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Targeted communication: the key to effective stakeholder engagement

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Abstract

Just as each project is unique, so are its stakeholders! Whether as individuals, groups or organizations, every stakeholder, and every stakeholder community has a unique and evolving set of cultures, expectations and perceptions. To engage with, and influence, this diverse community the traditional approach to project communications of regular reports and other 'one size fits all' strategies need to be replaced. Effective communication strategies take into account the complexity of the people who work with, or benefit from, the outcomes of the project; and manages the constantly changing group of people whose support and involvement are essential to project success. The conceptual paper is based on the widely used *Stakeholder Circle* methodology, and defines a structured but flexible approach to identifying and engaging a project's stakeholders throughout the lifecycle of the project. The methodology describes ways to identify and prioritise stakeholders, understand their needs and expectations, develop targeted communication strategies to influence attitudes and behaviour, and then to measure the effectiveness of the overall strategy in maintaining support from the key positive stakeholders and reducing opposition from negative stakeholders.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement; effective communication; culture.

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1. Introduction

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), Humpty Dumpty and Alice are having a conversation...

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'" Alice said.

Humpty dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

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Alice's concern was appropriate: how can communication be effective if words can mean whatever the speaker wants them to mean? If the message is confusing and open to misunderstandings and misinterpretation, because of the wrong choice of words, emphasis, or delivery, how can it be effective?

Research has found that 'communication competence' determines the success of a project or organizational activity (Clutterbuck, 2001). 'Communication competence' is developed through the following factors:

- Understanding of the stakeholder community and developing a robust relationship between the project team and its stakeholders
- Effective information sharing: the right information at the right time for people to do their jobs, share opinions, discuss ideas and learn from each other.

This conceptual paper will be organized as follows: the first section is a description of the *Stakeholder Circle* methodology and its relevance for the development of effective communication strategies. The second section is a discussion of the elements that make each one of us unique – personality, 'reality', culture, gender and age: these elements will need to be considered for communication beyond regular reporting, when the project team identifies stakeholders who are not sufficiently engaged and who will require additional information to improve that situation. The final section merges the discussions of the first two sections to focus on how to develop targeted communication directed at improving engagement of these stakeholders.

2. A methodology for stakeholder engagement

Stakeholders are defined in the *PMBOK Guide*® (PMI, 2012) (563) as:

Stakeholders are individuals, groups, or organizations who may affect, be affected by, or perceive themselves to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project, program, or portfolio.

2.1. A stakeholder has a 'stake'

Extending the PMI definition, a stakeholder has a stake in the activity, project or program. For successful engagement, it is necessary to understand the nature of a stakeholder's stake in the outcomes of the project. This stake may be:

- Interest: *a circumstance in which a person or group will be affected by a decision, action or outcome.* Consider a public event being conducted in a residential area: for the time that event is running people living in the vicinity of the event will have an *interest*, even if they do not enjoy or participate in that event.
- Rights – legal or moral: legal rights are usually enshrined in a country's legislation: examples include Privacy laws and Occupational Health and Safety. Moral rights refer to environmental, heritage or social issues. They may extend to speaking on behalf of countries or individuals who cannot speak for themselves or defend themselves, and encompass both the activists and the 'victims'.
- Ownership: such as a worker's right to earn their living from their knowledge; shareholders' ownership of a portion of an organization's assets; intellectual property resulting from the exploitation of an idea; legal title to an asset or a property.
- Knowledge: application of experience or knowledge to the work of the project. It is important to the organization's, or project's, success: the team member will also have a 'stake' in the outcomes of the project.
- Contribution: allocation of resources – people or materials, provision of funds – either the initial approval or ongoing assurance of continued funding, provision of 'political support' within the organization's hierarchy or the wider community.

2.2. Stakeholder engagement

Engagement can be defined as: the various communication practices, processes and actions that an organization (or project team) must perform to involve stakeholders to secure their involvement and

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