Project Management Basics

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

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How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

Stakeholders are human beings. That said they can be jerks, they can be demanding, some will wait until the last moment to add up problems. Part of them will be supportive, most will be indifferent. Just a few stakeholders will be destructive. Nevertheless, you need them all to finish a project successfully.

I understand the pain you feel. As a Project Manager, you wish to reach project objectives. You want to do everything to the best of your efforts. However, not all stakeholders will support you in the desire for achievements.

What can you do?

You need to approach stakeholders strategically. Like in Game of Thrones, you must have a plan to force someone to behave in a manner you need. You see, ad hoc stakeholder management doesn't work. You need consistent engagement not episodic.

Here is what you need:

How to Identify Stakeholders that Matter

"A stakeholder is an individual, group, or organisation who may affect, be affected by, or perceive itself to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project" – PMBOK Guide

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

When I was a novice, I thought that all the stakeholders except the customer (sponsor) are auxiliary resources. You can use them for your project needs, and they are willing or obliged to work with you.

A successful finish of a project is a common goal, isn't it?

What's the real story?

Though it was quite naive, it worked to some extent. However, understanding of two concepts has led to changes.

Firstly, each stakeholder has his/her own goals in regards to your project. And more often it is not just a successful project completion. Even within your organisation or your team, each person has his own agenda.

Secondly, helping stakeholders to achieve their goals benefits the project most of the times. Yes, there will be persons who will take advantage of you. Nevertheless, win-win strategy returns more on your investments.

So you need to know and understand your stakeholders. Keep in mind that it is largely a communication with people. You may feel awkward for the first time. But it is the best way to get information about the others.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

In this case, I do not recommend to plan too much beforehand. Until you have a lot of tested approaches, it is easier to develop a strategy based on the people you have to manage. Therefore, I suggest starting with identification process first.

Here is the first step:

1. Identify key stakeholders

Key stakeholders are obvious.

They are anyone who has a decision-making authority or in a management role and are related to your project. They include a sponsor, the project manager, a major customer. Most likely they are stated in the Project Charter.

It is a matter of brainstorming.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

Therefore, it is influenced by your attitude towards working with others as well as by your own priorities. So as key stakeholders you may consider but not limit to:

- Your family
- Your boss
- Project team
- Co-workers
- Relevant subject matter experts
- Contractors
- Users
- Relevant communities
- The press

2. Interview key stakeholders to identify other stakeholders

Yes, it is that simple!

Just go and talk to your key stakeholders. But be open and explain what you are doing.

Questions you may include:

- Who can help the project?
- Who can be interested in the project?
- Who must be involved?
- Who can be negatively impacted?
- What drawbacks does the project introduce to others?

It may be a good idea to have a checklist for such interviews.

Keep in mind that stakeholders may be an organisation, group of people or community. Make sure that you contact the right person within the organisation.

3. Take a Broader Look

Novice project managers usually limit stakeholders just to a customer and a project team. In a real world, there are much more people that can influence or can be influenced by your project.

We need to know these people early on to direct their impact in a positive way. On the other hand, we need to isolate any adverse effects and protect the project.

Below are the 11 reasons why we might need stakeholders. Based on the need, you can identify several types of people you need to manage.

1. Organisational structure

Some people have to be involved in the project just to comply with policies of the organisation and its corporate structure. They might not give any direct benefits to your project.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

However, ignoring or trying to isolate them is usually a bad idea. Even if they are absolutely not interested in your project.

Keep in mind that they have their own goals and responsibilities. Helping them to achieve their objectives usually benefits the project. Though, mostly in an indirect way.

2. Approvals

There are internal and external stakeholders that possess authority to approve your next move. Without meeting their requirements and expectations, your project may stall. They are usually a serious source of risks and delays.

3. Requirements

By nature, stakeholders are the source of requirements. One of the definitions of a project success says that you need to meet all the requirements of all the key stakeholders.

What novice project managers miss is that requirements do not limit to the functional ones that a customer provides. There are quality, legal, compliance, organisational and many other requirements that you need to identify.

It is important to note that you, as a project manager, might not be the best specialist to do that. Therefore, there might be a person in the project team or outside of it responsible interacting with stakeholders to collect requirements. That makes this person a critical stakeholder as well.

