Managing stakeholder engagement: A critical success factor [1]

Silvia Mari and Massimo Pirozzi

ABSTRACT

Since the project value is created and delivered due to the stakeholder relations, an effective stakeholder engagement is basic for the project success. Indeed, from the perspective of the team, the stakeholder engagement determines the quality that is incorporated in the project, while, from the perspective of the clients and/or investors, their engagement influences basically the perceived quality and/or value. However, the stakeholder engagement is neither a natural consequence of a role nor simply the result of a positive attitude, but is a specific behavior that has to be stimulated and managed properly – and systematically! This paper gives an overview about the process of value creation and delivery and about the relevant influence of stakeholder relations, outlines the basic behaviors that are necessary to engage stakeholders, deepens how the stakeholder engagement can be effectively measured and managed via proper KPIs collected with specifically designed, tested and fielded questionnaires, shows two relevant case studies and synthetizes the systematic approach that is needed to manage effectively the stakeholder engagement.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TO SUPPORT VALUE CREATION AND DELIVERY

In each project, the stakeholder perspective (Pirozzi, 2017) is a basic driver to show how the value is created and delivered (Fig.1).

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). Basically, the project processes are driven by the stakeholder requirements – which are generally formalized in a Statement of Work or similar – while the project relations are driven by the stakeholder expectations – which, in general, are partially unknown and/or undefined, and then require a specific stakeholder analysis.

In this scenario, in which all projects are made by stakeholders to be delivered to other stakeholders (Pirozzi, 2019), the stakeholder engagement is determinant at diverse levels.

[1] How to cite this paper: Mari, S and Pirozzi, M (2024). Managing stakeholder engagement: A critical success factor; *PM World Journal*, Vol. XIII, Issue I, January.

The engagement of the "providers" – i.e. the project manager, the team, the suppliers and the eventual PMO – is in fact determinant in terms of the generated value/deliverables, since it influences directly both the individual and the integration works. In addition, there is an indirect influence on the perceived value too, because the generated value is evidently the basis of the other types of value. In general, the engagement of the project "doers" targets both efficacy and efficiency, and optimize the results at a team level, so ensuring a result in terms of the integration of deliverables that is major than the sum of the diverse results of deliverables as they are.

The engagement of the sponsors/investors – including the project sponsor and the top management – is essential to ensure the availability of the required resources over time, as well as to support their satisfaction that is fundamental for supporting properly project design, implementation, completion and follow-up.

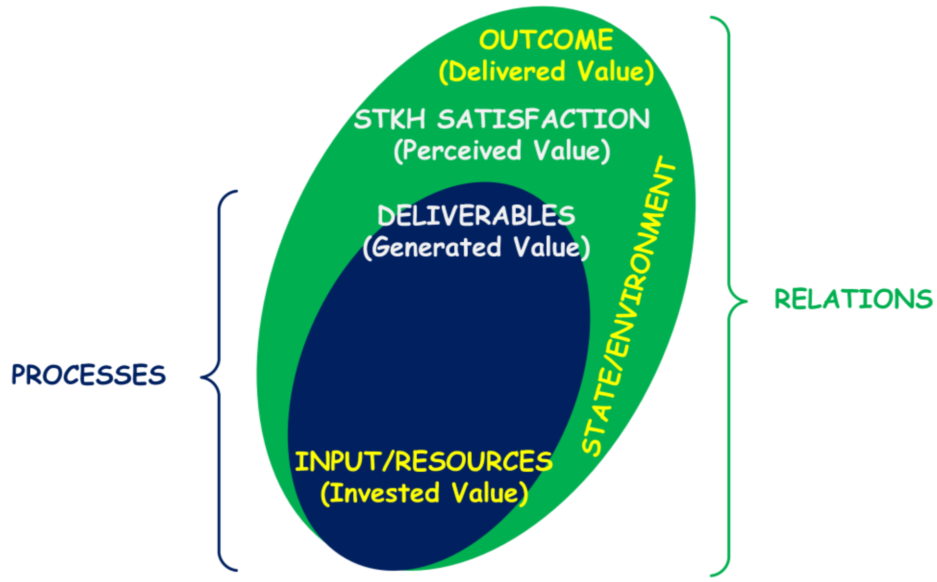

Fig.1 – A Systemic View of a Project (Source: Caressa and Pirozzi, 2022)

