Best Practices for Managing & Engaging Project Stakeholders [1, 2]

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INTRODUCTION

Effective stakeholder management and engagement is now acknowledged as a critical success factor on virtually every project. These assume heightened importance especially for large and complex construction and civil infrastructure development projects which usually tend to have numerous and diverse stakeholders spread over large areas. Effective project stakeholder management and engagement offers several significant benefits to projects, inter alia, reducing negative risks or threats to them, enhancing their design and planning quality and their execution efficiency, and often contributing towards attainment of a desirable win-win situation for both the projects as well as their stakeholders.

As awareness about the importance of good project stakeholder management and engagement has increased precipitously amongst project practitioners in recent year, many projects in construction and civil infrastructure development as well as in other fields have not only adopted sound established practices but are also showing an increasing inclination to experimenting with innovative ones. However, inadvertently or otherwise, it appears that many projects still exhibit serious stakeholder management and engagement shortcomings often resulting in mutually damaging and avoidable consequences for projects as well as their stakeholders. Hence, it is important to research existing best practices dealing with stakeholders in addition to proposing new ones and to generate and disseminate awareness about them to a wide audience of project practitioners and decision-makers. Doing so may expedite their application on

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projects and thus gradually and significantly improve the overall quality of the management and engagement of their stakeholders.

In this paper the authors present and outline ten selected 'best practices' for managing and engaging stakeholders on projects. The insights gained are an outcome of the authors' long-term inter-institutional collaborative research program on the management and engagement of stakeholders on projects, which is currently running in its sixth year. Some of these best practices came to light in discussions and interviews conducted by them over the time period 2017-19 with over fifty senior project managers and stakeholders excercising managerial functions on projects in the United States of America and Pakistan. Others stem from the authors' own personal reflection and experiences with large and complex projects accumulated over a period of several decades.

Although the best practices outlined in this paper can be applied in the context of any category of projects which are being undertaken anywhere they are especially useful for managing and engaging stakeholders on large and complex projects as are typically encountered in major construction and civil infrastructure development schemes. Such projects normally have a large number of primary stakeholders – i.e. those stakeholders which are actively participating in the project and have contractually assigned roles and responsibilities in it – some of whom are individuals serving in an independent capacity while others are organizations. All these entities work collaboratively by combining their inputs, resources and expertise for the purpose of undertaking the project. As knowledge, appreciation and the applied standards of stakeholder management and engagement may differ from stakeholder to stakeholder it is certainly in the interests of the project to not only ensure that all its primary stakeholders are fully cognizant of the criticality of effective stakeholder management and engagement continuously throughout the project life-cycle but also to proactively implement a set of practical measures which can enhance the quality of stakeholder interaction especially with a view towards optimizing collaboration and enhancing performance as well as to keep conflicts and issues between stakeholders to a minimum over the project life-cycle.

The ten 'best practices' are introduced and briefly outlined below. Their order of appearance here is arbitrary and is not intended to signify their level of relative importance. Some of the practices are quicker, easier and less costly to implement than others. However, they all complement each other nicely. Their focus is more on the project's primary stakeholders, less on its secondary stakeholders. Unlike the primary stakeholders, the secondary stakeholders are not active participants in the project and have no assigned roles and responsibilities in it but usually are very large in number, are affected by it in varying degrees and quite often do not always view the project favorably. While each of these practices if applied individually can benefit the project to some

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degree, it would certainly be no exaggeration to state that their collective, wholehearted and sustained application throughout the project life-cycle over time may bring about a very significant and observable positive impact on both project effectiveness and efficiency and satisfy the interests of both the project as well as (and in particular) its (primary) stakeholders.

Measure 01: Project Stakeholder Management Standard

Project management is a powerful and still evolving subject discipline. Over a period of many years and even several decades, the systematic study by academics, researchers, project management associations, consultants, and numerous others, of countless projects undertaken in diverse categories across the globe have generated a deep pool of knowledge and understanding of how projects can and should be professionally managed. With every passing year new insights, concepts and ideas are surfacing which are contributing towards improvement of, inter alia, the processes, tools and techniques, and the standards needed to undertake projects more efficiently and effectively and to help them better manage the negative risks facing them in an increasingly complex, competitive, and multicultural globalized environment.