4. Rare Critical Expert Knowledge

The essence of your project may require a unique expert knowledge. Usually, it is costly, and the availability of such resources is scarce. It goes without saying that the engagement of such experts and their efficient usage is critical to the project success.

5. End Users

If your project produces a flawlessly implemented product, service or result but the end users do not want to use it. Is it a success? I believe, it is not.

Unless you are a Steve-Jobs-type of influencer, you do need to know what your users expect from your project. Otherwise, you might be creating something that no one needs.

6. Critical Project Team Members

Most likely you have a person in the team without whom the project work will be impeded.

They are team leaders, your best specialists, or just a soul of the team. They are the most valuable allies in the trenches. Keeping them motivated and engaged is a half of your team building efforts.

7. Person(s) critical for quality

Such an expert may fall under other points of this list. But I would like to stress out the importance of such people.

Projects are unique, and their nature requires a specific knowledge of an industry they are performed in. If there is a dedicated person responsible for the quality, you have to collect his requirements for your project.

That is not all.

Do you have quality audits in your organisation? It is when someone outside of the project team comes to a project and "tests" your quality assurance and quality control approaches.

8. Resistance

We do not live in a utopia.

Your project may impact and even harm people. You need to expect resistance from their side. Keep in mind that there may be such stakeholders even within your organisation or your team. It is a major source of risks.

You need to identify such people as early as possible. Trying to find a win-win solution is a good investment of time.

9. Stakeholders that are unaware of your project

It usually happens this way.

Your project is well under way. At some point, a person (with some authority level) finds out about your project and suddenly realises that he has additional requirements or liabilities.

And he starts to panic and tries to catch up with the project progress. It is usually a mess.

It is in your best interests to ensure that every person that is influenced by your project is aware of it.

10. Support

It might be a project manager who had a similar project. It may be a mentor who can help you. Quite often some people can make things easier for you. You just need to find them.

11. Dependency

It can be a third party, a vendor or another project in your organisation. Almost always there are internal or external stakeholders we depend on. Simply because we do not have required resources or necessary level of expertise to do some part of a project.

Such dependencies are a separate topic to discuss. For now, keep in mind that they multiply the project's complexity and risks significantly.

We have broadened our understanding of stakeholders, I hope. This small list just outlines the major types, but it should show the variety and number of possible stakeholders. Which in its turn should encourage you to record quite a lot of people and organisations you need to manage.

So, what's next?

Stakeholder Register: How Not to Forget Important People

Stakeholder Register gives a framework to gain an engagement of all the key stakeholders. It is a single place to put all the relevant information you will use during the analysis and creating a stakeholder management plan.

It should not be a burden to you. It should serve you and take as little time as possible. Therefore, there are only a few things that I suggest putting to a Stakeholder Register.

One day a young and promising project manager, Corwin, approached me with a problem. He had an evolving crisis on his project.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

It was a rather small software development project. There were not many stakeholders at all. But the project was high-profile for our organisation.

They were well in the execution phase proceeding smoothly to the first major milestone. When out of the blue John B. low interest, low power stakeholder from the technical department, emailed a set of small requirements to the project. All were related to different aspects of the project. All were valid, though, did not have any significant impact.

A few days later Larry C., another low interest, low power stakeholder emailed with yet another batch of small requirements that built on the ones we had received from John B. His requirements were more processes and policies related.

So Corwin had a bunch of small and rather unimportant requirements. But John and Larry contended that they were of utter importance. He had to resolve this problem.

Corwin tried to clarify and prioritise the requirements. It ended up with an overacted escalation of the problem. He had to meet all the requirements to a full extent as soon as possible.

It was all way too strange. So I decided to help to find the root cause of the problem.

First things first. I asked for a Stakeholder Register. Unfortunately, none was present on the project.

We decided it was an appropriate time to review all the stakeholders and log them in a newly created Stakeholder Register.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

So, what was the catch?

To make a long story short here is what we found out. Separately Larry and John did not have enough authority. So they decided to team up to get more influence.

Why did they do that?

