Project Management for Team Members[1]

Project Team Members and Stakeholder Management

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INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth article of the series: Project Management for Team Members (aka Project Followership). We will deal with the importance of team members in stakeholder management and the difficulties they may face.

The topic of stakeholder management is relatively recent in the project management discipline. The first studies go back to the seventies, and they were related to the implementation of large public projects or complex IT systems. One of the first papers completely dedicated to stakeholder management can be traced back to the work of David Cleland, who in 1986 published the paper Project Stakeholder Management in the *Project Management Journal*. Finally, while the PMBOK introduced the notion of project stakeholders in the first edition in 1996, we had to wait until 2013, with the fifth edition, for a knowledge area dedicated to project stakeholder management.

To gain a deeper understanding of stakeholder management, reading the recent series of articles written by Dr Lynda Bourne in this journal is recommended.

Nowadays project stakeholder management is quite a “hot topic” since many people have realized that projects may affect and be influenced by many individuals and organizations. Not considering or managing them can trigger negative reactions resulting in poor project performance, if not their premature end. Looking at the glass as half full and not considering or managing project stakeholders may result in the leveraging of fewer opportunities.

The purpose of this article is not to stress the importance of involving project team members in stakeholder management but to make the team members aware of the important role they play in stakeholder management, and also to highlight some of the difficulties they may face in the stakeholder management process.

[1] This series of articles on project management for project team members is by Prof. Marco Sampietro, SDA Bocconi School of Management in Milan, Italy. Prof Sampietro is co-author and/or editor of 10 books on project management and 7 books on IT management, including *Empowering Project Teams: Using Project Followership to Improve Performance*, CRC Press, 2014. See his author profile at the end of this article.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEAM MEMBERS IN STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

While it is quite intuitive that team members should have a role in project stakeholder management, we would like to underline their importance by noting that:

- Based on the experiments and observations we carried out, it has been noted that individuals are rarely able to identify more than 60% of the actual stakeholders. What do we mean by actual stakeholder? It is very simple. We compared the list of project stakeholders created by individual team members/project managers with the list created through team effort; we then asked team members and project managers: do you think the stakeholders on this new list that were not on your individual lists are useless or irrelevant? The answers always confirmed that the additional stakeholders were relevant and they should be managed somehow.

- When it comes to defining management strategies to deal with project stakeholders, it is fundamental to have an in-depth understanding of the different stakeholders (their interests, attitudes, motivational factors etc.). The required knowledge is unlikely to be possessed by a single person, such as the project manager.

- When it comes to implementing the stakeholder management strategies, it is again unlikely, and sometimes impossible, that a single person would be able to execute them all.

- There are planned stakeholder management actions (those set out in the stakeholder management and communication plan) but in every project environment there are also stakeholder management actions that simply occur without being planned. For example, we can plan our actions for project stakeholders but we cannot be sure of their reactions. Imagine an angry customer calling a team member to complain about the fact that he/she received a corrupt file. The customer needs the file within the next hour to discuss it with his/her team. The team member cannot respond: "I'm sorry, but according to the communication plan you should call the Project Manager, who unfortunately is sick at the moment. Please try to call him/her in 3 or 4 days!"

TEAM MEMBERS IN THE PROJECT STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT PROCESS

In order to appreciate the role of team members in project stakeholder management, we can refer to the processes suggested by the PMI in the 5th edition of the PMBOK:

- Identify Stakeholders
- Plan Stakeholder Engagement
- Manage Stakeholder Engagement
- Control Stakeholder Engagement

Identifying Stakeholders

Identifying stakeholders consists of identifying the people, groups or organizations that could impact or be impacted by a decision, activity, or outcome of the project, and analyzing and documenting relevant information on their interests, involvement, interdependencies, influence, and potential impact on the project success.

Forgetting some stakeholders during the identification phase does not imply that they simply disappear. It means that those stakeholders will most likely show up when the project collides with their interests. Unfortunately, waiting for a stakeholder to knock at your door is not the safest way to achieve project success. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, team members are crucial in identifying project stakeholders as individuals are not usually able to identify all the relevant stakeholders. This also means that team members have to collaborate and share information in order to obtain a realistic picture of the project stakeholders. In practice, in addition to participating in formal stakeholder identification meetings (or whatever other techniques are used to identify stakeholders), they have to report to the project manager on new relevant stakeholders that may pop up during the project. In fact, no matter how much an individual excelled during the formal moments of stakeholder identification, projects change and so do project stakeholders.

However, formal stakeholder identification is applied in organizations with a high level of project management maturity.

What about project environments where projects are managed more informally? For example, what about when the project documentation is, if one is lucky, a brief PowerPoint presentation simply used to explain (or sell) the project to the sponsor? In these settings, team members do not have the opportunity to run project stakeholder identification sessions and the project manager might be of little help.

