Effectively managing negative and neutral stakeholders: a critical challenge [1]

Massimo Pirozzi

ABSTRACT

In each project, the centrality of the stakeholders remains a fully valid principle also in the cases of negative and neutral stakeholders, the behaviors of whom tend to influence negatively – either directly or indirectly, either deliberately or not, but always with consequent heavy impacts on project performances – the delivered value, and, ultimately, the success rate of the project itself. Therefore, an appropriate identification of both evident and potential stakeholders that are or might be characterized by a negative or neutral behavior becomes essential, as well as an effective relationship management turns out to be a critical success factor also in these peculiar stakeholder cases. This paper deepens the domains of the negative and neutral stakeholders, outlines the impacts of the stakeholder behaviors on the project value, shows the guidelines for the effective stakeholder identification and relationship management, and focuses on the specific guidelines that are successfully applicable in the cases of the negative and neutral stakeholder engagements – and eventual disengagements.

NEGATIVE AND NEUTRAL STAKEHOLDERS, WHO ARE THEY?

The concept of stakeholder incorporates several key words and issues. In fact, a project stakeholder is a person, or a group of persons, or an organization, who (Pirozzi, 2019):

- *participates*, or would like to participate, in the project;
- has some kind of *interest* in the project;
- can be (if properly engaged) a foundational *supporter* of the project;
- may *affect/influence* the project, or may be affected/influenced by the project, or may perceive to be affected by the project itself;
- can bring a *value*, which could be either positive or negative, to the project;
- may have responsibilities – that involve *ethics* – towards the project, which, in turn, is supposed to satisfy his requirements and expectations;
- is characterized by a *risk* based thinking approach;
- is part of a set that characterizes *uniquely* each project;
- has a *central role* in all projects: stakeholders, indeed, both implement the project and determine its success via their satisfaction, and, then, are the actual key for project success.

[1] How to cite this paper: Pirozzi, M (2023). Effectively managing negative and neutral stakeholders: a critical challenge; *PM World Journal*, Vol. XII, Issue II, February.

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Therefore, there are several diverse typologies of project stakeholders (Fig.1), who interact each other via their behaviors. Although we generally tend to consider – and unfortunately quite often to assume – that all stakeholders have positive attitudes and behaviors towards the project – so requiring correspondent positive "engagement" efforts in order to obtain their support – in the real world this regrettably almost never happens. In fact, the stakeholder behaviors can be either positive, or negative, or neutral, and, in addition, may change in the different moments of the project lifecycle. Since the negative and neutral behaviors bring, or tend to bring, a negative value, the impacts on the projects are evident, and may be of basic importance; however, both above stakeholder categories and the management of relations with/among them have been almost ignored in the project management literature for decades.