Standards in particular have advanced immensely in the recent years. Most organizations appear to apply 'off-the-shelf' standards on their projects. Examples are the Project Management Institute's PMBOK, the Association of Project Management's APMBOK, and the International Project Management Association's ICB – to name a few of the more popular ones which are highly regarded and widely applied by project practitioners across the globe and whose contents are revised and updated periodically. Some project management standards have been developed by country-level associations. Furthermore, many public and commercial organizations have invested considerable time, effort and resources in developing their own project management standards specifically suited to their own needs, requirements and operational environment.

Stakeholders are central to every project. Basically, they lie right at the very core a project. Every aspect of a project extending from its conception to its initiation throughout to its completion and thereafter directly involves stakeholders. Numerous project performance surveys conducted across the globe in various project categories over many years have clearly indicated that stakeholder-related considerations tend to play a significantly more crucial role in project success or failure than technical or other factors. Failure to manage and engage stakeholders is obviously asking for trouble. Hence, given the criticality of effective stakeholder management and engagement on projects, especially on large and complex schemes which in this regard traditionally are highly challenging, the authors and some of their interview partners are of the view that an industry-, organization- or even project-specific standard developed specifically with an

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exclusive focus on project stakeholders, both primary and secondary, and vigorously implemented, can help ensure the highest possible level of efficacy in managing these entities over the project life-cycle and help bring about a win-win situation for both the projects and their stakeholders. With this idea in mind, the authors had already earlier proposed the creation of a *Project Stakeholder Governance Framework* which they introduced at the University of Maryland's first annual project management symposium held in June 2014. Highlights of this governance framework were four integrated components, namely, institutional, instrumental, informational, and research & education. In the view of the authors these four components collectively constitute the foundation for the creation, application, consolidation and gradual improvement over time of the organization's entire gamut of principles, guidelines, policies, decision-making structures, rules, procedures, processes, tools and techniques, systems, databases and infrastructure, training, research and so forth, which determine the relationship between the organization's projects and all its stakeholders. Holistic in outlook and practical albeit somewhat complex and potentially costly to implement, an inclusive framework with this high level of sophistication can be developed by or for any organization and can be especially beneficial for those organizations which maintain sizeable project portfolios or whose operations are largely project-driven. An unwavering interest and commitment by senior management along with willingness to expend organizational resources and take risks and develop a conducive organizational culture are, off course, essential prerequisites for overcoming the challenges and bringing such frameworks into existence and ensuring that they function successfully and adapt to changing situations over time. On the other hand, attempts that are poorly conceived, planned or executed may cause serious problems for organizations instead of delivering the desired solutions.

Interestingly, and in apparent recognition of the crucial role and importance of stakeholders on projects, considerable effort has been made in recent years by some commercial organizations and government agencies and ministries to develop and implement standards applicable for dealing with their stakeholders as the currently impressive and expanding array of publicly accessible and sophisticated stakeholder engagement toolkits (for instance, in water resource management, forestry, urban revitalization, mining and other major project fields), guidelines, policies etc. aptly reveals. Clearly, there is immense scope for expansion into all project fields.

Measure 02: The Project Stakeholder Charter

On large and complex projects all (primary) stakeholders are active and direct participants with assigned roles and responsibilities. Besides the project manager and team, the project board or steering committee, and the project client, these typically include numerous independent entities ranging from individuals to large organizations.

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Entities usually involved in such projects are, for example, consultants, designers, advisers, financers, contractors and sub-contractors, vendors, and government agencies. Usually serving as voluntary participants in a project, all have their own respective interests, objectives, motivation, concerns, expectations and perceptions in relation to the project. Quite often such do not completely concide. For instance, whereas the expected financial benefit its participation in the project may far outweigh all other considerations for one stakeholder, another stakeholder which may view the project primarily as a means of improving its public visibility and standing and seeking to develop professional networking opportunities with other participating entities. Consequently, it would be an error of judgement for the project to look at all its primary stakeholders under the same lens and may be potentially damaging for it to automatically assume that because of their contractual bond to the project they will wholeheartedly and unwaveringly support it under any and all circumstances for the entire duration of their participation in the project. Should a stakeholder for some reason come to view the project less favourably any time after formally joining it, then a demotivation effect may set in resulting in a decline in its interest and performance. This in turn may adversely impact not only its own project activities and tasks but those of other stakeholders which depend on them as well. The onus therefore lies with the project to carefully analyze the attributes of its primary stakeholders from the onset of their joining the project and through periodic monitoring and assesment ensure that stakeholders stay content and in case of any issues or conflicts arise to analyze their causes and implement prompt remedial action.