They had just another tough talk with their superior manager, Todd M., several months before. He told them, that there were too many technical problems on projects and that they were not performing well enough.

So Corwin had two stakeholders teamed up and supported by the third one. A group that had much more authority and influence than each one separately.

However, that is not the end of the story.

While their new requirements to the project were valid and were aimed at improving the quality of technical solutions, their expectations were different.

They wanted to restore the trust of Todd and to increase the overall authority in the first place. By highlighting and dramatising each and every issue related to their requests Larry and John tried to prove they did their best but they did not get any support.

That is a real story. Though I have changed the names.

What are the lessons learned here?

- A Risk Register is a must.
- Stakeholder analysis is a must.
- Overall awareness for a project manager is a strong benefit.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

So, the next step is to create a Stakeholder Register template.

Basic Entries in a Stakeholder Register

Full Name. Simple as it is. You need to collect full (official) names of all the stakeholders. The only trick here is to put in a phonetic transcript of fancy names. And for sure you do want to remember all the names and spell them correctly.

Department. Next to the name put the name of the department the stakeholder works in. It is the first input to the analysis of relations between stakeholders.

Location. It is important only in case your stakeholders are located in different countries. You might also want to put a time zone shift next to the location.

Role on the project. It is utterly essential. Each stakeholder should have a clear role and responsibilities. It is even more important to ensure that all the stakeholders are informed of roles and responsibilities of each other.

Impact, Influence, Power. These attributes will be used in stakeholder analysis. I will explain that below.

(Optionally) Salience Model type. I will explain the Salience Model below as well. If you choose it as the main analysis technique, your Stakeholder Register should reflect it.

A preferred way of communication. It is more of communication management, but if you are going to win stakeholder's' disposition, you need to respect his or her preferences in communication. It will save him or her time and will increase your chances to get positive feedback.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

Stakeholder Register Template

I have a Stakeholder Register Template in the PM Basics Library.

To get it you can register for a free membership. Also, you will get access to many other valuable resources.

Claim Free Membership Now!

How to Analyse Stakeholders

I must confess. I began performing proper stakeholder analysis out of laziness.

I had a time when I was typing emails all day long for several weeks. This correspondence did not solve any of the project's problems, nor it helped to move the project to its goal.

Well, even key stakeholders were not involved. Though, the process seemed like very urgent and significant.

So what did I do?

I used very simple tools to analyse the whole list of project stakeholders.

It appeared that my perception of influential persons had been entirely wrong. I spent enormous time engaging the stakeholders who were not interested much in project progress. However, they were pretty involved in political intrigues.

So, now I will talk about four main stakeholder analysis tools.

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But before we start I want you to understand the prerequisites. It is utterly crucial that you equip yourself with pragmatism, unbiased mind and positive attitude.

This process is subjective.

It depends on your past experience of communication with other people. Their good and bad deeds. Moreover, you might be a talented leader. It means you know how to influence other people and impose your opinion. It is not what you want to achieve.

At the moment, empathy is more important. You need to understand fundamental motivations of people and their real attitude.

So let's get to the stakeholder analysis tools now.

1. Paper and Pen

Well, it doesn't have to be exactly pen and paper. However, you have to write everything down in any way suitable for you.

There are several benefits of doing that:

- You will not be able to keep everything in your head.
- You will need all the information about stakeholders later during planning.
- You need to capture your starting point to ensure that you are progressing toward your desired goal.
- It will increase your chances to identify and analyse all the key stakeholders correctly.
- It will help you to approach the task strategically.
- You will be able to make educated decisions based on collected facts.
- You will be able to identify where your analysis was wrong.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

I think I can continue this list with a dozen more points. But you've got the idea. It is crucial.

2. Meetings and Expert Judgement

To know about people you need to talk to people.

Do not make a common mistake trying to identify and analyse all the stakeholders on your own.

Different people can give you different perspectives. Moreover, you have a chance to get useful insights about the experience of working with a particular person, his or her habits, perks and quirks.

Do not overthink about it. You really just need to make an appointment and meet with the stakeholders. Such meetings quickly go off track, so you need to keep to your point. People tend to talk about things they like.

