

How to understand project stakeholders for project success^{1, 2}

Alfonso Bucero

1. Introduction

The ability to understand people is one of the greatest assets anyone can ever have. It has the potential to positively impact every area of your life, not just the business arena. If you are not able to understand project stakeholders, you will not be able to influence them. You need to know what their worries are, what do they expect from you, what are their expectations and desires; you need to listen to them. Then you will have the possibility to influence them.

Understanding people certainly impacts your ability to communicate with others. The biggest mistake I made in the past frequently, as a project manager, was to put my highest priority on expressing my ideas and feelings. What most people really want is to be listened to, respected, and understood. The moment people see that they are being understood, they become more motivated to understand your points of view. If you can learn to understand people, how they think, what they feel, what inspires them, how they're likely to act and react in a given situation – then you can motivate and influence them in a positive way.

Then, in order to influence people, we need to consider what is best, to be loved or feared. Machiavelli pondered that timeless conundrum five hundred years ago and hedged his bets. Machiavelli poses a basic question that all politicians have to answer for themselves: is it better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? And his answer is clear: fear is better. “Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? One should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved.”

2. Why people fail to understand others?

Lack of understanding concerning others is a recurrent source of stress in our society. In order to understand project stakeholders, we need to listen to them. In fact, their voices need to be listened

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to if we want to be successful in our project. If understanding is such an asset, why do not more people practice it? There are many reasons:

2.1 Fear

When people do not understand others, they rarely try to overcome their fear in order to learn more about them. It becomes a vicious cycle. Unfortunately, fear is evident in the workplace when it comes to employee's reactions toward their leaders. Laborers fear their managers. Middle managers are intimidated by senior managers and in some cases project managers too. The three groups are sometimes afraid of executives. The whole situation causes undue suspicion, lack of communication, and reduced productivity. Fear can undermine cognitive potential, creativity, and problem solving, and cause employees to get stuck and even disengage. It is a "hot" emotion, with long lasting effects. It burns into our memory in a way that cooler emotions do not.

I strongly believe that warmth is the conduit of influence. It facilitates trust and communication and absorption of ideas. There are many signs from your body language that can show people that you are pleased to be in their company. When warmth is your priority it helps you connect immediately with those around you, demonstrating that you hear them, understand them, and can be trusted by them. For example, when I was working on IT projects in banking organizations, I observed the following behaviors from project managers:

- They think their ideas will be rejected
- They feel colleagues won't like the ideas
- They think they won't get credit if the ideas work
- They are afraid the boss will be threatened by the ideas
- They are concerned that they will be labelled as troublemakers
- They are afraid of losing their jobs if they suggest ideas that don't work

All those project managers tried to avoid conflict generation in the projects they managed. What happens is that sometimes we assume some negative behaviors from other project stakeholders without talking to them, without listening to them. Based on my professional experience some level of stakeholder's conflict is healthy. In my opinion if you give the others the benefit of the doubt and replace fear with understanding, everyone can work together positively.

2.2 Self-centeredness

There are two sides to every question as long as it does not concern us personally. One way to overcome our natural self-centeredness is to try to see things from other people's perspectives. For instance, the salesperson's challenge is to see the world from the prospect's viewpoint. And I believe it is the challenge for every one of us as project managers. When dealing with other people (project stakeholders) please consider as showed in Exhibit 1:

