



# An integrative framework for managing project issues across stakeholder groups

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## Abstract

The stakeholders and the issues associated with a project are different concepts but closely interconnected. Despite this, the project stakeholder management literature falls short in analyzing the linkages between the stakeholders and the issues they bring. This paper develops a multilayered stakeholder–issue framework that makes the connections between stakeholders and issues explicit with the aim of helping project managers analyze and prioritize the issues that stakeholders confront them with. The framework’s usability is preliminary evaluated through a case study of a multi-stakeholder implementation of an electronic health record (EHR) system in an institutionalized hospital environment. The framework enables a coherent assessment of stakeholders’ issues. Using the case study, we discuss how such an assessment could improve the management of stakeholders’ issues and their influence on a project’s progress and outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

When managing projects, project leaders encounter a range of stakeholders with different interests and varying perceptions of the project at hand (Davis, 2014). During the project’s lifetime, these stakeholders will come up with issues they expect project leaders to address. Some issues may be shared by several stakeholders; others may be raised by just one. Nevertheless, many issues will seem worthy of attention, but a project management’s span of attention is limited and resources will generally be scarce (Jepson and Eskerod, 2009). For project leaders, this raises the question of how to prioritize within the complexity of issues emerging during a project’s lifecycle. To this end, in this paper, we develop and preliminary evaluate a framework that connects a project’s stakeholders

with the issues they voice. The aim is to enable a more systematic assessment, and thereby management, of the influence of stakeholder issues on a project’s progress and outcomes.

The literature has shown that project stakeholder management is critical for project success (Boonstra et al., 2008; Bryson and Bromiley, 1993; Nutt, 2002). To identify critical types of stakeholders, and to distinguish between them, different classification frameworks have been developed (e.g. Achterkamp and Vos, 2008; Bourne and Walker, 2006; Cova and Salle, 2005; Freeman, 1984; Gray and Hay, 1986; Mitchell et al., 1997; Nadler, 1988). While being valuable and commonly applied, these instruments do not explicitly consider the issues that stakeholders raise. A parallel strand of literature focuses on issue management (e.g. Dutton and Jackson, 1987; Jaques, 2007; Oliver and Donnelly, 2007). In their turn, these studies, with the exception of Roloff (2008), similarly fail to offer a clear link between the stakeholders and the issues they bring. We see this as a shortcoming, as, in

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the literature, Aaltonen and Sivonen (2009) show that both characteristics of the stakeholders and of the issues they present influence project managers' choice of response strategies.

The current paper argues that a more integrated view is needed to tackle the dynamic complexity of managing multiple stakeholders and their issues. In our networked society (Castells, 1996), such complexity is inherent to many project settings (Aaltonen et al., 2008; Cooke-Davies et al., 2007; Yu-Chih Liu et al., 2011). Our key argument is that the stakeholders and the issues of a project are different but closely interconnected concepts (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). Based on this idea we develop a multilayered stakeholder–issue framework that explicates these connections and enables a coherent analysis of stakeholders and their issues as these emerge during a project. While the management of these two aspects cannot be separated, we would encourage clearly distinguishing between them as this provides a sharper view on the ways they are connected.

We lay out our argument following a design-oriented research approach (Van Aken, 2004). First, in Section 2, we argue how such a framework can complement and bridge gaps in the extant literature. In Section 3 we develop the framework. Then we preliminary evaluate its potential usability (Jepsen and Eskerod, 2009) through a case study of the multi-stakeholder implementation of an electronic health record (EHR) system in an institutionalized hospital environment. In assessing the framework's usability, we more specifically ask how its use in a multi-stakeholder project may contribute to prioritizing between stakeholder issues. Section 4 introduces the case setting and explains how the study was conducted. Next, Section 5 presents the framework's application in our case and its preliminary evaluation. In the concluding section, we critically reflect on the framework's added value for practitioners, and discuss avenues for its further development and for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background: bridging stakeholder management and issue management

### 2.1. A bridge from stakeholders to issues

In many projects, stakeholders are a primary source of uncertainties and of disagreements giving rise to what has been called soft complexity (Burnes, 2005): a dynamic situation of interrelated processes where there is a variety of stakeholders involved with different interests and views (Atkinson et al., 2006). A traditional approach to dealing with stakeholder-induced complexity is to identify the project's key stakeholders based on a consideration of which actors and parties can influence project goal attainment (Eden and Ackerman, 1998). In effect, such models take a project-focused perspective on stakeholder management and implicitly stress hard complexity: the project goals are known and hence there is a given set of stakeholders with fixed interests and power.

We take a complementary approach for the following reasons. First, models and instruments that adopt a hard

approach tend to overlook stakeholders who are affected by the project in favor of those who can affect it (Freeman, 1984; Jones et al., 2007; Waxenberger and Spence, 2003). Second, by focusing on fixed stakeholder characteristics, these models also ignore the uncertainties in a project's environment from which unforeseen issues will arise during its lifetime (Cooke-Davies et al., 2007; Yu-Chih Liu et al., 2011). Neglecting the affected stakeholders or the emerging issues can hinder the legitimate direction and successful progress of a project and endanger its ultimate effectiveness (Aaltonen and Kujala, 2010; Roloff, 2008). Finally, such models disregard the finding that “firms and managers do not respond to stakeholders and environmental characteristics per se. Instead they respond to specific issues and concerns advocated by stakeholders” (Bundy et al., 2013, p. 253). That is, project managers will often form an impression and act upon the ‘noise’ that emerges during a project.

In contrast, our approach takes both the ‘can affect’ and the ‘affected’ stakeholders (Freeman, 1984) into account and is directed at identifying the issues they raise at a certain moment in time. In building our framework, we take the position that it should be an issue's significance for those stakeholders that project managers need to consider, in order to safeguard project legitimacy and success that is important. In this way our framework can address the three above mentioned limitations of the existing models. By conceptualizing stakeholder legitimacy in terms of the extent to which stakeholders think they can affect a project and will be affected by it, we address Helin et al.'s (2013) criticism that stakeholder management often neglects power relationships and that project managers often fail to reflect on their own political role and responsibilities.

### 2.2. A bridge from issues to stakeholders

Issues arise from a range of project activities and can thus take various forms (Burchell and Cook, 2006). Dutton and Jackson (1987) argue that adequately classifying issues is a precondition for effectively addressing them in the context of change. It follows that, for project managers to be able to deal with issues, they have to understand the nature of these issues. First, those issues are associated with stakeholder interests (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). However, stakeholders differ in how they define and perceive their own roles and interests. Some may, for example, pay particular attention to their wider interests as citizens (in a hospital setting, one nurse may worry about patient privacy when records are fully digitalized and widely accessible), while others may stress their interests as employees (in worrying about an increase in administrative workload due to digitized patient records). It is thus in the nature of issues that such interests are enacted by the stakeholders themselves, as emphasized by Crable and Vibbert (1985, p. 5): “... issues are not simply questions that exist; an issue is created when a stakeholder attaches significance to a situation or perceived concern ...”. As such, a dominant characteristic of an issue is that a stakeholder brackets

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