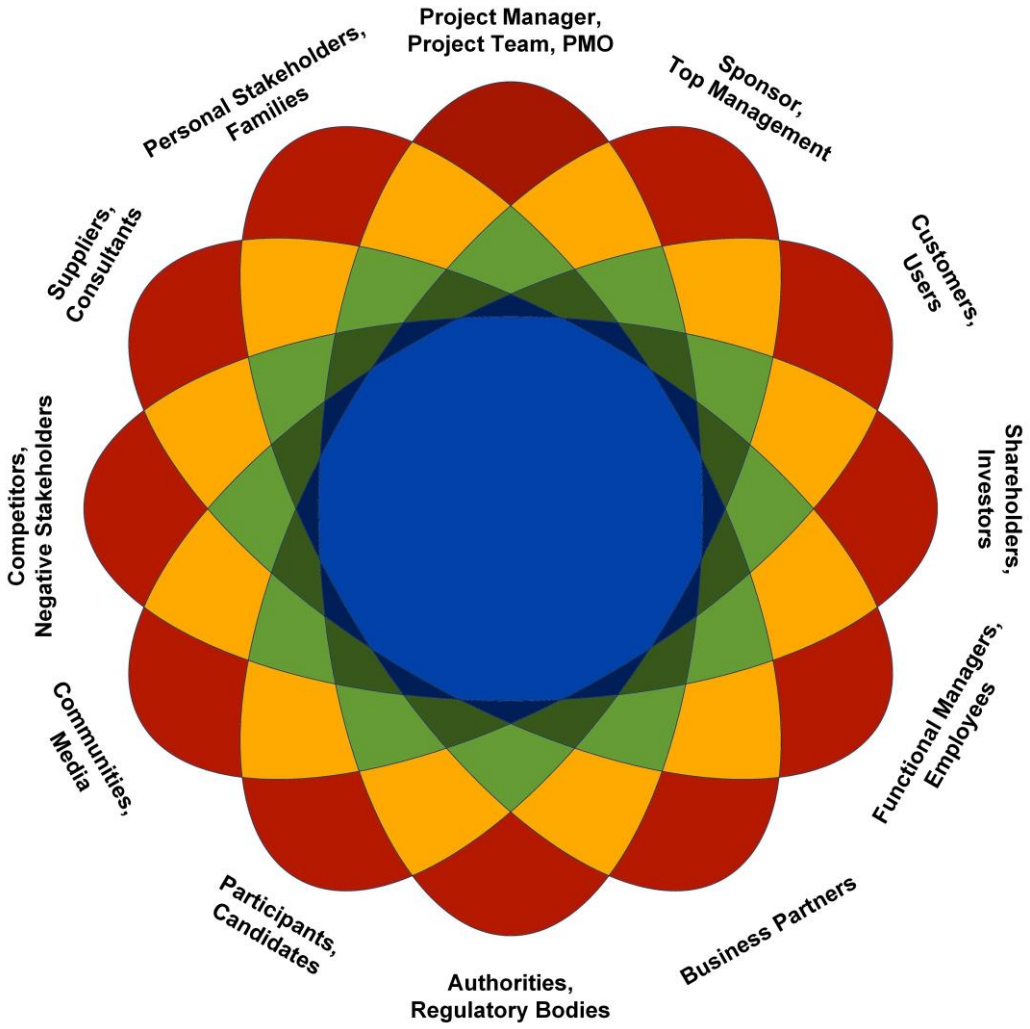

Fig.1 – An example of stakeholder rose (Source: Pirozzi, 2019)

In general, the negative stakeholders are negatively engaged in the project, i.e. their behaviors bring to the project – due to a large variety of possible reasons – a value that is lower than expected or negative at all. The sole evident typology of negative stakeholders is the domain of competitors, while, in almost all the other cases, the

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negative behaviors can unfortunately be detected – at least for the first time – only retrospectively, i.e. once they came forward, and this make the issue of their management further complex. In principle, in fact, all stakeholders may be considered "potentially negative", because they can be and/or become negative based on their behaviors, which in any case may be evolutionary in the project lifecycle. In other words, the project stakeholders potentially behave as the unrevealed stakeholders and the two-timing stakeholders in IT security: both act as "normal", basically positive stakeholders until they can, suddenly and/or unexpectedly, turn out to be negative.

On the other hand, the neutral stakeholders are reluctant to be engaged in the project, e.g. they try to avoid formalizing their agreements/comments/signatures, and their behavior, although is apparently neutral with no added value, turns out to bring to the project a value that is lower than expected or negative at all, as in the case of negative stakeholders. In fact, the behaviors of the neutral stakeholders always cause delays – and then additional costs – and may also generate misunderstandings and/or inaccurate definitions relevant to the scope, as for instance happens when the customers are reluctant to specify their requirements and/or to explicit their expectations.

It is important to highlight that stakeholders' "level of positivity" towards the project exclusively depends on their behaviors, and not on their attitudes and/or intentions. In fact, situations in which stakeholder attitudes and behaviors towards the project diverge are quite common; for instance, unskilled members of the project team might have positive attitudes but negative behaviors in terms of performance that make them negative stakeholders, while demanding customers might have negative attitudes but positive behaviors due to the commonality of interests that make them positive stakeholders, and so on.

Definitively, since behaviors may occur and/or change in the whole project lifecycle, all types of stakeholders – both internal and external to the performing organization – may be and/or become negative and/or neutral, so bringing a negative value to the project, the impact of which is generally dependent on their importance.

THE IMPACTS OF THE STAKEHOLDER BEHAVIORS ON THE PROJECT VALUE

In each project, the stakeholder perspective (Pirozzi, 2017) is a basic driver to show how the value is created (Fig.2).

The outcome – which corresponds to the delivered value – is the result of the integration of the processed inputs/resources – which correspond to the invested value – with the relations, i.e. the integration of the generated value due to the deliverables with the perceived value due to the stakeholder satisfaction (Caressa and Pirozzi, 2022).

Therefore, in general, the negative stakeholders tend to decrease the delivered value via their negative behavior, and this occurs in two basic ways, i.e. via a decrease of the generated value – and a correspondent decrease of the perceived value – or via a decrease of the delivered value due to a negative perceived value (Fig.3).

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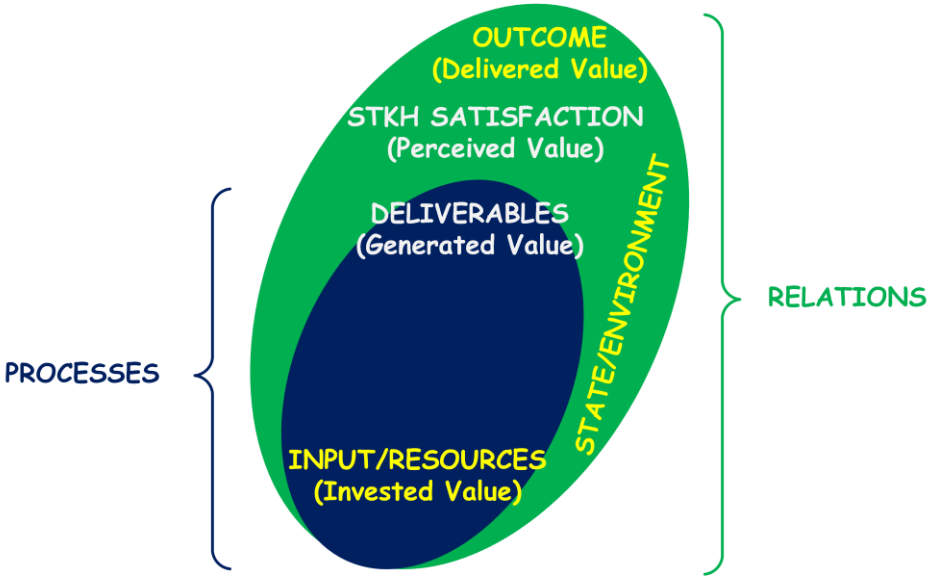