In these scenarios, project team members have to be very realistic: as they cannot usually replace the project manager (it is hard to imagine them running stakeholder identification meetings in secret), they have to try to be successful in the tasks they are responsible for. If all team members are able to do this the entire project has more chances of being successful. We are aware that we are not depicting an ideal situation, but organizations with poor project management practices are still in the majority.

From this perspective, the entry point for team members is to be aware of the stakeholders that might directly influence the tasks they are responsible for. This is usually an easy task and the most frequent people identified by this analysis are: the project manager, other team members, project specialists, users, suppliers involved in the task, the direct supervisor, and other executives.

It is much more difficult to identify stakeholders that might indirectly influence the work of the team members. In this case, team members should act as private detectives: collect information without making other people aware of it.

Team members should collect at least the information that permits them to respond to the following questions (see table below).

Question	Rationale
Which tasks (and related people) do I rely on? (In project management jargon, we should say: what are the predecessors?).	Predecessor tasks provide inputs to our task, therefore establishing communication with the people involved in the predecessor tasks may be of great help in creating a smooth transition between the tasks. In addition, knowing in advance that the predecessors tasks are late allows us to implement alternative actions.
Which tasks (and related people) come after my task? (Again, in project management jargon, we should say: what are the successors?)	Very similar to the situation mentioned above. In this case, if our outputs do not fit with the following tasks, we might need to redo some work.
Can the customer communicate with me directly?	Customers are normally among the most important project stakeholders. Knowing in advance if there is the possibility of directly interacting with them triggers the need for additional information. In fact, given the influence of customers, it is better for team members to know them quite well in order to implement effective management actions.
In my organization is it normal for supervisors, even if they are not directly involved in the project, to contact team members?	In many organizations, projects do not have an adequate level of autonomy and “insulation” from the rest of the organization. In these cases, it is advisable to spend some time understanding how other decision-makers perceive the tasks we are responsible for and how the way we carry out our tasks can impact them.
Is there any possibility of the output of the tasks I am responsible for being used by anyone other than the originally intended users?	This topic is related to customer satisfaction as well as, in some cases, safety and security. For instance, a product may be safe in adult hands but dangerous if handled by children. So it can be very useful to try and understand if the output of the tasks we are responsible for can be seen or used by other people aside from the intended users.

The way to obtain answers to the questions above may vary. In organizations where the project management maturity level is quite low, directly asking the project manager or other team members those questions might be seen as lack of trust, a way to show-off, a way of communicating one's believe that the project is not managed professionally, or even an attempt to take over the role of the project manager or of the other team members. It may seem odd, but one technique is to introduce the questions while speaking about other topics. This way, the counterparts perceive the questions as not particularly relevant and just an occasional detour from other topics. Informal occasions, such as coffee breaks, lunches, and brief encounters in the corridors, are a good time to informally collect information on stakeholders.

Another step in stakeholder identification is analyzing stakeholders. This means understanding variables such as their interests, their attitude towards the project, how they may influence the project, and their power to influence the project.

From this perspective, team members are very precious as each team member knows something about a particular stakeholder that the other team members perhaps do not. For example, in dealing with a customer, a team member who has already had contact with that customer has information that other team members do not have. So again, good stakeholder analysis requires the contribution of the various team members.

Let us now consider a structured project environment where a formal stakeholder analysis is carried out. Knowing that there are many ways to analyze and prioritize stakeholders, let us apply the basic power and interest matrix.

In this regard, team members sometimes find it difficult to define the power level of stakeholders. This difficulty derives from:

- Unit of analysis. For many team members it is more natural to stay focused on their tasks than consider the entire project. A stakeholder who is very influential at task level may be perceived by the team member as very powerful, while at project level the stakeholder may be of little significance.

- Availability of information: even when team members adopt a project level view, they usually do not have all the information that would permit them to have a global vision of the project, thus limiting their ability to correctly rate the importance of stakeholders.

This is why it is recommended that stakeholder analyses be performed in teams and with the contribution of people who have a broader view of the project.

Let us now consider organizations with low project management maturity level. In these cases, the aforementioned issues are still valid but there is the aggravating circumstance that there is no open discussion of these topics, thus increasing the likelihood of team members overreacting to stakeholders inputs (or the opposite if they consider some stakeholders to be less influential than they actually are).

Here the suggestion is similar to the one mentioned before: team members should try to collect information in an attempt to acquire a broader overview of the project and thereby an understanding of the relative importance of the tasks they are responsible for.

Planning Stakeholder Engagement

Planning stakeholder engagement means developing appropriate management strategies to effectively engage stakeholders throughout the project life cycle.