The engagement of the clients is fundamental in order to define and review properly their requirements and their expectations – the satisfaction of which is always a critical success factor! –, clarifying eventual misunderstandings, preventing and/or solving eventual conflicts, harmonizing requirements and expectations and, if necessary, determining priorities. These aspects continue to be a major improvement that is needed in project management, since 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 requirements and expectations in terms of delivered value. Definitively, the engagement with the clients is a basic support to improve the relations with them via an effective communication, and then contributes directly to a better-perceived value.

Finally, an adequate engagement of the "influencers", who are all the other stakeholders that participate or would like to participate to the project but are not a "contractual" party – including e.g. the authorities, such as the public administrations, the media, plus a large variety of other communities, as the local communities, the lobbies, the trade unions, the associations, and so forth – may prevent problems arising, especially those that are due to misunderstandings and/or lack of information.

Ultimately, 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. 2). Specifically, as we saw above, 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. 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. Therefore, in general, the stakeholder engagement acts both as an enabler and as an enhancer of the whole process of value creation and delivery.

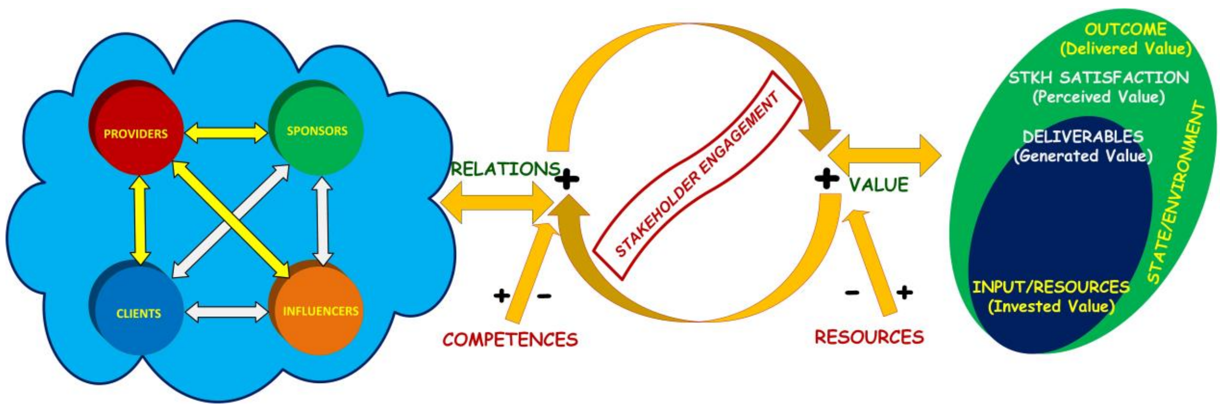

Fig.2 – The Reinforcing Loop between Stakeholder Relations and Value

How to engage stakeholders? Evidently, the stakeholder engagement is neither a natural consequence of a role nor simply the result of a positive attitude, but is a specific behavior that has to be stimulated and managed properly – and systematically!

Behavior is really a key word in stakeholder management: in fact, especially in the professional domain, "we are how we behave". In other words, all the relations that stakeholders have are developed, managed and evaluated based on their behaviors – and not based on their feelings and/or attitudes and/or intentions and/or beliefs! This is because the overt behaviors are generally perceived as "objective" – although of course can be subjectively interpreted! – and then more "comforting". Although in each project stakeholder coexist an individual behavior and an organizational behavior, the latter is dominant, since it is driven by common interests and even by common organizational language, and then determines the four behavioral categories – i.e. providers, sponsors, clients and influencers – we saw above. Definitively, an effective engagement with a certain stakeholder behavioral category is possible if and only if we can use and share the relevant perspective. However, managing effectively the stakeholder engagement requires adequate approaches and metrics.