Fig.2 – A Systemic View of a Project (Source: Caressa and Pirozzi, 2022)

In Figure 3, the blue and the green solid lines respectively indicate the results in terms of generated value and delivered value, while the dotted lines indicate the values that could be achievable whether there were not stakeholders that influence negatively the results. The image on the left represents the "normal" case, in which stakeholders may be properly engaged and their perceived value contribute positively, via their satisfaction, to the overall delivered value (maybe compensating for minor negative contributes by negative and/or neutral – but non-key! – stakeholders).

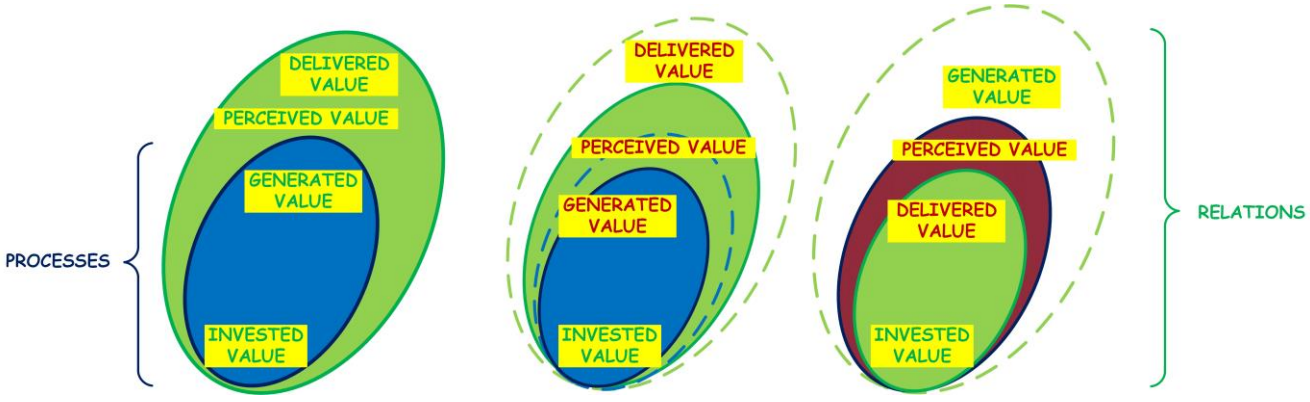

Fig.3 – The basic schemes of the delivered value and of its possible decreases

The image on the middle represents the case in which the generated value that is incorporated in the deliverables is less than expected and, therefore, both the perceived value and the delivered value decrease accordingly. These situations usually occur when

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there are negative stakeholders that are internal to the performing organization, e.g. project team members that underperform, organizational structures that do not make available on time the planned resources in terms of quantity and/or quality, or the organization itself that changes its priorities – by the way, this last case is considered by the PM community the most common cause of project partial and/or total failure (Project Management Institute, 2018).

The image on the right represents the case in which the value that is perceived by key stakeholders is negative, and, therefore, the delivered value results to be even lower than the generated value that is incorporated in the deliverables. These situations usually occur when there is a dissatisfaction of some key stakeholders, and the result is evidently a great waste of the invested resources.

Actually, the behaviors of the positive, negative and neutral stakeholders heavily affect project results. In fact, although it would be very complex individuating all the possible cause/effect relations and then measuring specifically the deviations, the observation of the reality shows very clearly the paramount importance of the stakeholder management issues. Indeed, there are at least ten years that almost 30% of projects do not meet the original goals/business intents because of which they have been financed (Project Management Institute, 2018 and 2021), i.e. a very significant percentage of projects, on average, do not satisfy the stakeholder expectations in terms of delivered value. Since above percentage is almost constant over the years, it evidently shows a systematic error/lack in terms of project management.

On the other hand, the community of project managers and of their executives individuated as the first five primary causes of project failure (Project Management Institute, 2018) all issues that concern the stakeholder relationship management domain – specifically including the relations with key stakeholders as the top management and the customers –, i.e. change in organization's priorities, change in project objectives, inaccurate requirements gathering, inadequate vision or goal for the project and inadequate/poor communication, respectively.