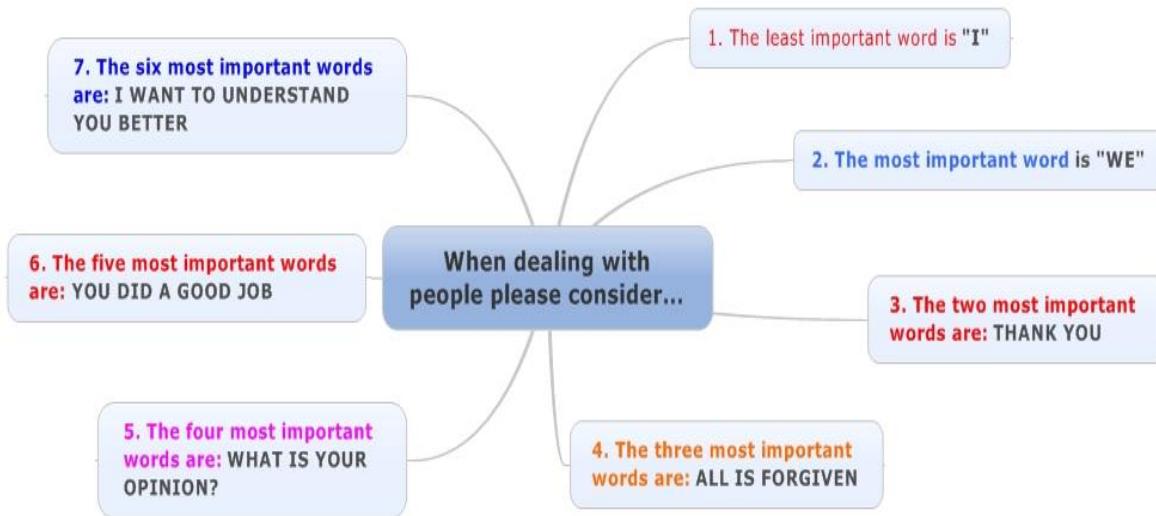


Exhibit 1 – Considerations dealing with people

1. The least important word is “I”: You are leading a team. You achieve project goals and objectives through your project stakeholders. Do not be a “me” person. You are the driver, not the doer.
2. The most important word is “We”: All project stakeholders together will contribute to project success. So you are a team, you are not alone as a project manager. You need to lead your team and influence all your project stakeholders.
3. The two most important words are “Thank You”: Smile and thanks your project stakeholders for their contributions, inputs and feedback. The words “Thank you” only consumes 0,000002 milligrams of saliva, and not all project managers use it.
4. The three most important words are “All is forgiven”: Project stakeholder’s conflicts and issues are part of a project. We need to focus on solving project problems but not on personal issues or conflicts.
5. The four most important words are “What is your opinion”: Ask for stakeholder’s opinions and listen to them carefully. You will need to spend some time with your project stakeholders periodically. Communication is a key for project success.
6. The five most important words are “You did a good job”: Recognizing things welldone and giving positive feedback when needed is very important to maintain project stakeholders focused and motivated.

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7. The six most important words are “I want to understand you better”: Demonstrate that you, as a project manager, has interest in listening and understanding your project stakeholders. You need to create a productive and effective business relationship with your stakeholders.

Changing your attitude from self-centeredness to understanding requires desire and commitments to always try to see things from the other person’s point of view.

2.3 Not appreciating differences

We need to respect and recognize everyone else’s unique qualities. Learning to appreciate their differences is the right path in my personal experience. If somebody in your team has a talent that you don’t have, great. The two of you can strengthen each other’s weaknesses. For instance, I use to work with people from different cultures and I consider myself as a lucky person because of that. You need to celebrate people’s differences in temperament. Variety makes for interesting dynamics between people. People from different cultures see things from a different perspective, from a different angle. Changing the frame of reference is usually helpful because it obliges you to reflect.

For instance, my wife works with me on the same project in our small company. She is very analytic and pragmatic; she knows how to take care of all the small details when we are preparing a project proposal for a customer. I’m much more of a dreamer and visionary. So that mix works well for us, because it is a good combination. The combination of differences has helped us when presenting solution proposals to customers and we influenced them to be convinced of our solution.

Another example was the good teamwork I did with my internal project sponsor for an IT customer project. I was two years dealing with the customer on the customer office. I was the project manager for that project and as I spent all the time at the customer office, I started to think as a customer. My internal Sponsor (in this case my boss) attended the Steering Committee meetings with the customer and me every 15 days. At those meetings he always played the “*bad and the ugly*” role and I played the “*good*” role. It was part of our strategy. So that way we complemented each other achieving our purpose that was project success and good customer satisfaction. When the project manager is able to work well on a team with his/her Sponsor, and the customer Sponsor you can expect great project results.