MANAGING EFFECTIVELY STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Whenever we need to monitor stakeholder engagement, we require collecting and analysing data. In fact, while dealing with any stakeholder management plan, we need to establish some measurable and metrics regarding stakeholder engagement.

However, how shall we get data related to relationship, satisfaction, or in general perceived values?

Common standards (*e.g.* PMBOK Guide 7th Ed.) clarify that degree of stakeholder satisfaction mainly relies in work performance data and in having a conversation with stakeholders to gauge their satisfaction with the project deliverables and the overall management of the project. Project and iteration reviews, product reviews, stage gates, and other methods are ways to obtain periodic feedbacks.

The feedbacks are essential in project communication, although for decades they have been under evaluated, in the wrong assumption that project communication was substantially limited to project information. Indeed, the project communication is always purposeful, and its basic purposes include providing project information, requesting/preventing/starting/ changing an action, providing support to decision/ advising/consulting, learning/facilitating learning, setting up and/or improving relationships, and, especially, obtaining project information and/or data and information that are relevant to the project, i.e. feedbacks. Certainly, feedbacks are indispensable for sharing stakeholder requirements and expectations, assessing objectives and priorities, and preventing or resolving conflicts. On the other hand, they stand out as highly effective tools for measuring and managing the perceived value across various dimensions such as business value, social value, quality, sustainability, innovation, and more. In essence, the feedbacks play a pivotal role in determining and enhancing the overall level of stakeholder engagement.

However, assessing perceived values while having conversations could be very subjective. The influence of stakeholders on the project's outcomes is so important that it is mandatory to rely on a better structured and systematic approach, where engagement could be continuously measured and monitored. So, beside work performance data, surveys or questionnaires can be used to assess the degree of satisfaction.

Questionnaire is a measurement instrument and should be considered a common tool for assessing and measuring stakeholder perceived value and stakeholder satisfaction. This section provides some guidelines for questionnaire development and administration while measuring stakeholder engagement.

During stakeholder identification and analysis, project manager (eventually with project team and/or sponsor) should start in parallel defining a strategy for assessing engagement. Questionnaire life cycle could be described using the analogy with the plan-do-check-act cycle, as illustrated in figure 3.