Therefore, definitively, managing effectively the relations with positive, negative and neutral stakeholders is a primary critical success factor for all projects, programs and portfolios.

THE EFFECTIVE IDENTIFICATION OF THE STAKEHOLDERS AND OF THEIR BEHAVIORS

In all the projects, the stakeholders are the basic contributors of both the value – since the stakeholders are at the same time creators and beneficiaries of value – and the complexity. Indeed, project stakeholder domain is characterized by a multilevel complexity (Pirozzi, 2019), because:

- stakeholders are persons, or groups of persons;
- stakeholders are diverse;
- stakeholders are numerous, and stakeholder relations are even more numerous;

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- stakeholder behaviors and relations are context sensitive;
- stakeholder behaviors and relations may influence each other, and then, taking care of the relations both with stakeholders and among stakeholders becomes essential;
- ultimately, stakeholder presence, participation, behaviors and relations may be evolutive in the life cycle of the project.

Therefore, an effective stakeholder identification has the purpose of properly identifying the stakeholders, their relations, their expectations and there behaviors, being able to face and reduce the complexity – thing that requires efficient models and classifications.

The first action that is needed is the individuation and the list of the project stakeholders, which normally require a brainstorming phase. The analysis of both the business case and the contract is basic to determine the stakeholders who directly participate in the project, while a context analysis is generally essential to include also the stakeholders that may influence with their behavior the project performances. At this point, the stakeholder classification is the next step.

The most commonly used classification models are the multiple classification models as, for instance, the grids, which consider the belonging of stakeholders to four different subjective categories, and then individuate four basic “intensities” of relations with them, i.e. monitor, keep informed, keep satisfied, and manage closely. The basic concept of the grids is categorizing stakeholders based on two of their main attributes, and then representing the results on a two-dimensional matrix; the most popular grid is the power/interest grid (Mendelow, 1991), which categorizes stakeholders according to their level of authority in the project, and their level of interest towards the project results.

The grids help to prioritize stakeholders in accordance with their importance, and their use is immediate. However, if they are not integrated with other more complete classification models, have evident limitations to overcome, in order to increase both stakeholder identification efficacy, and its effective usability by other stakeholder management processes:

- stakeholder characterization in multiple classification models is a subjective process, and the importance of some stakeholder could be either over valuated, or, even worse, under evaluated, or ignored at all;

- while in each project, stakeholder behavior can significantly either influence or be influenced by, time, cost, and quality, stakeholder belonging to a certain category in multiple classification models per se does not, neither correlations between above mentioned categories and stakeholder expectations are evident, and/or specific, for each category;

- in multiple classification models, the project stakeholders maintain their individual behavior, even if they belong to the same category, and/or they are at the same level of importance, and this does not lead to a further reduction of the complexity, because, basically, we still have to manage a number of diverse relations that is coinciding with the number of possible stakeholders.

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On the other side, categories that are based on stakeholder common behaviors and main interests are objective, durable, homogeneous, directly related to project characteristics, and reduce greatly the complexity of relations since, in this case, just few different relationship typologies have to be managed. The behavioral classification of stakeholders in Communities, each one sharing a common prevalent interest and a common organizational language (Pirozzi, 2017), is indeed a segmentation of the domain of stakeholders that helps effectively to reduce drastically the complexity of stakeholder management, since it categorizes the whole domain of project stakeholders in four communities only, with just three typologies of relations to manage (and other three to monitor). This Behavioral Model of Stakeholder Communities has been definitively supported by Russell Archibald, who defined it as "excellent" (Archibald, 2017), and Alan Stretton made a very positive commentary on it, also integrating it with some interesting applicable considerations (Stretton, 2018).

In each project there are, indeed, four main communities of stakeholders (Fig.4), which can be defined, respectively, as the providers, the clients, the sponsors, and the influencers; every one of these communities shares a prevailing interest in the project and a specific organizational language, and, then, stakeholders that are part of each of these categories have a common type of behavior towards the project.

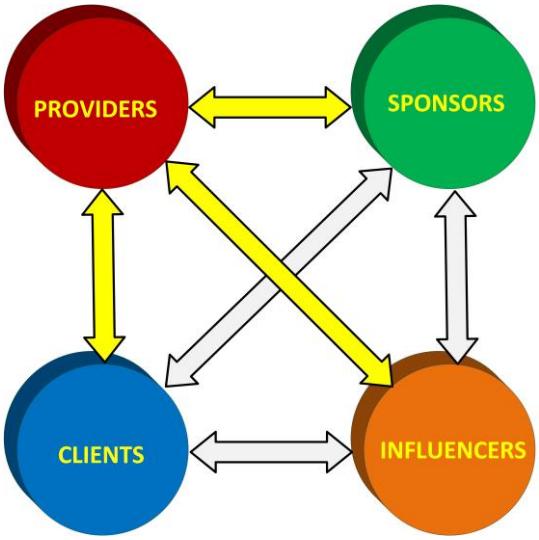

Fig.4 - The Stakeholder Communities and their Relations

The prevailing interest of the providers (e.g. project manager, team, and subcontractors) is in the project as a whole; they share the common interest of realizing the project, in its optimal combination of the three main variables time, cost and quality. Their specific organizational language is the language of project management discipline, and their primary objective is the project completion within the triple constraints.