2.4 Not acknowledging similarities

As much as you know more about people and get to know others, you begin to realize that people have a lot in common. We all have hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, victories, and problems. A clear example is the first PMI Congress I attended in 1993 in the US. As soon as I talked to other international colleagues, I found they had similar problems and issues with the project they managed that I had in the projects I managed in Spain.

Most people have an emotional reaction to what’s happening around them. To foster understanding, think what your emotions would be if you were in the same position as the person

you are interacting with. You know what you would want to happen in a given situation. Chances are that the person you are working with has many of the same feelings.

For example: A couple of years ago I directed a Master Program in Project Management in the UPM (Madrid University of Technology). During the training course the students were asked to select a project that would be defended at the end of the course. They had the possibility to choose between two teachers as project mentors. One of the teachers always had students lined up waiting to talk to him while the other had nothing to do. I was curious to know what the reason was because both were good teachers. I asked one student and he told me: the reason is because the teacher who has a long line of students waiting for him listen to everyone, ask everyone to write his/her commitment in a project charter. He cares of the students. The other teacher does not listen to anybody.

3. How do people react to your style?

Research by Amy Cuddy (Harvard Business Review, July 2013) suggests that the way others perceive your levels of warmth and competence determines the emotions you elicit and your ability to influence a situation. For example, if you are highly competent but show only moderate warmth, you will get people to go along with you, but you won't earn their true engagement and support. If you show no warmth, beware of those who may try to derail your efforts and may be your career. In any case, the key is to develop your ability to listen to your stakeholders. Then you need to use your passion, persistence and patience with them.

4. Some things everybody needs to understand about people

Knowing what people need and want is the key to understanding them. If you can understand them, you can influence them and impact their lives in a positive way. If we were to boil down all the things, we know about understanding people and narrow them down to a short list, we would identify the five things showed at Exhibit 2:

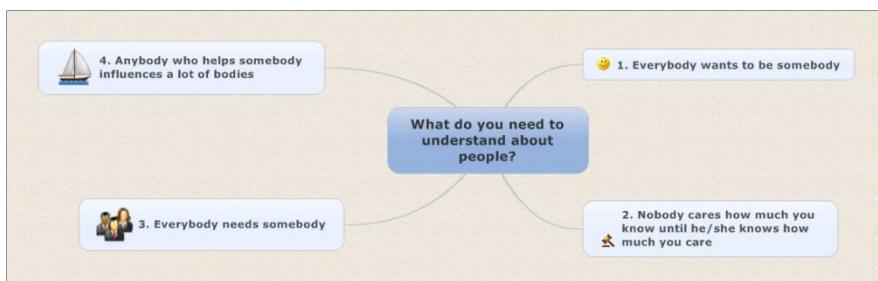


Exhibit 2 – What do you need to understand about people?

4.1 Everybody wants to be somebody

There is not a person in the world who does not have the desire to be someone, to have significance. Even the least ambitious and unassuming person wants to be regarded highly by others. Let me give you an example: In the year 1993 when I attended my first PMI Congress in North America, I was in the PMI Awards Ceremony. I was really impacted by the public

recognition that PMI gave to some professionals. It was spectacular the large amount of people in the room. I said to myself “I dreamed to be there some day”. Nineteen years later that happened.

It is funny how that kind of dream can impact your life. Everybody wants to be regarded and valued by others. In other words, everybody wants to be somebody. Once that piece of information becomes a part of your everyday thinking, you will gain incredible insight into why people do the things they do. If you treat every person you meet as if he or she were the most important person in the world, you will communicate that he or she is somebody to you.

4.2 Nobody cares how much you know until he or she know how much you care

If you want to be a project manager with influence, you need to love people before you try to lead them. The moment that people know that you care for and about them, the way they feel about you changes.