It is a good practice to contact with subject matter experts first. They can provide a comprehensive list of stakeholders related to their knowledge area. Try to meet with:

- Senior management to get insights of the similar projects, lessons learned and knowledge sharing. You will then derive relevant names of possible stakeholders.
- Project managers who work on similar projects. They can share hands-on experience, known pitfalls, risks, names of specialist they worked with, etc.
- Consultants and technical experts. They can provide a broad range of information from gut feelings to specific approaches and strategies for project implementation.
- Afterwards, you can meet with other stakeholders on your updated list.

3. Matrixes and Grids

Eden's and Ackermann's classification model represented as grids will help you to visualise and group stakeholders. There are four main parameters used in this model:
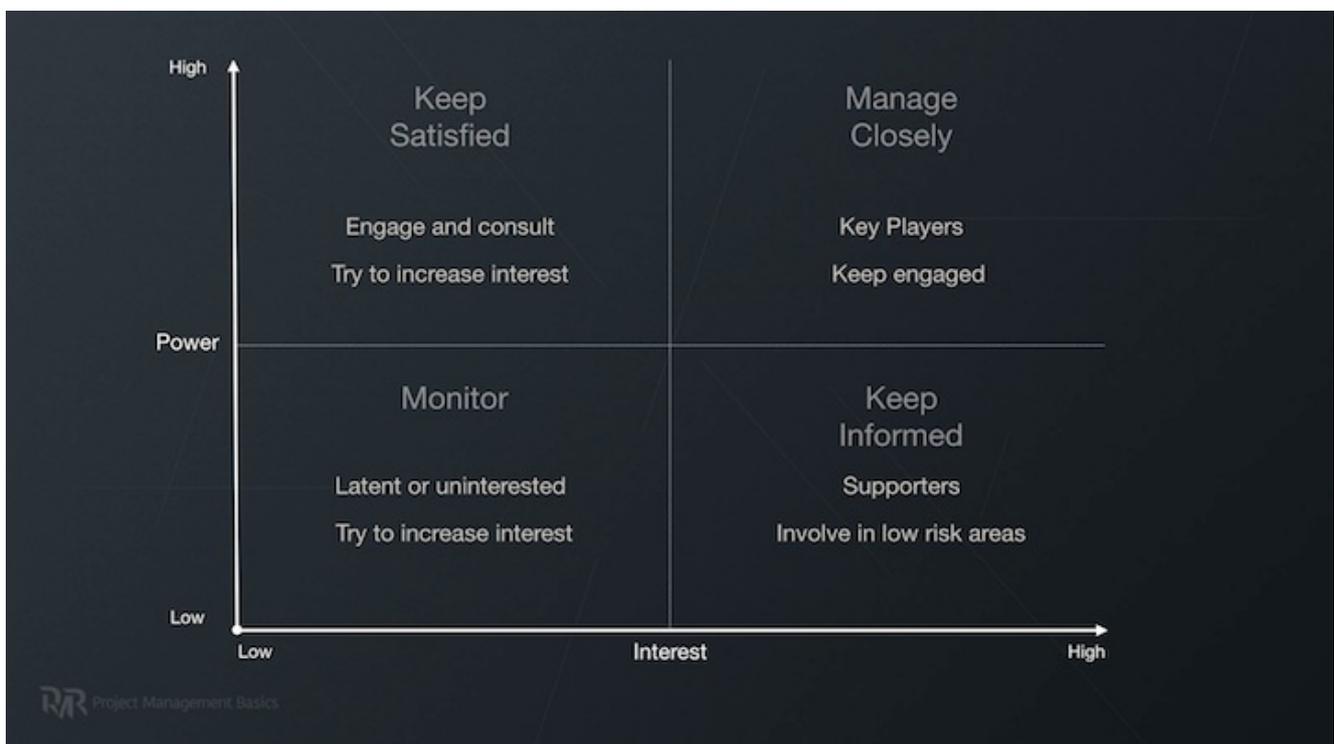
Power or level of authority. An ability of a person to impose his or her will.

Interest or level of concern in a project and its outcome.

Influence degree of active involvement.

Impact or ability to make changes in a project planning or execution.

So you take a grid like shown below and put your stakeholders in the corresponding quarter.