The prevailing interest of the clients (e.g. customers, users, contracting organizations) is the quality of the project; they share in fact the common interest of obtaining from the project as much quality as possible in correspondence of what they consider the contractual "fix" price and schedule. Their specific organizational language is their

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business language, and the project is for them is not a goal, but a medium to achieve their business/strategic goals.

The prevailing interest of the sponsors (e.g. project sponsor, top management, investors, funders) is the profitability. Their specific language is the language of business economics, and the project is considered by them, in this case too, a medium to achieve their business goals.

Finally, the prevailing interest of the influencers is to participate in the project, even if they may be not a contracting party. In the community of the influencers there are the authorities, such as the public administrations, the media, plus a large variety of other communities, as e.g. the local and web communities, the lobbies, the trade unions, the associations, and so forth, as well as the competitors, the personal stakeholders, and the potential customers and/or users. Their specific language is the language of the media and/or the natural language, but sometimes and/or occasionally business language and the language of economics may be present too (Stretton, 2018), while the project is for the influencers a medium that supports their goals and/or their own mission.

Definitively, integrating a multiple classification model, as the power/interest grid, with the behavioral model of communities, can be very simple, since it is sufficient to associate to every stakeholder who is present in the grid a letter (e.g. P, C, S, I) that corresponds to each community, but is effective at all, both to identify those key stakeholders to develop a direct communication with, and to drastically reduce the complexity of stakeholder management by minimizing the diverse typologies of relations to be managed (Pirozzi, 2019).

At this point, the only missing issue that is relevant to the effective stakeholder identification is the determination of what stakeholders are and/or become negative and/or neutral. Since, as we saw previously, the behaviors may change dynamically, a continuous endeavor in terms of monitoring and controlling is then needed to detect promptly the switch of a stakeholder from a positive to a neutral or negative behavior, in order to manage this issue properly. This also because negative and neutral stakeholders tend to remain in their state, then accumulating negative value, so that timely stakeholder management actions aimed at obtaining positive changes in their behaviors become necessary.

In general, negative and neutral behaviors are revealed upon the occurrence of certain events, e.g. negative affirmations, delays, drops in productivity, difficulty in opening and/or managing relations, etc.; once this types of events occur, it is then easy and immediate to “tag” the relevant identified stakeholders, in the stakeholder register, as negative or neutral, and then trigger the “specific” management of the relations with them that is required. In addition, there might exist “lessons learned” that suggest to identify some stakeholders as potentially negative or neutral, and this could save time in their specific management.

THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF POSITIVE, NEGATIVE AND NEUTRAL STAKEHOLDERS: ENGAGEMENTS, DISENGAGEMENTS AND DASHBOARDS

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In a systemic perspective (Senge, 2006), the stakeholder relationships may be represented, together with the value, as a "reinforcing loop", in which an improvement of the relations among stakeholders correspond, via their engagement, to an increase of the project value, and vice versa (Fig. 5). Specifically, The providers' engagement influences directly the generated value and indirectly the perceived value, the clients' engagement influences directly the perceived value and indirectly the generated value, the investors' engagement influences directly both the invested value and the perceived value, the influencers' engagement influence directly the perceived value.

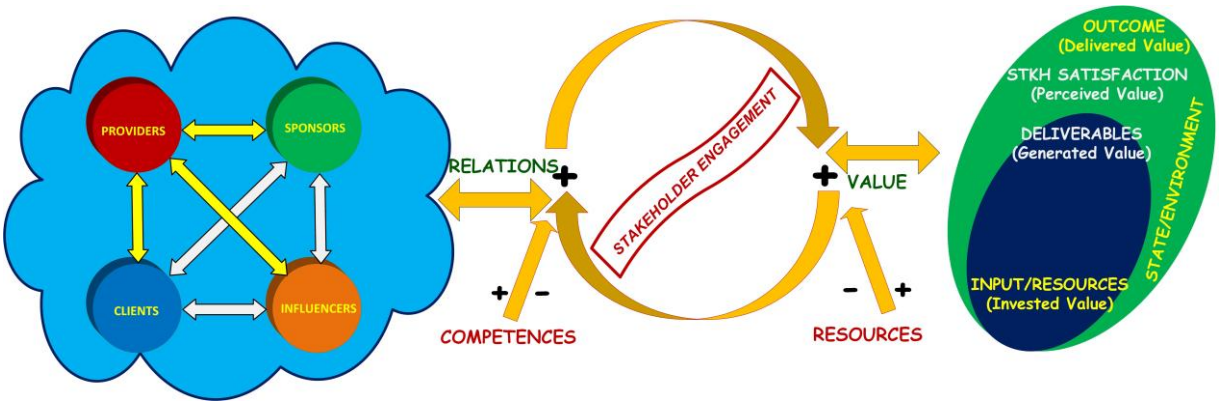

Fig.5 – The Reinforcing Loop between Stakeholder Relations and Value

Of course, both the quality of stakeholder relations and the creation of value cannot grow indefinitely: the available competences and resources, which initially act as enablers/accelerators, from a certain point on constitute "limits to grow", and a state of equilibrium is then reached.