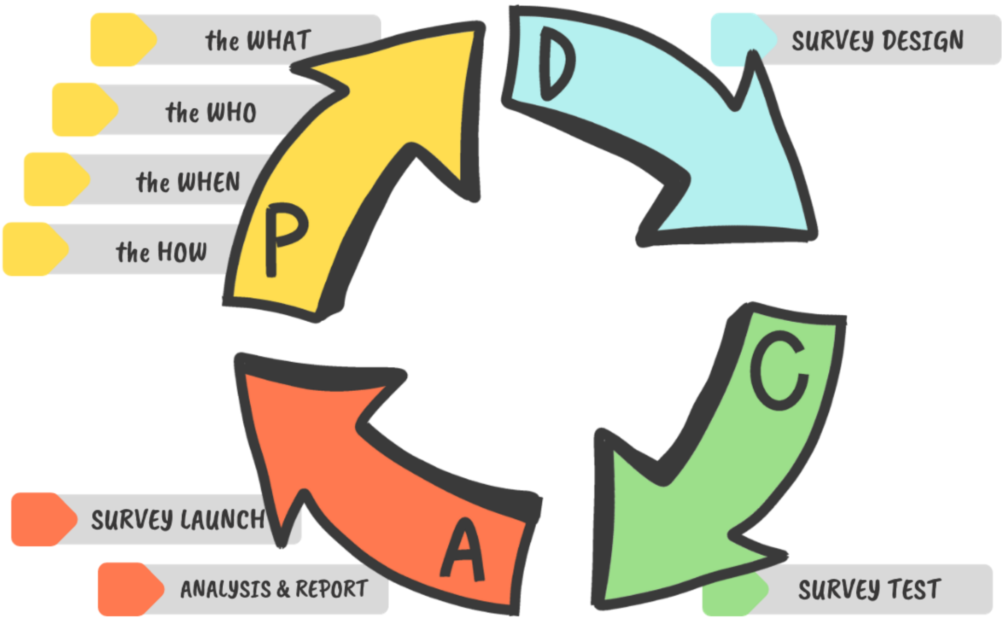

Fig.3 Questionnaire life cycle

During planning phase we need to address four main questions: the “what”, the “who”, the “when” and the “how”. Answers are collected in a statement of objective, which could have a certain degree of formality. In the majority of cases, we can assume that such surveys will be conduct by the same project manager; however, this is not always the case. In fact, considering the size of the survey, the size of the company, and the general data protection regulation we need to fulfil, surveys are often executed either by internal communication department or by external providers. Hence, it is mandatory to collect questionnaire’s requirements and questionnaire’s boundaries in a proper questionnaire chart, which is the statement of objectives.

As said, the statement of objectives should address four main questions.

1. The **WHAT**. While answering it, we need to clarify at least the following aspects:

- Survey objectives. That is which information we wish to collect; whether it is stakeholders' perceived business value, or their perceived social value; or it is the stakeholders' satisfaction, or their perceived quality/sustainability/innovation of the project results (product or service).

- Expected uses of survey results. Whenever we resort to a survey, we will end up in taking decisions on the bases of results. So, it is important to define whom need to be informed on survey's outcome (e.g. project team, sponsor, steering committee) since those will be asked to take decision on the basis of the return of the survey.

2. The **WHO**. It is important to clarify which subgroup of project stakeholders we required to measure relative engagement. In principle, once the "WHAT" is clear, the "WHO" should come straightforwardly. However, due to certain factors such as numerosity or geographical distribution, it could be necessary to select a sample of stakeholders among the subgroup identified.

3. The **WHEN**. In general, once the WHAT and the WHO are defined and agreed, it should be clear when, during the project, it is relevant to survey stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, it could be the case to judge whether one-shot survey over periodic assessment is more appropriate. Indeed having possibility to survey stakeholders' perceived values at periodic intervals implies much higher effort, however it could bring several benefits to the project, and allows project manager to keep a closed loop between stakeholders feedback and corrective actions, with an "agile" approach.

4. The **HOW**. A survey could be conducted in many different ways. We can opt for a face-to-face interview, or we can go for a full anonymous web-based survey. We can go for a phone or video call interview, or for a focus group meeting. Project manager sensibility should judge the best survey methods. There are several factors that can contribute to the selection of the method. Those are numerosity and range of ages of interviewees, interviewees capability to access and use of digital platforms, type of information we wish to collect, interviewees suggestibility (either in positive or negative) and finally budget we can allocate for survey and time requirements.

During the designing phase of the survey, we start constructing it according with the information collected in the statement of objective. Moreover, the type of survey we choose (e.g. interview, online questionnaire, focus group observation …) drives the way we design the survey. However, we could bring general consideration despite the method selected. In general, we could say that questionnaires include three main parts. Firstly, we collect information about the interviewee; we need in fact contextualizing the profile of respondent with the answers provided. Since this may imply inclusion of profile details (age range, education level, geographical location …) we always need to ensure safety, confidentiality, and comfort of respondents. An example of such contextualization is provided in the first case study hereinafter reported. If we consider to survey on a periodic bases, the first part should be accommodated also for that purpose. That means introducing questions that could help in discriminating the contribution of the time in the perceived value we are measuring.

The second part of a questionnaire comprises the core questions that will allow us to measure the requested perceived value. As stated by Nielsen Norman Group, a leader in research-based user experience, designing a good survey is harder than it may seem. We need to ensure accurate and reliable data by writing questions that are appropriate for the method and worded to minimize bias. Despite the high variety types of questions that can be used in a questionnaire (e.g. Likert scale question, semantic differential questions or open-ended questions), there are common guidelines (Fink, 2002) we should apply to all of them:

- Questions should be specific and ask only about one concept at a time.
- Write questions that are short and simple and use words and concepts that the target audience will understand.
- Keep questions free of bias by avoiding language that pushes respondents to respond in a certain way or that presents only one side of an issue.
- Arrange questions in an order that will be logical to respondents but not influence how they answer. Often, it is better for general questions to come earlier than specific questions about the same concept in the survey.
- Choose whether a question should be closed-ended or open-ended.
- Response options for closed-ended questions should be chosen with care. They should be mutually exclusive, include all reasonable options (including, in some cases, options such as “don’t know” or “does not apply” or neutral choices such as “neither agree nor disagree”), and be in a logical order.