Keeping the above in mind, and based on their interviews with project practitioners, the authors came up with the idea for a Stakeholder Partnership Charter. This is a written document which would become part of the project documentation system and which is endorsed, signed and (hopefully) adhered to by all the primary stakeholders. The Charter is developed in careful consultation with each stakeholder and comprehensively lists and clarifies, inter alia, their respective specific roles and responsibilities, interests, objectives and expectations in relation to the project. It is a valuable reference which the project can update and use over its life-cycle to systematically ensure fulfillment of its primary stakeholders' declared needs and wants and to prevent or promptly address and rectify any observed negative deviations which may crop up over time. At the same time, the Charter helps promote mutual understanding of the differences which exist among stakeholders and helps sustain their commitment to and full cooperation for the project.

Stakeholder-specific charters of sorts are already being utilized on many projects. Usually their scope and content is restricted. A case in point is the project team charter which documents the roles and responsibilities and the work targets of the project team members.

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Measure 03: Stakeholder Collaboration Clause in Project Contracts

According to renowned US project management scholars Cleland & Ireland primary stakeholders encompass all those entities which have a contractual bond with the project or some legal obligation towards it. On large and complex projects numerous entities, including those specifically mentioned in the previous section, fall in this primary category which is distinct from the category of the secondary stakeholders, all of whom have no contractual bond or legal obligation to the project and consequently lie outside its formal control.

As with all contracts, project contracts too are legally binding and enforceable and spell out the roles and responsibilities of the contracting (primary) stakeholders. Contracts can also be instrumentalized for requiring the maximum attainable level of collaboration both between the project and all its stakeholders as well as between the various primary stakeholders actively participating in the project. For instance, to ensure maximum stakeholder collaboration on projects – and thereby increase project efficiency and likelihood of the project being a success - a suggestion surfaced in the course of the interviews conducted for this study to mandatorily include an at all times maximum and prompt collaboration assurance clause in every project contract. Compliance of this obligation by all primary stakeholders would be carefully and individually monitored by the project over time and linked with the application of a points-based collaboration assessment system administered by an evaluation committee specifically tasked for this purpose. Each observed shortcoming in the level of collaboration by a stakeholder would be assigned a score; severe cases would be assigned comparatively higher scores than less serious ones. Periodically reviewing the aggregate scores attained by each stakeholder and carefully analyzing the underlying reasons would serve as a useful basis for discussions between the project and its stakeholders for preventing future or resolving current collaboration issues and problems. If the aggregate score exceeds a pre-specified tolerance limit and an improvement in the quality of collaboration between the project and stakeholder(s) concerned is not feasible or foreseeable despite repeated attempts, termination of the contract between the project and the stakeholder(s) concerned may be considered.

Measure 04: Performance Incentives & Rewards

Project stakeholders, regardless of whether they are individuals, groups or organizations, normally tend to perform better when offered appropriate incentives and rewards for rendering high-quality, outstanding or innovative work. Best work performance may significantly enhance project efficiency and reduce negative risk to the project, both of which are important project objectives. As stakeholder needs, wants and preferences may presumably cover a broad spectrum, it is important that any system of incentives

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and rewards used by projects must reflect such differences between stakeholders in order for it to be effective over the project life-cycle and produce the desired beneficial result. Stakeholder motivating factors can be ascertained specifically by surveying or interviewing them all very early on in the project or whenever they join it during the project life-cycle and incorporating their inputs into designing a customized reward and incentive system. The proposed rewards and incentives identified in the course of the interviews conducted for this research tend to fall into three broad categories:

- Monetary incentives & rewards intended for especially high-performing stakeholders, such as project team members and which could include, for example, payment of a bonus or special grant or allowance.
- Incentives & rewards encompassing better promotional opportunities, more free time, official acknowledgement and commendations, improved access to facilities and a better working environment.
- Preferential access or guaranteed participation on future major projects. This can be of special interest to independent stakeholders such as consultants, contractors or vendors.

Measure 05: Training for Project Stakeholders About Stakeholders

Training is an important tool for imparting knowledge and improving work performance. Many projects make extensive use of training conducted by in-house or external subject matter experts covering a variety of themes (often development of technical or soft skills) for its employees. However, it appears that trainings specifically focused on stakeholder management and engagement are still relatively few and far in between. Considering that stakeholders are central to every project – perhaps even more so in fact than the parameters comprising the 'iron triangle' – and that project performance surveys undertaken across the globe over several years consistently indicate that stakeholder-related issues and challenges constitute an overall significantly bigger threat to project success than factors unrelated to stakeholders, it is surprising that relatively few organizations and projects attempt to systematically educate and inform their employees about the myriad complexities involved in project stakeholder management and engagement and how best to effectively and efficiently handle such complexities and interact with stakeholders professionally and responsibly.