When negative and/or neutral stakeholders are present, their behaviors act as a "brake" in the overall process of value creation, and they tend to bring a negative value – which always corresponds to "improvable" stakeholders relations and engagements – that causes a "weakening" of the loop. In this case, the trend becomes the achievement of a new equilibrium that corresponds to lower performances of the project, as we saw in Fig.2. The causes of negative and/or neutral behaviors can be relational, rational, or both, and have to be addressed properly in order to reverse the trend of a negative and/or neutral stakeholder engagement in a positive one.

In all the cases in which there are stakeholders who bring a negative value, there are problems in the management of the relationships with them, but this should not be surprising, since we already saw that the first five primary causes of project partial and/or total failure (Project Management Institute, 2018) are all issues that concern the stakeholder relationship management domain. Therefore, an effective stakeholder relationship management becomes necessary both to invert eventual negative trends and, a fortiori, to ensure an adequate process of value creation.

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Indeed, in all projects, the stakeholder relationship management is a powerful, and effective, set of processes and competencies, that helps both the project manager and the project team to remain constantly aligned with both stakeholder requirements and expectations, in order to target continuously the achievement of both project objectives and goals, so increasing the overall project success rate (Pirozzi, 2018). However, in order to improve successfully both the meeting of the original goals and business intent of the project, and/or the achievement of objectives in terms of scope, time, cost, and quality, especially in large and/or complex projects, just an event-driven stakeholder management cannot be considered as sufficient, and, therefore, a structured path to effectiveness must be built; every relationship management is, in all respects, a project within the project, which is focused on the empowerment of stakeholder engagement and management.

Indeed, a Relationship Management Project (Pirozzi, 2019) includes and integrates several specific enhanced project management processes, which, in turn, interact with each other perfectly in accordance with the five project management process groups, i.e., initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing (Fig. 6); in this way, immediate applicability is guaranteed and ensured in all projects, of any size and/or complexity and in any sector of activity.