Showing others that you care is not always easy. I believe the greatest times and fondest memories will come because of people, but so will come your most difficult, hurting and tragic times. People are your greatest assets and your greater liabilities. The challenge is to keep caring about project stakeholders no matter what:

- People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered – love them anyway
- If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives – do good
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies – succeed anyway
- The good you do today will perhaps be forgotten tomorrow – do good anyway
- Honesty and frankness make your vulnerable – be honest and frank anyway
- The biggest man with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest man with the smallest mind – think big anyway
- People favor underdogs but follow only big dogs – fight for the few underdogs anyway
- What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight – build anyway
- People really need help but may attack you if you help them – help them anyway
- Give the world the best that you have and you will get kicked in the teeth – give the world the best that you have anyway

If better is possible then good is not enough, if you want to help others and become a person of influence, keep smiling, sharing, giving, and turning the other cheek. That's the right way to treat people.

4.3 Everybody needs somebody

Everybody needs friendship, encouragement, and help. What people can accomplish by themselves is nothing compared to their potential when working with others. Doing things with other people tends to bring contentment. For example: When I manage projects, I always instill my team members to share what they did during the week with the other team members. In that way I try to demonstrate that by exchanging experiences and thoughts they can avoid reinventing

the wheel and they need each other to continue working in the project in order to achieve their objectives. Asking questions and sharing ideas is always helpful. People who try to do everything alone often get themselves into trouble.

4.4 Everybody can be somebody

Once you understand people and believe in them, they really can become somebody. And it does not take much effort to help other people feel important. Little things, done deliberately at the right time, can make a big difference. For example: At the beginning of my professional career I started working in Fujitsu Spain as an Engineer, and I made many mistakes when trying to accomplish my assignments. Little by little I corrected my mistakes and I was very lucky because I had a manager who met me every Friday afternoon for at least ten minutes and reinforced me what I accomplished well that week. He makes me feeling happy and he encouraged me to move forward.

Another clear example is doing retrospective analysis session along the project life cycle. Those information-sharing sessions allowed participants to talk freely and share their project experiences showing that all project stakeholders were important for project success.

4.5 Anybody who helps somebody influences a lot of people

The final thing you need to understand about people is that when you help one person, you are really impacting a lot of other people. What you give to one person overflows into the lives of all the people that person impacts. The nature of influence is to multiply. It even impacts you because when you help others and your reasons are good, you always receive more than you can ever give. Most people are so genuinely grateful when another person makes them feel that they are somebody special that they never tire of showing their gratitude.

When managing a project for a Financial Institution in Spain, I found some tension during the first project steering committee meeting among the different customer stakeholders. The customer project manager did not have a good relationship with the Marketing department Manager. I treated the Marketing Manager to lunch and had the opportunity to find out more information about the issue. I discovered that the Marketing Manager wanted to have more freedom in his decisions because the customer project manager was very autocratic in his project decisions, but he wanted the project to be a success. Then, I spent some time with the customer project manager to get him to understand the situation and looking for more synergy in his actions with the rest of the Stakeholders. After some weeks, the customer project manager modified his behavior and the level of collaboration increased. After some months, other project stakeholders approached me to say thanks Alfonso because your efforts aligning people' thoughts to achieve our project success.

5. The ability to understand people

Finally, the ability to understand people is a choice. It is true that some people are born with great instincts that enable them to understand how others think and feel. But even if you are not an instinctive person, you can improve your ability to work with others. Every person is capable of having the ability to understand, motivate, and ultimately influence others.

5.1 The other person's perspective

Whenever you look at things from the other person's perspective, you will receive a whole new way of looking at life. And you will find other ways of helping others. For example, a king was upset because his favorite dog was missing. The king sent couriers throughout the land to look for it, but without any successful result. In desperation, the king offered a great reward. Many came hoping to simpleton at the king's court sought an audience with the monarch and told him that he could find the dog.

"You" exclaimed the king. "You can find my dog when all others have failed? Yes sire," answered the simpleton.

"Ok, do it", said the king, who had nothing to lose. Within hours the dog was back at the palace, and the king was astonished. He immediately had his treasurer issue a handsome reward to the man and asked him to explain how he had found it when many men considered wise had not.

"It was easy, sire", said the simpleton. "I merely asked myself if I were a dog where would I go? And putting myself in his place, I soon found him."