Finally, a questionnaire should always consider an open-ended question at the end, to collet free feedback from the interviewees.

In the next phase of questionnaire life cycle, we need to check the survey. Before launching a survey to the field, it is mandatory to test that survey distribution and data collection are working properly. In general, checks must be made at every step of the survey life cycle to ensure that the sample is selected properly, the questionnaire is programmed accurately, interviewers do their work properly, information from questionnaires is edited and coded accurately, and proper analyses are used.

Furthermore, conducting a pilot test to ensure that all survey procedures work as intended is recommended. If it is unclear what question-wording or survey design choice is best, implementing an experiment during data collection can help systematically compare the effects of two or more alternatives.

In the last phase of questionnaire life cycle, the survey is launched to the filed. It is imperative to monitor data while it is being collected by using techniques such as observation of interviewers, replication of some interviews (re-interviews), and monitoring of response. Odd patterns of responses may reflect a programming error or interviewer issue, that needs to be addressed immediately in order to minimize negative effects into the survey campaign, and ultimately in the quality of data collected.

In the last phase, collected data are analysed and results are reported accordingly to the responsibility assigned matrix. Analysing survey data is, in many ways, similar to data analysis in other fields. It is important to be as transparent as possible, including about any statistical techniques used to adjust the data. The list of items to report of a survey can vary based on the mode of your survey — online, phone, face-to-face, etc.

These items include sample size, margin of sampling error, weighting attributes, the full text of the questions and answer options, the survey mode, the population under study, the way the sample was constructed, recruitment, and several other details of how the survey was run.

In conclusion, questionnaires can be a valuable tool for assessing and measuring stakeholder perceived value and stakeholder satisfaction. However, it is important to design and administer questionnaires carefully to ensure that they are effective and reliable. Guidelines provided in this section are meant to support development and administration of questionnaires that provide valuable information about stakeholders' perceived values.

MEASURING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

In this paper, we explore two real-life cases where questionnaires were deployed to illuminate stakeholders' perceived values. Through these cases, we aim to underscore the practical utility and significance of employing questionnaires as a strategic tool in the arsenal of project managers.

CASE STUDY 1

In 2018, a Swiss company leader in the precision components, tools and mold-making industry started a project to create a new human-machine interface, which ultimately will be used in all machine portfolio. With presence at 50 locations worldwide, the company covers different market segments. Operators of such machines comes from different experiences, ages and cultures, raising the complexity in defining an appropriate user experience. The project consists of 37 requirements, as defined by the product management, and based on such requirements the technical department defined 267 functionalities, which were properly developed, tested and validated. However, while approaching the official launch of the product that would have taken place at the European Trade Show for the Manufacturing Industries in October 2021, some concerns raised from internal experts working at company's centre of competences. Despite their involvement during design thinking phases, and despite the official go from the Validation department, they started questioning about readiness of the product. It was clear that they were key stakeholders both from the impact and influence points of view. They were dislocated in different Sales companies all over the world, and they were the technical experts directly in contact with customers. However, the more they were approaching the launch date, the more they experienced a fear in the change of the current operator interface. Discontents started spreading, reaching top management, who was responsible for confirming the go to launch of the product.

A posteriori the project team has questioned about the impact of Covid-19 and the consequent lock-down in weaken stakeholders' trust in the product.

To overcome such impasse, project management team decided to start an initiative where proactive exchange, support and follow-up was provided periodically every week for 3 months, on remote basis. Twelve experts were involved covering 6 countries among Asia, Europe and North America. At the end of the 3 months, a questionnaire was submitted to each expert. Collected answer were summarized and presented to the steering committee in charge of final acceptance of the product launch.