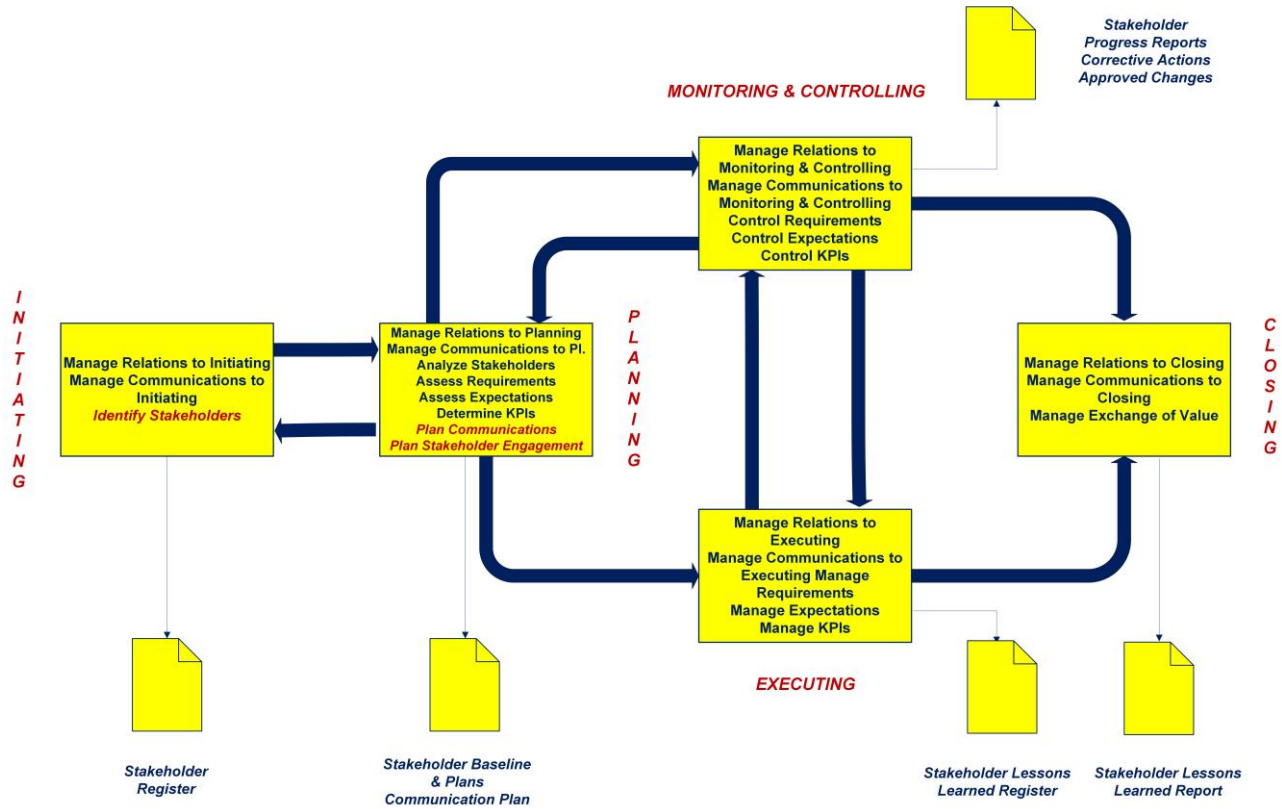

Fig.6 – The Relationship Management Project (Source: Pirozzi, 2019)

The concept of a Relationship Management Project is naturally based on the axioms that both stakeholder relations management and communications have to be considered in

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their most comprehensive and extensive meanings; indeed, stakeholder management is not limited to stakeholder engagement only, because we have to consider that, for instance, relations that are non-collaborative and/or among stakeholders, and not just with them, have to be managed too, as well as stakeholder identification, requirements and expectations have to be managed in the whole project lifecycle, and as well as project communication is not limited to project information only, but it must cover all the diverse multilateral exchange of project-related contents.

Definitively, Relationship Management Project both is based on and follows the two main guidelines:

- ✓ both stakeholder relations management and communication management processes must be specifically present in all the project management process groups; e.g., it is evidently unconceivable to identify a scope or to develop a project charter without interacting with the project sponsor, or to develop project plans without interacting with those members of the project team that are the responsible for the diverse work packages, or to close a project without interacting with the customer, etc.; and

- ✓ the project/stakeholder requirements, the stakeholder expectations, and the measures of value as the key performance indicators (KPIs), have to be processed during the whole project life cycle, i.e., they have to be determined, assessed, managed, and control, and all this iteratively and/or adaptively too, if needed.

Negative and/or neutral behaviors of the stakeholders may be determined also by rational causes, e.g. in the presence of low performances of the project or when divergences of interest among the stakeholders occur. In all cases, if rational causes exist, these are of course dominant with respect to the relational ones, i.e. rational causes have to be removed necessarily before the other. When the low performances of the project – and the consequent lack of trust – are the causes of the negative and/or neutral behaviors, additional competences and resources are evidently needed to increase the overall value and invert positively the trend.

In any case, for all stakeholders, the diversity of interests and/or the perception that other stakeholders hamper their interest, as well as the thought that their expectations are not and/or will not be satisfied, may constitute major causes of negative behaviors, which, if not properly prevented and/or managed, can generate significant damages to the project, until a possible project partial and/or total failure.

An effective analysis of stakeholder expectations greatly prevents their possible negative and/or neutral behaviors. For each stakeholder community, the effective analysis can be based on a systemic approach, which focuses on cause-effect relationships; in all cases, relationships between strategies, which are the causes, and the expectations, which are the effects, are defined in the business and/or other plans that stakeholders set up, and the internal and external context affects them, too (Pirozzi, 2019).

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In investors' perspective, plans are generally business plans, and, generally, they are available and/or accessible through the project sponsor: investors' economic and financial expectations rely on project, and on project follow up, and, then, influence directly project objectives and triple constraint. In contrast to investors' plans, those of clients generally are not available and accessible to Project Manager, and, then, they look unknown and/or hidden: in depth study of both customers and users business and/or social context, as well as discussions and interactive clarifications with key stakeholders, become foundational to understand properly their expectations. Clients' expectations concern mainly the product/service life cycle, and, then, influence directly project goals, so their influence on project objectives is indirect, but essential; definitively, analyzing purchasers' expectations is the hardest part of the work, but it is basic to target project success. Finally, influencers plans are generally not evident too, as per those of clients, but, since they are not directly involved in the contract, their influence in the project does not concern directly scope and objectives, although it proves to be basic in establishing constraints of different types (legal, regulatory, environmental, etc.).

In any case, potential conflicts and/or misunderstandings between different stakeholder expectations must be immediately solved, and/or an agreed prioritization has to be made, just like initial scope and requirements have to be reviewed accordingly: indeed, only the alignment of the diverse stakeholder expectations can prevent negative behaviors as much as possible, and, then, support a proper project development, and, ultimately, an increase of the project success rate.

However, there may be stakeholders that are "structurally" negative because of their divergent interests, and in these cases, of course, there is no possibility to change positively their behavior. In general, these stakeholders do not participate directly in the projects: main potential examples are the competitors, the local and/or web communities, the personal stakeholders (Pirozzi, 2019) and in some cases, stakeholders that are part of the same performing organization but do not share the same goals and/or budgets – these last cases are even more delicate to manage, because these "internal" stakeholders often tend to remain hidden. The "structurally negative" stakeholders do not participate directly in the projects; however, their behaviors may heavily influence negatively the behaviors of key stakeholders with whom they are in connection, and, therefore, they have to be "disengaged" from the project. Indeed, since they mainly oppose the project by trying to discredit it, often by using the power of amplification that is a characteristic of internet and/or social media, if project reputation is not properly defended, they can succeed with disruption of the project.