Sometimes we, as project managers, are not asking enough questions to project stakeholders to know more about their personal perspectives and opinions. However asking for other person's perspective is very helpful to understand people.

5.2 Personal empathy

Another quality that you need to develop if you want to understand others is "personal empathy". Not everyone is naturally empathetic. I mean not all the people are able to put on the other's people boots. People have problems and issues, and those problems affect their reactions. So, you need to understand that people reactions are not always negative because they are their natural response but because they have a special reason.

5.3 Positive attitude about people

People usually see what they look for and hear what they listen for. If you have a positive attitude about people, believe the best of them, and act on your beliefs, then you can have an impact on their lives. But it all starts with the way you think of others. You cannot be a positive influencer if your thinking is negative. Your attitude towards people is one of the most important choices you will ever make. If your thinking is positive, you can really make an impact on them.

If you want to become a person of influence, have a positive attitude toward others. If you treat every person that you meet as if he or she were the most important person in the world, you communicate that he or she is somebody to you. To make an impact on others, find out what people want and then help them to get it. That's what motivates them. In addition, that is what makes it possible for you to become a person of influence in their lives. Thinking in a positive way about all your project stakeholders is a good and effective practice from the project manager point of view.

6. Projecting warmth

When professionals want to project warmth, they sometimes increase the enthusiasm in their voice; increasing their volume and dynamic range to convey delight. That can be effective in the right setting, but those around you have done nothing in particular to earn your adulation, they'll assume either that you're faking it or that you fawn over everyone indiscriminately.

A better way to create vocal warmth is to speak with lower pitch and volume, as you would if you were comforting a friend. Aim for a tone that suggests that you are leveling with people – that you are sharing the straight scoop, with no pretense or emotional adornment. In doing so, you signal that you trust those you are talking with to handle things the right way. You might even occasionally share a personal story – one that feels private but not inappropriate – in a confiding tone of voice to demonstrate that you are being forthcoming and open. Let's suppose that you want to establish a bond with new employees you are meeting for the first time. You might offer something personal right off the bat, such as recalling how you felt at a similar point in your career. That's often enough to set a congenial tone.

Before people decide what they think of your message, they decide what they think of you. If you show your employees that you hold roughly the same worldview as they do, you demonstrate not only empathy but, in their eyes, common sense. So if you want colleagues to listen and agree with you, first agree with them.

For example, imagine that your company is undergoing a reorganization project and your team is feeling deep anxiety over what the change could mean – for quality, innovation, job security. Acknowledge people's fear and concerns when you speak to them, whether in formal meetings or during water cooler chats. Look them in the eye and say, "I know everybody's feeling a lot of uncertainty right now, and it is unsettling". People will respect you for addressing the elephant in the room and will be more open to hearing what you have to say.



Exhibit 3 – Smile

Smiling is important. When we smile sincerely, the warmth becomes self-reinforcing. I mean feeling happy makes us smile, and smiling makes us happy. This facial feedback is also contagious. We tend to mirror one another's nonverbal expressions and emotions, so when we see someone beaming and emanating genuine warmth, we cannot resist smiling with you. Warmth is not easy to fake, of course, and a polite smile fools no one. To project warmth, you have to genuinely feel it. A natural smile, for instance, involves not only the muscles around the mouth but also those around the eyes.

So how do you produce a natural smile? Find some reason to feel happy wherever you may be, even if you have to resort to laughing at your predicament. Introverts in social settings can single out one person to focus on. This can help you channel the sense of comfort you feel with close friends or family. There is one thing to avoid, that is smiling with your eyebrows raised at anyone over the age of five. This suggests that you are overly eager to please and be liked. It also signals anxiety, which, like warmth, is contagious. It will cost you much more in strength than you will gain in warmth.

7. Projecting strength

Strength or competence can be established by virtue of the position you hold, your reputation, and your actual performance. But your presence or behavior always counts, too. The way you carry yourself does not establish your skill level, of course, but it is taken as strong evidence of your attitude, I mean how serious you are and how determined to tackle a challenge, and that is an important component of overall strength. The trick is to cultivate a demeanor of strength without seeming menacing.