It is a simple and efficient way to prioritise stakeholders

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Your judgement should be based on your investigations and interviews. It is really great if a relevant senior manager reviews your considerations.

The most popular grids are Power/Interest, Power/Influence and Influence/Impact. I would like to recommend to consider, at least, two of the grids.

As a side note on practical tips. Power and Interest should be measured in regards to your project only. I think they should be a function of Influence to some degree.

For example, the President of the company, CEO or CTO may have ultimate power and authority over most aspects of the project. They can force you to make any changes they consider to be necessary. Also, they are very interested in a project success and very concerned about its outcome.

However, on a daily basis, they will never interact with you.

Most likely they are not involved in any project on your level. They just don't have time for that. Such stakeholders are usually satisfied with a very high-level reporting.

Therefore, focusing your attention on them will not be the best investment of time. If everything goes smoothly, you will not hear them a lot. So map them accordingly.

Here is how your grid will look like when you are done.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

Here is how it may look on your project.

4. Salience Model

This model takes into consideration three parameters:

Power shows the level of impact a stakeholder can make on a project and its outcome.

Legitimacy shows how appropriate it is to involve a stakeholder.

Urgency shows how soon a stakeholder requires a response or action from a project manager.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way
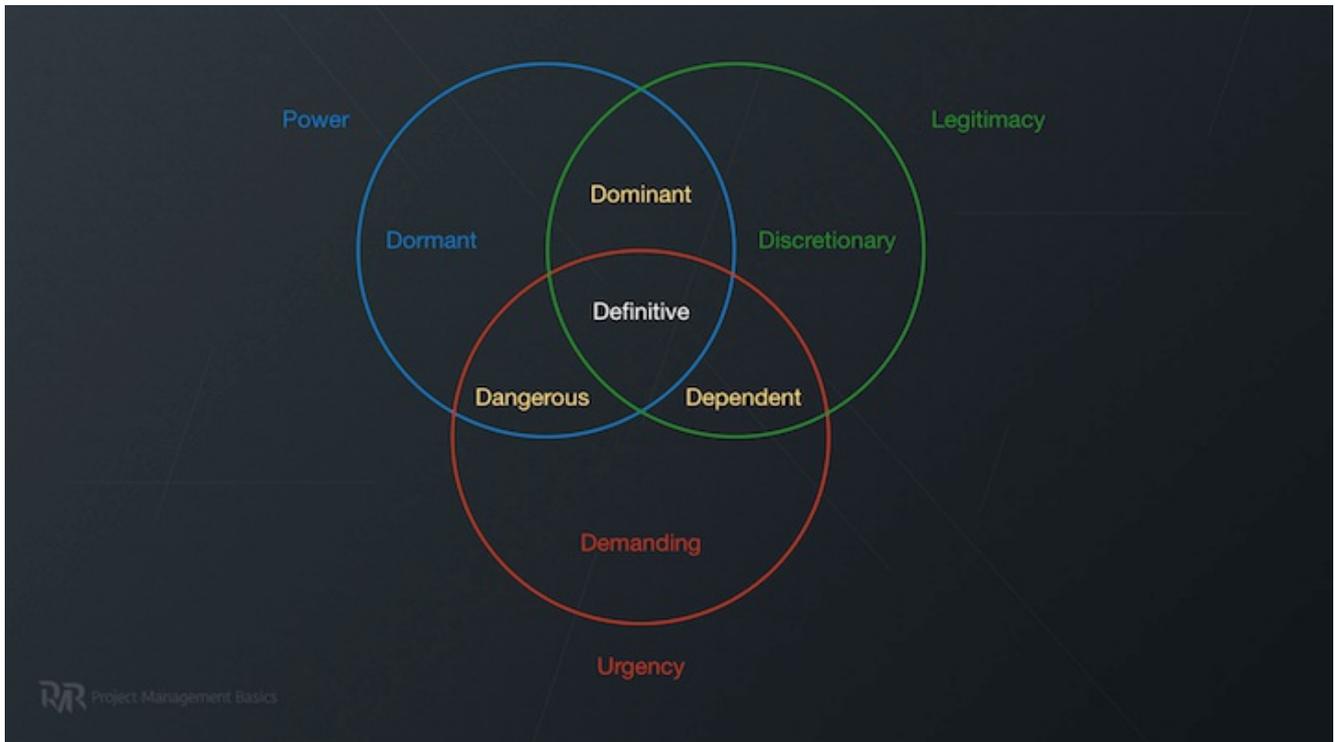
Stakeholders are grouped into seven types.