The real advantage that the project manager and the team have over the structurally negative stakeholders is the technical and operational updated knowledge about the project. In fact, the negative stakeholders that try to discredit the project are unavoidably unprepared, and, therefore, use wholesale arguments, which can be very effectively opposed by specific issues concerning the real status/progress of the project. In these cases, the use of a professional language – of course supported by reports, charts, sheets, gantts, etc. – is generally successful, and leads to a progressive "disengagement"

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of the negative stakeholders, who – as all – do not like to make a bad impression with a consequent bad impact their reputation.

On the other hand, the neutral stakeholders are reluctant to get involved, and, therefore, require special additional efforts for their engagement. We already showed above the importance of the relational effort, to be managed as "a project in the project", with the essential role of the KPIs (Fig. 6). In general, the best way to share effectively, rapidly, and continuously, KPIs with other stakeholders is using dashboards and/or scorecards, which replace very efficiently traditional reports (Kerzner, 2015). Actually, the use of KPIs and dashboards can help to deal effectively also with the neutral stakeholders, because KPIs that are shared via dashboards are business-oriented, client-centered, and very stakeholder-friendly; moreover, they require a quick and minimal effort to interact, and, in most cases, they are available so frequently for sharing, that also no-answers can be interpreted positively, as a "silent approval" (Pirozzi, 2019) – which is a very good starting point to positively engage progressively the neutral stakeholders.

Definitively, both the negative and the neutral stakeholders are interested parties of extraordinary importance in all projects, since they heavily influence, via their behavior, the project value. Their effective identification and management require, as we saw above, specific actions and competences; however, these additional efforts are totally rewarded in terms of value creation and, therefore, of project results, because the on field data confirm that there is a still a great space for project optimization. In fact, in the last ten years, on average (Project Management Institute, 2018), more than 40% projects suffered scope creeps, additional cost and delays, more than 30% projects did not meet their initial goals/business intents and the losses in case of project failures has been almost 30% of the budget …

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About the Author

Massimo Pirozzi

Rome, Italy

Massimo Pirozzi, MSc cum laude, Electronic Engineering, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Project, Program and Portfolio Manager, Principal Consultant and Educator. He is a Member of the Executive Board and an Accredited Master Teacher, of the Istituto Italiano di Project Management (Italian Institute of Project Management). He is certified as a Professional Project Manager, as an Information Security Management Systems Lead Auditor, and as an International Mediator. He is a Researcher, a Lecturer, and an Author about Stakeholder Management, Relationship Management, and Complex Projects Management, and his papers have been published in U.S.A., in Italy, and also in Russia; in particular, he is the Author of the innovative Book "*The Stakeholder Perspective: Relationship Management to enhance Project value and Success*", CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, Boca Raton (FL), U.S.A., October 2019. Due to the acknowledgement of his comments on stakeholder-related issues contained in Exposure Draft of The Standard for Project Management - 7th Edition, he has been recognized as one of the *Contributors and Reviewers of The PMBOK® Guide - Seventh Edition*, and he received the *Certificate of Appreciation for Excellence for his volunteer contributions to the Project Management Institute and the project management profession in 2020*.

Massimo Pirozzi has a wide experience in managing large and complex projects, programs, and portfolios in national and international contexts, and in managing business relations with public and private organizations, including multinational companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, research institutes, and non-profit organizations. He worked successfully in several sectors, including Defense, Security, Health, Education, Engineering, Logistics, Cultural Heritage, Transport, Gaming, Services to Citizens, Consulting, and Web. He was also, for many years, a Top Manager in ICT Industry, and an Adjunct Professor in Organizational Psychology. He is registered as an Expert both of the European Commission, and of Italian Public Administrations.

Massimo Pirozzi is an Accomplished Author and an International Editorial Advisor of *PM World Journal*. He received three 2020 PM World Journal Editor's Choice Awards for his featured paper "*Project Management for Evidence Based Medicine*" (co-authored with Dr. Lidia Strigari), for his Article "*Project communications 1.0 and 2.0: from information to interactivity*" and for his report from Italy titled "*The fight against Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) from the perspectives of projects and of project management*". He received also two *2019 PM World Journal Editor's Choice Awards* for his featured paper "*Stakeholders, Who Are They*?", and for his report from Italy titled "*PM Expo® and PM Maturity Model ISIPM-Prado®*", and a *2018 PM World Journal Editor's Choice Award* for his featured paper "*The Stakeholder Management Perspective to Increase the Success Rate of Complex Projects*".

Massimo can be contacted at max.pirozzi@gmail.com.

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