Questionnaire submitted comprised 11 questions, and it aimed to collect experts' experiences and feedback related to the new interface. It comprised three sections: preliminary questions, technical feedback and finally overall considerations. In the preliminary section the team addressed whether experts receive any training for the new interface; they were asked to rate such training and their confidence level in using the new interface. It was also investigated the amount of time the expert was working using the new interface on a daily base. In the technical questions, the experts were asked to judge the completeness of some key functionalities. Finally, among the overall considerations, two direct questions were asked:

Q8. Overall, how do you rate the achievement of the new interface considering the worldwide launch during EMO exhibition in October? Possible answers were: *complete*, *adequate*, *almost adequate* and *inadequate*

Q11. Do you feel comfortable to promote the new interface to your customer? Possible answers were *yes*, *no* and *I do not know*

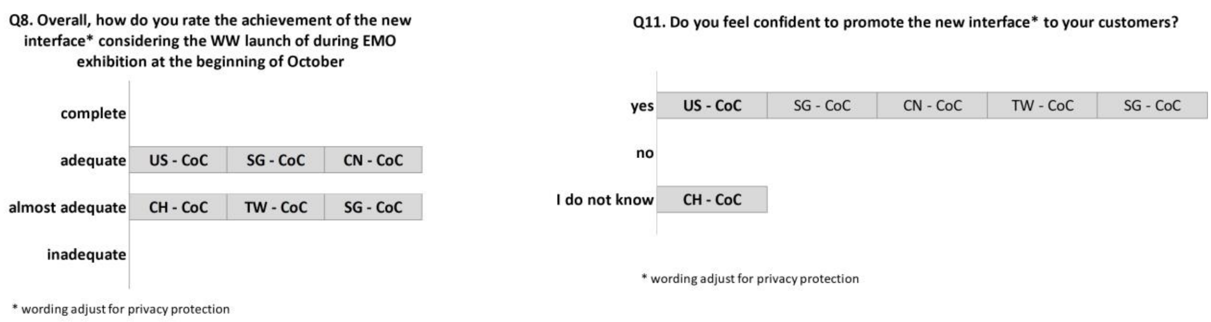

Fig.4 Case 1: feedbacks obtained from Q8 and Q11 questions.

Figure 4 shows a part of the report presented to the steering committee. Once experts' feedbacks were clear and written, steering committee had no doubts and launch approval was confirmed.

Such situation highlighted how the stakeholders' perceived value has a huge influence and could eventually decide for a project failure even if all features requested are included into project deliverables.

CASE STUDY 2

In 2022, the board of a Swiss health institution made the decision to fast-track a project aiming to add another floor to the entire facility. Both the administrative director and the president of the Foundation overseeing the institute expressed apprehensions about the potential impact of this infrastructure project on their day-to-day operations. Additionally, they were worried about the dual effects of this project and the lingering morale issues among collaborators following the efforts during the COVID pandemic, fearing a negative impact on overall engagement levels.

The board unanimously decided to evaluate, systematically and regularly, the engagement and needs of collaborators through an annual online anonymous survey. The survey was designed in three parts. The first part, featuring 12 questions inspired by the Gallup Institute's Q12 survey, focused on assessing stakeholder engagement and remained consistent throughout the years. The second part comprised questions addressing environmental and educational needs, with its content varying based on the ongoing initiatives of the institute. Lastly, the third part included an open-ended question, allowing each collaborator to freely express their thoughts.

The first fielding of the survey was in November 2022; all 130 employees were asked to answer it anonymously. Each employee received detailed information about the survey in their payslip, with plan details when results of the surveys and proposed actions would be presented to them. Each employee had the possibility to either compile survey online, either fill it in paper. Two ballot boxes were settled to collect paper forms.

