

Applying Seven Good Habits to develop Strategic Stakeholder Relationships

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Most project practitioners have come to an understanding that effective management of stakeholder relationships is a key skill that needs to be developed in us. This is very crucial considering that many organizations depend upon their projects to be successful. Project managers know that managing key stakeholders and their influence has a direct impact on project outcomes. Unfortunately many factors make stakeholder relationship management a difficult area for project managers. The project managers need to develop strong leadership skill to manage stakeholders. The power/influence grid is a good start - but it cannot take us far unless we develop some effective habits which are directed at improving our effectiveness in managing stakeholders. It would be difficult to build long term strategic relationships with stakeholders standing on a shaky ground.

Steven R Covey's book, *The 7 habits of Highly Effective people* can be used a good framework for project managers to develop a strong foundation towards better stakeholder management which in turn helps in developing better strategic stakeholder relationships. The book relies on proven time tested principles of integrity, honesty, fairness and human dignity which we can apply to be more effective than just be efficient. But we need to clearly understand that "Principles are good and worth the effort only when they develop into deeds".

Now let us understand and apply the 7 habits to develop strategic stakeholder relationships.

First Habit: Being Proactive

It is very imperative for the project manager to completely accept responsibility for the project outcomes. Our experiences are function of our decisions, not our conditions. We have the initiative and responsibility to make things happen. In every stakeholder engagement the Project manager has the power to choose his response. Proactive project managers focus their efforts in the circle of influence-they work on things they can do something about. In that way they become more proactive and less reactive over a period of time.

Second Habit: Beginning with the end in mind

The ability to visualize the kind of relationship that we can build with the stakeholders over a period of time is important. Constantly revisiting the image, pictures of where the relationship can lead to is a crucial habit when working with stakeholders. By focusing on the end goal that

we perceive to achieve, it helps is doing the things which does not violate the vision we have set. We may have many stakeholders to manage - the question is how effective are we? We cannot be truly effective if we cannot begin with the end in mind.

Third habit: Put first things first

Applying this habit on a consistent basis makes the project manager focus more time and effort on high priority stakeholders- who have high power and high influence in the power/interest grid as explained in PMBOK. This doesn't mean he should overlook the stakeholders in the other quadrants.

Fourth Habit: Think Win-win

This is a key habit for stakeholder interaction and collaboration. No project can be successful without stakeholder interaction and collaboration. Any kind of collaboration without win-win approach will not be effective in the long run. Thinking and applying win-win approach is the ability of the project manager to have a frame a mind that constantly seeks mutual benefit in his interaction with stakeholders.

Fifth Habit: Seek first to understand before being understood

When it comes to understand the stakeholders first before trying to project our viewpoints on them - the key skill is listening. The ability to listen without the intent to reply and putting ourselves in the shoes of stakeholders and walking a distance is not easy but it has been to be done repeatedly to develop this habit.

Sixth Habit: Synergize

The ability of the project manager to encourage and practice "Open" thinking among his stakeholders is important. To be an open thinker one is continuously being creative, making decisions and completing actions. Being an open thinker helps us to find new solutions to old problems. Culture change is not easy, nor is it quick, but if open thinking is inculcated across the team, it plays an important role is building better relations with stakeholders.

Seventh habit: Sharpening the saw

For all the above habits to implemented and bring forth results, the project manager has to regularly sharpen his saw. In simple words sharpening the saw means to develop a habit to

constantly self-renew in 4 dimensions of one self- namely physical, mental, social and spiritual. Unless the project manager spends considerable amount of time in self-renewal activities in 4 dimensions of himself, developing habits 1-6 would be difficult which in turn would make it difficult to build strategic long term relationships.

From what we have discussed above, we can see that applying the seven habits of effectiveness can play a key role in improving strategic stakeholder relationships. By following the above time-tested principles and habits we should be in a better position to manage our stakeholders move effectively in the long term!

About the Author



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