Good stakeholder plans come from:

- an understanding of the interest, motivational factors, and attitudes of stakeholders;
- an understanding of their power to influence the project.

As already pointed out, very often team members are the most important source of information relating to stakeholders. They are also very useful when it comes to defining the actions to manage stakeholders but, similarly to what was said in the previous paragraph, they may need help to fine tune the stakeholder management actions. In fact, team members are sometimes not able to correctly evaluate the stakeholders' capacity to influence the project thus they may propose actions that exceed the project needs or, on the contrary, that are not robust enough.

Another issue project team members may face is the so-called "illusion of control" bias. In practice, people tend to overestimate the extent to which an outcome is under their control (Shapira, 1995), so they tend to consider their stakeholder management strategies as more effective than they actually are.

Finally, given the lesser exposure to the entire project, team members may propose actions that may be beneficial for their tasks but that might even harm other tasks.

When team members have the opportunity to discuss and share the stakeholder management actions with the rest of the team, the aforementioned issues are usually minimized thanks to mechanisms of mutual influence, but when team members are left alone the results may vary.

Managing Stakeholder Engagement

Regardless of the level of formality in the previous steps, stakeholder management has no value if it does not lead to actions.

Some actions may be well planned in advanced but many others simply occur. For planned actions, it is just a matter of implementing them (this does not however mean it is easy). Additional issues may arise when team members have to react to stakeholders in an unplanned way.

In fact, during the normal life of a project, a team member may come into contact with people:

- and not know whether they are stakeholders;
- and know that they are stakeholders but not know their characteristics;
- that he/she knows quite well but they have unexpected requests.

In all these cases, it could be said that the best answer should be: "please refer to the project manager." However, in many real-life situations, this answer cannot be given due to time pressure, emergencies or simply because of stakeholder expectations (remember that project success is evaluated by stakeholders and not only by contractual agreements, if any).

Team members must therefore give an answer that was not planned. The worst scenario is when someone the team member does not know places a special request related to the project. Unfortunately, here there are almost no suggestions that can be generalized. However, knowing the organizational domain, rules, practices, and culture is of great help.

The only very basic suggestion that can be generalized is to have all the contacts details of the team members (email, office location, office phone, mobile phone, instant messaging). This allows team members to quickly get in contact with other team members who may have the information they need.

This suggestion also applies to the remaining two scenarios. However, in those cases, the team member has some additional clues about the stakeholder. Here, the best ally of team members is having a clear picture of the entire project (the global vision we mentioned in the second article of this article series). This allows team members to understand how their stakeholder management actions fit with the rest of the project. Sometimes project managers support team members in developing their global vision, but very often, however, team members have to collect information (much like a private detective, as we mentioned earlier) in order to obtain a broader picture of the project.

Controlling Stakeholder Engagement

Controlling stakeholder engagement is the process of monitoring overall project stakeholder relationships and adjusting strategies and plans for engaging stakeholders.

This process is fundamental because team members can appreciate:

- the existence of stakeholders they were not able to identify;
- if they underestimated or overestimated the importance of specific stakeholders;
- if the stakeholder management strategies were appropriate and effective.

In an organization with a high level of project management maturity this process is formal and can really increase the ability to manage stakeholders effectively. In other organizations the process is very informal thus diminishing the ability of team members to learn from the experience. One suggestion is to always try to close the loop by investigating (remember the private detective?) how stakeholders respond to the implemented management actions.

CONCLUSIONS

Team members play a role in project stakeholder management. How team members are involved in stakeholder management varies depending on the organization's level of project management maturity. In mature organizations, team members are encouraged to identify and manage stakeholders and find fewer issues in the stakeholder management process. In organizations with low project management maturity level team members have fewer opportunities to formally collaborate with other team members in stakeholder management. This "isolation" generates more issues in the stakeholder management process. In particular, the difficulty of acquiring a systematic view of the project makes it difficult to have a shared view of the project stakeholders, thus jeopardizing the stakeholder management effort.

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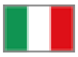

Marco Sampietro obtained a Ph.D. at the University of Bremen, Germany. Since 2000 he has been a professor at SDA Bocconi School of Management, Milan, Italy. SDA Bocconi School of Management is ranked among the top Business Schools in the world (Financial Times, Forbes, Bloomberg, and The Economist rankings). He is a Core Faculty Member at SDA Bocconi School of Management and teaches Project Management on the MBA – Master of Business Administration, and GEMBA – Global Executive Master of Business Administration programs. He is Faculty Member at MISB – Mumbai International School of Business, the Indian subsidiary of Bocconi University, and Visiting Professor at IHU – International Hellenic University, Greece. He is also a Contract Professor at Bocconi University and Milano Fashion Institute for the Project Management courses.

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