Depending on where a stakeholder lands on the chart there are seven possible types:

Definitive stakeholders are the most important. You need to manage them closely. Most likely they are your sponsors or customers.

Dependent stakeholders don't have a direct power. However, if they have a personal interest in your project they might seek powerful allies to achieve them. So you need to monitor them closely as well. It is anyone who wants to accomplish his or her goals utilising your project.

Dominant stakeholders are those who can impact your project in case something goes wrong, or their requirements are ignored for far too long. You need to keep them well informed. Also, you need to deliberately assure that they do not lose track of your project. For example, CTO or any controlling entity may fall under this type.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

Dangerous stakeholders can cause problems because most likely they are pursuing different goals than your project. You need to keep an eye on them because problems usually come from the direction you expect the least.

Dormant stakeholders generally act on a different level than your project. Nevertheless, they are also dangerous because they can use the power to become Dominant or Dangerous. CEO is a good example.

Discretionary stakeholders are those who get into the project on demand or by a trigger. They fulfil their obligations and return to a standby mode. For example, it can be a Quality Audit team.

Demanding stakeholders can cause a lot of noise and mess around your project. While you cannot afford to spend much time you need to ensure that you keep them at bay. You might think of a person who feeds on politics in the organisation for instance.

The model is dynamic.

Therefore, stakeholders will move around the chart during the project lifetime. You need to monitor such movements and act accordingly.

For the first time, it may look intimidating, unnecessary, overwhelming.

There are a lot of communications and quite often communication with difficult people. Nevertheless, as a project manager, you are doing a project for someone, so you do need to know what they want and expect as an outcome. So make appointments and talk to your stakeholders now.

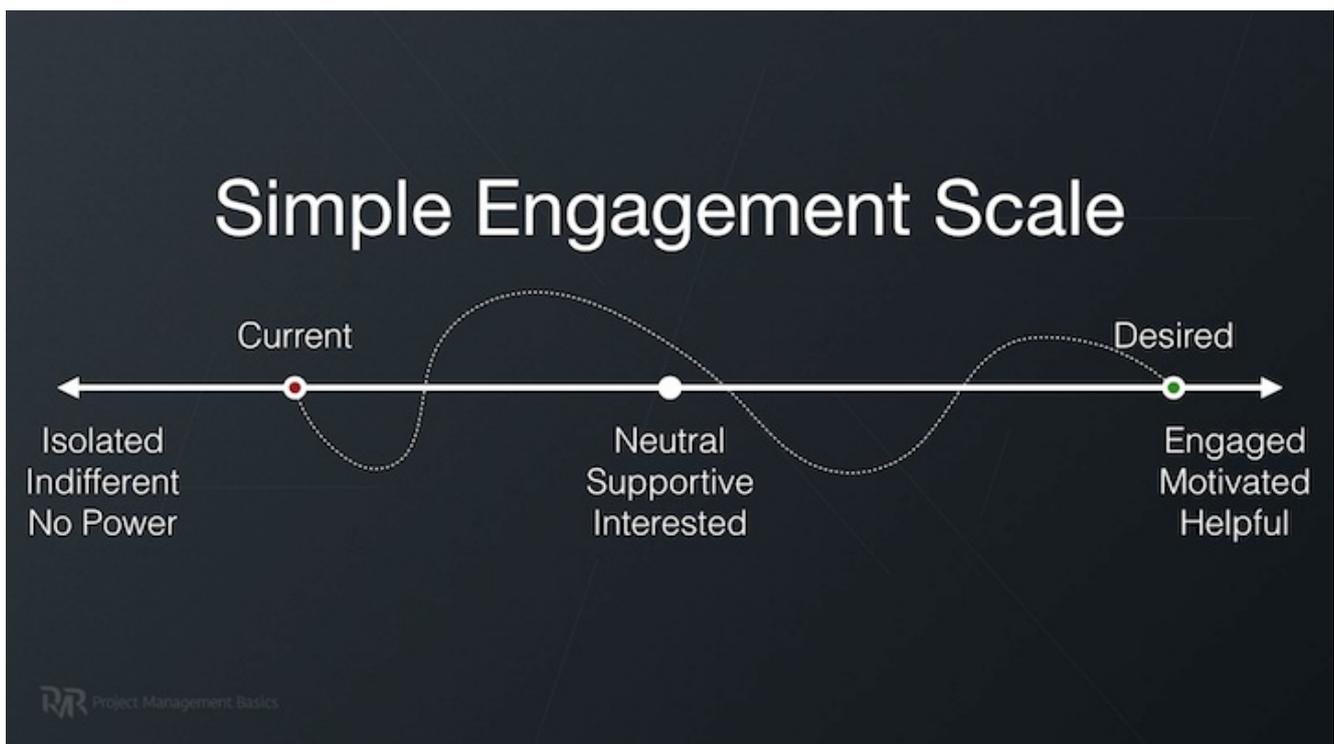Even if your project is well under way.