In discussions with project practitioners, an idea surfaced for projects to impart mandatory training to spread knowledge, awareness and understanding of the criticality of good stakeholder management and engagement. Participation in the training would thereby not only be confined to project employees but would be a requirement for all key primary stakeholders having managerial or decision-making roles and responsibilities on

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large and complex projects involving multiple independent professionals and organizations. Broad participation in such training has the advantage that all participating stakeholders would acquire an equal understanding of all salient concepts, rules, policies, standards, guidelines, processes, tools and techniques, procedures, best practices etc. relating to stakeholders which are applicable on the project. Conducted by experienced experts over a period of minimum two to a maximum of five days, the consensus among interviewees was that such trainings must be held as early as possible in the project life-cycle, preferably shortly after project initiation, and repeated at any point in time in the project life-cycle if deemed necessary.

Measure 06: Project Stakeholder Audit

Audits constitute an objective, effective and time-tested tool for evaluating on-going and completed projects. Though usually quite complex, time-consuming and expensive to undertake they can often yield valuable insights. Audits are versatile tools and can focus on specific themes such as financing, quality and technical performance. A variation of the audit, as proposed by the interviewees of this study, can also be used to comprehensively analyze and assess effectiveness and efficiency of the management and engagement of the stakeholders. This would be especially useful for large, complex or mission-critical projects. A stakeholder audit can reveal, inter alia, whether or not the prescribed stakeholder management and engagement standards, policies, processes, procedures, tools & techniques etc. were adhered to by the project. It can also deliver valuable insight into how well or otherwise stakeholder conflicts, issues and problems were handled in addition to collecting, reviewing and assessing detailed critical feedback from stakeholders and offering practical suggestions for improving the quality of stakeholder management and engagement on future projects.

Measure 07: Project Stakeholder Handbook

Project stakeholder management/engagement is a complex and challenging undertaking based on a now quite highly developed and extensive field of knowledge which makes the process of finding creative, fair and flexible solutions, especially of the win-win type, for both projects and their stakeholders easier. Knowledge has be to be shared in order for it to be applied. Training is one way of achieving this; another way is in the form of a manual or handbook accessible to all primary stakeholders. Many commercial organizations and government agencies have developed their own project management handbooks or manuals for reference while planning, designing, executing and controlling their projects. A project- or organization-specific stakeholder manual or handbook developed specially for use by and for the purpose of guiding all primary stakeholders would constitute an invaluable and focused source of information about managing and

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engaging stakeholders as effectively and efficiently as possible. This document can be periodically updated over time as new knowledge, insights and experiences are gained.

Contents of the stakeholder handbook would include both descriptive and prescriptive material. The former typically encompasses, inter alia, the principles, policies, guidelines, standards, rules, procedures, processes, tools and techniques, work flow diagrams, forms, templates, checklists etc. which apply to and are to be used for managing and engaging stakeholders. Included among the latter and based on past experience are, for instance, practical advice, guidance and suggestions for preventing and dealing with complex and tricky situations, challenges, conflicts, issues, problems etc. with stakeholders, best practices and strategies for attaining win-win solutions, ethical conduct and case studies highlighting both excellent and worst stakeholder management and engagement.

Measure 08: Project Stakeholder Newsletter

A useful, variable and up-to-date source of information for primary stakeholders over the course of the project-cycle is the project stakeholder newsletter. Published and circulated to all primary stakeholders by the project office periodically, the purpose of such newsletter is basically to keep stakeholders informed about the project progress and its achieved milestones to date as well as upcoming work, and to highlight their contribution towards achievement of the project goal through their respective activities, tasks, and mutual collaboration. A feature of the newsletter can be to throw light on stakeholder concerns, issues, conflicts, problems etc. currently occurring and provide an opportunity for primary stakeholders to share their knowledge, ideas and experiences, and propose practical suggestions with a view to improving the quality of stakeholder interaction and their management and engagement on the project.

Measure 09: Project Stakeholder Surveys & Interviews

Access to quality information is a critical input for effective stakeholder management and engagement. Only when the project is fully aware of its stakeholders' respective needs, wants, concerns etc. is it possible to address these systematically and properly in a timely manner over the project life-cycle.

