energy from and where they focus it, i.e. external or internal sources)
- ✚ Sensing Vs Intuition (Preference for information and what they can perceive as opposed to imagination and theoretical concepts)
- ✚ Thinking Vs Feeling (Basing decisions on logic as opposed to personal values/views of others)
- ✚ Judging Vs Perceiving (Planning in a linear, inflexible way as opposed to a more agile approach)

Someone who had a high preference for 'Extraversion', 'Intuition', 'Thinking' and 'Judging' would have the type 'ENTJ'. Each of the four letters 'Types' has certain characteristics associated with it e.g. a brief description for an 'ENTJ' would be as follows (Briggs Myers 2000):

ENTJ

"Frank, decisive, assumes leadership readily. Quickly sees illogical and inefficient procedures and policies, develops and implements comprehensive systems to solve organisational problems. Enjoys long term planning and goal setting. Usually well informed, well read; enjoys expanding their knowledge and passing it onto others. Forceful in presenting their ideas."

Looking at the contrasting ends of the MBTI scales, it is easy to see how conflict may occur between people with very differing preferences and ways of working e.g. someone with a preference for 'intuition' and big picture ideas may become very frustrated when working with someone who has a preference for 'Sensing', who keeps asking for proof that an idea is going to work effectively. Equally, someone with a preference for 'Judging', who likes a strong, linear project plan is likely to become frustrated with someone who has a preference for 'Perceiving' who is happy to just have an end goal and not be too worried about the best way to get there.

Although there are other tools available, the MBTI can be very useful in giving team members a better understanding of each other's preferences which enables people to be more accommodating of each other's differences and less judgemental. This then promotes better relationships between teams.

4, DEALING WITH DIFFICULT STAKEHOLDERS WHEN RELATIONSHIPS ARE STRAINED

Paying Attention to Communication

Communication is a human behaviour and is affected by our perceptions, cognitions and emotions. There is no such thing as objective 'Reality'. We all have our own version of 'Reality' based on our experiences, our personality, our level of knowledge and skill etc. George Kelly (1963) suggested that we each look at the world and situations through our own particular goggles and that the world and various situations look different to each of us. This can lead to new insights and creativity which is great; however, our perceptions can lead us to distort events, which prevent us from perceiving something in a clear and rational way. When talking with stakeholders, project managers should try to concentrate on what they actually know about the person. This then allows the project manager to gain a more accurate understanding of the stakeholder and their perceptions.

Non-Verbal Communication

It is very important also to pay attention to your non-verbal communication. An Anthropologist by the name of Ray L. Birdwhistell (1970) suggested that 65%% of the message in conversations is conveyed nonverbally. Factors that you need to be aware of are, first of all, your voice and tone. When we do not agree with what someone else is saying often a note of disapproval or challenge creeps into our voice and this is very easily detected by the listener. Equally, when we are angry we tend to increase the volume of our voice, consequently, if you are communicating in a loud tone, your recipients may assume that you are angry even if you are not. When communicating, it is useful to adopt calm and measured tone of voice so as not to convey any feelings of our own impatience. This avoids any defensive reactions and facilitates a more rational and even discussion.

Emotional intelligence and Being Mindful of our Emotions.

Being mindful of how we communicate is very important when managing difficult relationships, as is being emotionally intelligent. Emotional Intelligence is a phrase coined by Goleman (2002) which is about how we manage our emotions and influence the emotions of others. Sometimes we develop habitual ways of interacting with people that are not emotionally intelligent and when we are under pressure, we can often interact and react in a defensive emotional manner as opposed to a calm rational one.

When you are interacting with stakeholders where the relationship is strained, it is more important than ever to be mindful of the emotions that you display. When you are with a stakeholder and you experience a negative emotion e.g. anger, irritation, impatience, just ask yourself “Why am I feeling this way?” “What is this emotion about, is it to do with anything that is happening now or this emotion related to something else?” This will help you identify whether or not the emotions that you are experiencing are appropriate for the situation. Take a few seconds to calm your mind before you respond to the stakeholder and respond in a rational and positive way. Equally, be mindful of the emotions that the stakeholder is displaying and try to influence any negative emotions in order to facilitate a calm and rational discussion.

Lessons from the ‘Negotiation’ Research

Some of the work on ‘Principled negotiation’ carried out by the ‘Harvard Negotiation Project’ (Fisher & Ury, 1991), lends itself well to managing difficult stakeholders. Firstly, separate the person from the problem. We can become very defensive when we feel that someone is attacking an idea or objective of ours and we can start to take things personally and feel that we are being attacked. The trick is to separate the problem from the person and jointly focus on the problem and how to resolve it. Concentrate on maintaining a good relationship with the stakeholder and emphasise a collective approach by frequent use of the word ‘We’ e.g. how can we resolve this issue?

Secondly, focus on interests not positions. Stakeholders are more likely to want to understand where you are coming from if you have demonstrated a genuine interest in their requirements, which is why it is so important to try and engage stakeholders from the outset of the project. You need to look beyond the stakeholders stated position e.g. “I can’t implement self-service HR in my Department” to what the underlying goal is which could be not to have to make 3 valued administrators redundant. Once you identify exactly what the stakeholder is trying to achieve, you will understand why the stakeholder is ‘being difficult’. It is then easier to start thinking about sensible alternatives that meet the needs of both parties.

When I speak to project managers about engaging stakeholders, they all nod sagely and agree that it is a crucial activity but then, sadly, they realise that it takes time and effort and fail to make the time to really engage stakeholders. Anyone who has ever worked on a project where relationships have soured or broken down will appreciate how much time can be lost trying to rebuild stakeholder relationships and how

stressful and difficult it can be. In my opinion, it is better to bite the bullet and make the time upfront to invest in building and maintaining stakeholder engagement. It is less painful in the long run.

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