Strategic Planning of Engagement

Now that we know the stakeholders and performed analysis, we need to develop a strategic plan.

What's the point?

Your goal is to determine how to move each stakeholder from his current level of engagement to the desired one.

To simplify things, I just use the following scale:

We are setting the current and desired engagement levels. The path is not universal or straight.

It goes both ways. You may want to motivate a person to help your project. Likewise, you may want to reduce the involvement and influence of a stakeholder.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

Nevertheless, it will not happen in an instance. Usually, it is a small project on its own.

Here are a few things that will help you make correct decisions.

How to Understand Stakeholders

I took the ideas, concepts, and patterns described below from Josh Kaufman's book "The Personal MBA". It is interesting to notice that these ideas are present in PMBOK Guide to some extent. They are incorporated into practices and techniques, but I think it is useful to stress them out explicitly.

I strongly recommend you to read Josh Kaufman's book. It will be a great addition to your skills that help to influence stakeholders and build lasting relations.

Trade-offs

A trade-off is a practical application of a triple project constraint of scope, costs, and time.

Every time a stakeholder wants to do something he makes a trade-off of not doing something else.

It is the concept that you should teach each stakeholder. Moreover, you should be able to draw a line and stand your ground to prove this concept on a daily basis.

Every change request should result in one or a combination of the following:

- A change of the project scope. A part of the project, its delivery or a work package should be removed or modified.
- Additional resources. You must get more money to get more workforce or equipment.
- A change to the schedule. Milestones and deadlines should be moved to include new work.

This concept is quite transparent during initiation of the project and planning process. Implementing an additional requirement obviously requires more time and resources.

However, it gets crucial when it comes to changes after the project start. Teaching the trade-off helps to influence stakeholders and their understanding of processes on the project.

Take a look at it from a stakeholder's perspective.

For example, during the execution phase, a stakeholder (let us assume he is a customer) asks to make a small change to the scope of the project. It is quite expected, and you are even prepared for that. And you agree to integrate the change saying nothing.

Then he asks for the second, third and fourth time. Now you put your schedule and your team on the stretch. It will be hard but still possible to meet deadlines.

Then comes a fifth change request. You obviously see that there is no way to fit it into your schedule, and only now you start to negotiate a trade-off.

It might seem like the previous four change requests does not require trade-offs.

However, you have made a lot of them. You gave away your schedule slack, maybe some risk reserves and, therefore, increased a risk level for the project. Additionally, you put your team under stress, which may influence their motivation.

From here we jump to the next concept.

Next Best Alternative

Assuming that you did not clearly communicate the concept of the trade-offs and the actual consequences of the first four change requests, the stakeholder may not take it easy.

He made four changes without a problem before. But now, one more "simple" request cannot be integrated. Moreover, the project is at significant risk. How could it happen?

Now you and the stakeholder can't reach an agreement.

Your customer will search for the next best alternative. Given that he doesn't believe (or understand) you, his next best alternative is to force you to integrate the change into the project. Either directly or via your management.