Surveying is an excellent, versatile and established tool for acquiring information from a project's stakeholders, both primary and secondary. Generally straightforward, quick and cheap to conduct, well-designed and effective surveys can deliver deep insights about stakeholders. A major advantage of surveying is that the process can be repeated over time and comparisons drawn with data collected from previously undertaken surveys. Such comparisons are very useful for revealing trends and significant differences, the underlying reasons for which can then be ascertained through careful analysis and

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research. In project context three integrated forms of surveys are especially useful for gathering information from stakeholders, namely, expectation, perception, and satisfaction surveys. Expectation surveys determine the stakeholders' views of situations or conditions on the project that they believe will or may occur, or may not occur, at future points in time over the project life-cycle and thereafter. Perception surveys deliver insight from stakeholder perspective about the level of fulfillment - fully, partially, or not - of their pre-identified expectations. Divergence between stakeholder expectations and perceptions may be problematic for the project and must be skillfully addressed by it. Satisfaction surveys provide insight into the stakeholders' mood towards the project. Continuously declining satisfaction levels over time obviously do not augur well for the project and are an indicator that changes in the approach used for managing and engaging stakeholders may be needed.

Surveys can be supplemented with in-depth interviews of stakeholders with a view to soliciting their inputs especially with regard to improving the quality of their interaction, especially in critical areas such as stakeholder communication, cooperation and work coordination. Focus groups are a particularly useful tool in this regard. Formed at the beginning of a project and existing until it ends, focus groups could yield very valuable insights and suggestions which if acted upon may prove highly beneficial for the project and for future projects. Consideration in this regard may also be given to forming a group of specialized focus groups each comprising stakeholders having similar or closely-related roles and responsibilities, tasks etc. or who are closely interacting with each other over time.

Measure 10: Mobile Monitoring, Evaluation & Facilitation Team

The Mobile Monitoring, Evaluation & Facilitation Team is an institutional mechanism intended to provide the project over the course of its life-cycle with the ability to reach out directly to its stakeholders, both primary and secondary, by visiting them on-site and ascertaining if they have any concerns, problems or issues, guidance or advice, or other important matters regarding the project which these stakeholders believe need to be raised and examined. A major advantage of having this team is that it can quickly access potentially valuable inputs from stakeholders which they may not have been inclined to disclose had the project not approached them directly. In particular, it also provides the project with an opportunity to quickly and effectively monitor and assess any problems encountered by stakeholders resulting from the project activities and where and when possible resolving these problems by taking on-the-spot remedial decisions.

Membership of the team can comprise key primary stakeholders or their representatives along with equal representation by a group of neutral independent entities of high social standing and impeccable reputation – such as for example, community leaders, subject

matter experts and officials of well-established non-governmental organizations - the purpose of the latter group's presence being to reassure and instill confidence in stakeholders, especially secondary ones, that the project views the interests of all its stakeholders very seriously and seeks to pursue a fair, ethical and balanced approach in its dealings with them. The team could report directly to the project board or steering committee with its responsibilities and authority contained in its Terms of Reference document.

CONCLUSION

As shown in this paper, and based on analysis of the feedback acquired from a series of in-depth interviews, projects can benefit immensely by applying a set of simple, practical, integrated and fairly easy to implement stakeholder management and engagement 'best practices' over the duration of their life-cycles. The overall benefits to both projects and their stakeholders from these practices will presumably be significantly higher than their cost and the effort, complexity and practical challenges involved in designing and executing them. This is an interesting subject field whose further exploration and consideration clearly offers many possibilities for creativity on the part of project planners and owners and for the pursuit of win-win solutions for all stakeholders.

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John Cable served in the newly formed U.S. Department of Energy in 1980, where he was involved with developing energy standards for buildings, methods for measuring energy consumption, and managing primary research in energy conservation. As an architect and builder, Mr. Cable founded and led John Cable Associates in 1984, a design build firm. In 1999 he was recruited by the University of Maryland's Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering to create and manage a graduate program in project management. In his role as founder and director of the Project Management Center for Excellence at Maryland, the program has grown to offer an undergraduate minor, master's degrees, and a doctoral program. Information about the Project Management Center for Project Management at the University of Maryland can be found at www.pm.umd.edu.

In 2002, PMI formed the Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Educational Programs (GAC). Mr. Cable was appointed to that inaugural board where he served as vice chair. In 2006, he was elected as chairman, a role he held through 2012. As Chair of the PMI GAC, John led the accreditation of 86 project management educational programs at 40 institutions in 15 countries in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Asia Pacific Region. John was awarded PMI's 2012 Distinguished Contribution Award for his leadership at the GAC. He can be contacted at jcable@umd.edu.