The first part of the survey, the one remaining constant over the years, well suited to derive a score. In this part, stakeholders were asked to answer 12 questions, by choosing 5 possible answers for each: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Figure 5, left panel, illustrates results of Q12 survey using a colour-code scale. For each of the five possible answers, a score number was assigned as follow: 5= strongly agree; 4= agree; 3= neutral; 2= disagree and 1= strongly disagree. Introducing a weight-average of scores based on the distribution of Q12 answers, the 2022 survey resulted in a total score of 3.69. Finally, four regions were defined based on total scores ranges. These were bad, medium, good and excellent. In order to define numeric values of such ranges, as well as lower and upper limits of total scores, the following scenarios were arbitrarily defined:

	Upper limit	Excellent	Realistic good	Realistic bad	Bad	Lower limit
% of strongly agree	100%	60%	30%	0%	0%	0%
% of agree	0%	40%	40%	10%	0%	0%
% of neutral	0%	0%	20%	20%	0%	0%

% of disagree	0%	0%	10%	40%	40%	0%
% of strongly disagree	0%	0%	0%	30%	60%	100%
Total Score	**5.00**	**4.60**	**3.90**	**2.10**	**1.40**	**1.00**

The total score for each scenario was computed using the identical weighted-average approach applied in calculating the overall score of 3.69. With these defined ranges and total score boundaries, the representation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) is depicted in Figure 5 on the right panel.

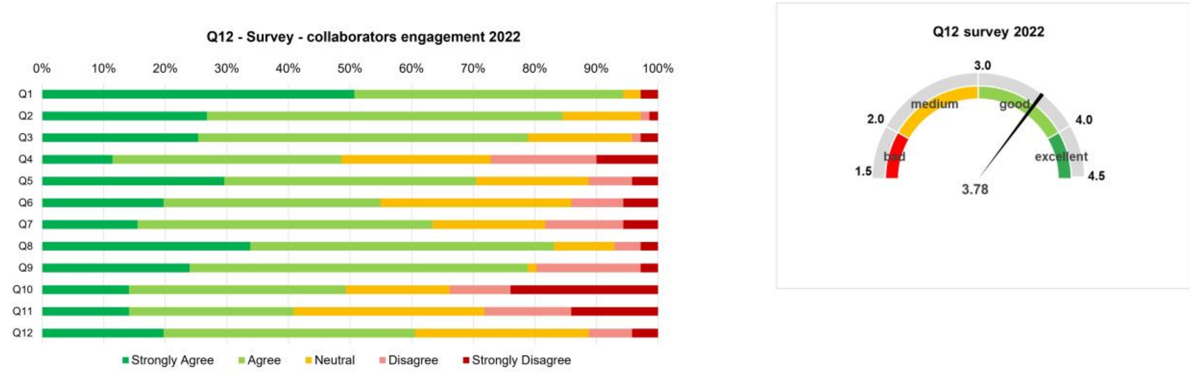

Fig.5 – Case study 2: left panel - Q12 survey results for 2022; right panel – total score tacos representation

Finally, we presented here a first case where a questionnaire was employed to gauge stakeholder perceptions of the status of development of a project in the precision manufacturing industry. The results were used as input for the steering committee responsible for the approval in the stage gate process.

In a second case, a questionnaire was used in evaluating stakeholder engagements with regard an upcoming infrastructure project in the health-care sector. Stakeholders were asked to rate their level of engagement with respect their current position in the company. The insights gained from this questionnaire allowed creating a KPI with its relative taco-representation.

Ultimately, the stakeholder values, which correspond to the guiding principles that shape their decisions and preferences, are often implicit and difficult to discern directly. Questionnaires, through carefully crafted questions, can effectively uncover stakeholder values, revealing the underlying motivations and priorities that drive their engagement. By understanding stakeholder values, project managers can tailor their communication strategies, address specific concerns, and foster a sense of shared purpose, enhancing overall project success.

MANAGING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT: A PROJECT IN THE PROJECT

Indeed, in all projects, the stakeholder engagement 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. 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 engagement cannot be considered as sufficient, and, therefore, a systematic, 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 Stakeholder Engagement Project includes and integrates several specific enhanced project management processes, which, in turn, interact specifically 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.