Warmth may be harder to fake, but confidence is harder to talk yourself into. Feeling like an impostor is very common. But self-doubt completely undermines your ability in project confidence, enthusiasm, and passion, the qualities that make up presence. In fact, if you see yourself as an impostor, others will, too. Feeling in command and confident is about connecting with you. And when we are connected with ourselves, it is much easier to connect with others.



Exhibit 4 – Projecting strength

Holding your body in certain ways, as we discussed above, may help. Although we refer to these postures as power poses, they don't increase your dominance over others. They are about personal power. It is hard to overstate the importance of good posture in projecting authority and an intention to be taken seriously. Good posture does not mean the exaggerated chest-out pose known in the military as standing at attention or raising one's chin up high. It just means reaching you full height, using your muscles to straighten the S-curve in your spine rather than slouching. It sounds trivial, but maximizing the physical space your body takes up makes a substantial difference in how your audience reacts to you, regardless of your height.

If you want to influence people effectively, you have to get the warmth competence dynamic right. Being calm and confident creates space to be warm, open and appreciative, to choose to act in

ways that reflect and express your values and priorities. Once you establish your warmth, your strength is received as a welcome reassurance. Your leadership becomes not a threat but a gift.

As a project manager you need to be a leader, establishing your warmth is needed but people need to see you always as somebody strong, somebody who has the power to influence and make project decisions. In my project experience when managing projects at the beginning of my career I was able to establish my warmth because is very natural for me working easily with people, but I ran into problems because I could not reassure my position in some occasions. I was not given enough authority by the project organization. It was a critical lesson learned in my professional career as a project manager. Project your strength and it will be helpful for you to success as a project manager.

8. Summary and conclusions

Understanding project stakeholders is a set of challenging activities but they need to be taken into consideration to achieve project success. It is difficult but never impossible. Clear communication is key to be able to understand people by listening to them. You need to ask questions and it is much better to bother in a polite way, I mean asking too many questions, than not asking questions, making assumptions and failing. Finally, and based on my personal experiences explained in this paper my summary is as follows:

- Understanding people certainly impacts your ability to communicate with others and the way of influencing them. If you are not able to understand people, you will not be able to influence them.
- When people do not understand others, they rarely try to overcome their fear in order to learn more about them. It becomes a vicious cycle. It is because is very important to develop your listening skills.
- There are two sides to every question as long as it does not concern us personally. One way to overcome our natural self-centeredness is to try to see things from other people's perspectives.
- We need to respect and recognize everyone else's unique qualities. Learning to appreciate their differences is the right path in my personal experience.
- As much as you know more about people and get to know others well, you begin to realize that people have a lot in common.
- Knowing what people need and want is the key to understanding them. If you can understand them, you can influence them and impact their lives in a positive way
- Every person is capable of having the ability to understand, motivate, and ultimately influence others.

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About the Author



Alfonso Bucero

Madrid, Spain



Alfonso Bucero, MSc, CPS, ACE, PMP, PMI-RMP, PfMP, SFC, IPMO-E, PMI Fellow, is an International Correspondent and Contributing Editor for the **PM World Journal** in Madrid, Spain. Mr. Bucero is also the founder and Managing Partner of BUCERO PM Consulting. Alfonso was the founder, sponsor, and President of the PMI Barcelona Chapter until April 2005 and belonged to PMI's LIAG (Leadership Institute Advisory Group). He was the past President of the PMI Madrid Spain Chapter and then nominated as a PMI EMEA Region 8 Component Mentor. Alfonso was a member of the PMIEF Engagement Committee. Alfonso has a Computer Science Engineering degree from Universidad Politécnica in Madrid and is studying for his Ph.D. in Project Management. He has 36 years of practical experience and is actively advancing the PM profession in Spain and Europe. Alfonso received the *PMI Distinguished Contribution Award* on October 9, 2010, the *PMI Fellow Award* on October 22· 2011, and the *PMI Eric Jenett Excellence Award* on October 28, 2017. Mr. Bucero can be contacted at alfonso.bucero@abucero.com.