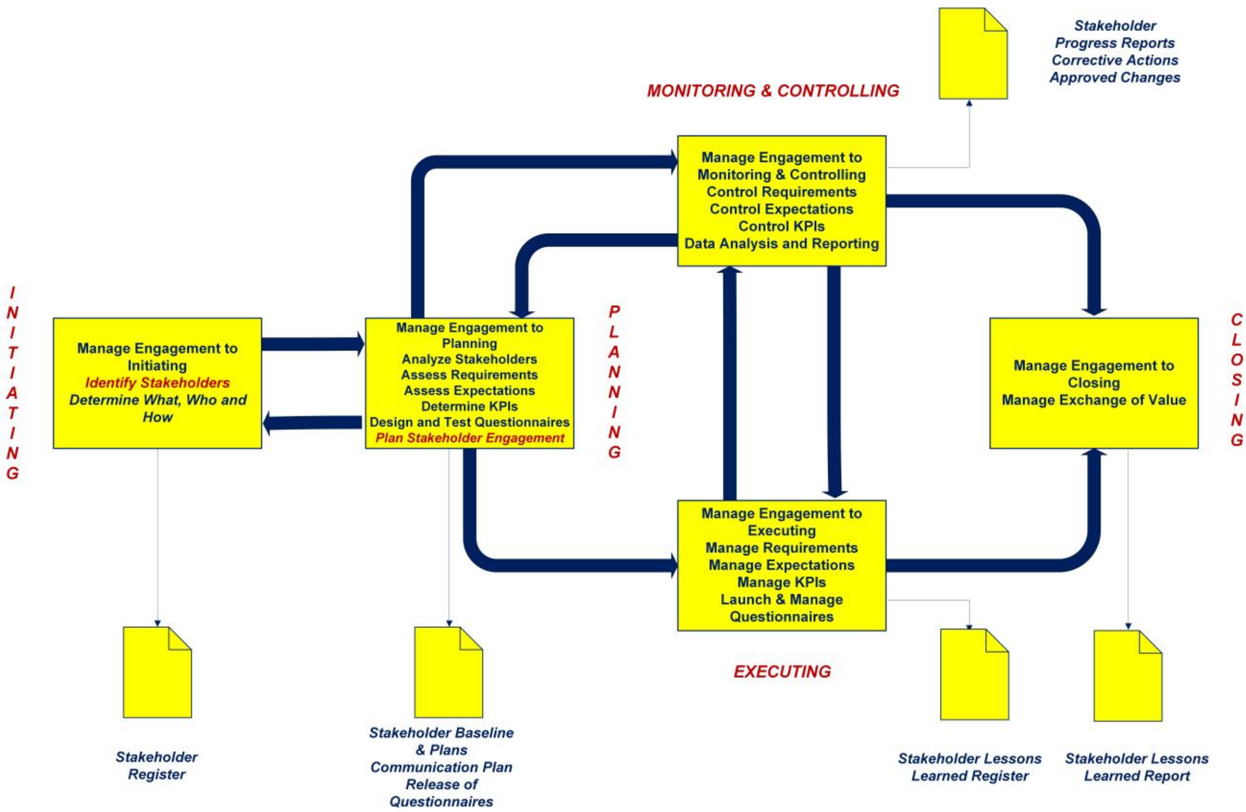

Fig.6 – The Stakeholder Engagement Project

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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 he authored or coauthored more than 5o papers in 5 different Countries. 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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Her transition to project management was marked by a Certificate in Advanced Studies in Management of Biotech, Medtech & Pharma Ventures from EPFL, Lausanne, subsequently by a Certificate in Advanced Studies in Project Management from SUPSI, Lugano, and finally by PMP certification by Project Management Institute. This laid the groundwork for her pivotal role in project management, orchestrating the management of projects across international boundaries.

She is currently Senior Lecturer for the Lifelong Learning department at SUPSI in Lugano. She is member of PMI and its Swiss Chapter; and she is the treasurer of the local Project Management Association based in Lugano.

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