While trying to please the customer and make him happy, you will have to include the change without a trade-off.

Usually, it will be put on you as a business and client satisfaction matter. Most probably your organisation wants to preserve long and beneficial relations. Especially if it costs only a "bit" of stress for you and your team.

Such misunderstandings happen way too often. Some clients intentionally use this unfair practice to get as much as possible for what they paid.

But let's assume a more positive case. What would be the best next alternative? You are correct! It is a trade-off.

Perceived Value

Each part of the project has a different value for a stakeholder. Each functional requirement, characteristic, or trait of the end product also has its value.

Though a stakeholder can calculate the monetary value of delivering a requirement, usually he operates with a perceived value. It is an amount of resources, time and money he is willing to give for a piece of work.

Quite often a perceived value and real costs differ.

It is one of the most difficult things in managing stakeholders' expectations – to meet a perceived value with the reality of how a project produces a product (and value); how costs add up and how much time and efforts each piece of work requires.

The next best alternative also has its perceived value. The good thing is that you can increase the attractiveness of your suggestions by:

Visualising the plan and the end result.

- Removing stakeholders hassle in the process as much as possible.
- Ensuring that everything is under control.
- Making a stakeholder feel good and look good in the eyes of others when he accepts your offer.

In general, you need to focus on the most significant benefit of your alternative suggestion. This way you can influence stakeholders and make their decisions more predictable.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

Absence Blindness

"Absence Blindness is a cognitive bias that prevents us from identifying what we can't observe", as Josh Kaufman states in his book. This human trait has a great impact in many areas of project management.

Both stakeholders and project managers have a hard time identifying better approaches once they have selected one.

While everything works fine, we tend to become blind to new problems until they appear.

To overcome absence blindness, for example, we have a separate set of processes and techniques in Risk Management that help to identify things that we do not see right away.

We, project managers, are usually underappreciated due to absence blindness. The greatest gauge of a good project management is when nothing serious happens, and the project runs smoothly.

But most people tend to miss that it happens this way because you have prevented all the bad things. It may seem like a project gets finished in time and within budget while you are sitting doing nothing.

Absence Blindness makes risk management, prevention in quality management and process improvements less appealing. It is hard to see that these processes and activities beneficial because they produce absence.

Another problem, which is created by absence blindness, is that it makes people feel uncomfortable and out of control when you do nothing when something bad happens.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

In project management, it is often better to keep to the plan, and risk response plans to overcome problems.

However, stakeholders usually tend to escalate problems when they do not see you doing everything possible to solve the problem right here and right now. That is why it is so important to keep stakeholders informed about upcoming risks.

Absence Blindness is so widely spread that it appears in all aspects of project management and our life. The best way to overcome it is to create checklists.

Loss Aversion

People hate losing things. Business people hate to lose opportunities even more. So quite often a loss aversion prevents stakeholders from making correct decisions.

You will often see it when negotiating scope reductions. Even if a project success is at stake, it is very hard to convince stakeholders to give up a feature or functionality.

Even worse. When a loss aversion is combined with absence blindness quality and risks reserves are usually cut first.

Here is another concept that influences stakeholders.

Sunk Costs are the investment of money, time and efforts that were spent and can't be recovered.

Customers and Sponsors are usually hard to give up sunk costs. So they try to invest even more resources in hope to get back what they have spent.

However, sunk costs should not be taken into account when you decide whether you want to spend some more money. Only the final reward you expect is what matters.

Planning Fallacy

Keep always in mind that people tend to underestimate completion times.

Even if you are doing everything by the book, there are uncertainties, risks and interdependencies that you will not be aware of. Even if you are very accurate with estimates of separate tasks, time will flow in between activities and phases.

You can spend a lot of efforts trying to predict every possible problem. However, not a single plan lived through the whole project without a change.

I prefer to have a flexible plan that can withstand some reasonable amount of unexpected events without a need to make corrections. Rather than a detailed one that will require changes on a daily basis.

It takes a lot of experience and authority to produce a plan that will be accepted by stakeholders and will have a good chance to be accurate.

So for now, I would recommend you to integrate slack into your projects. Slack is just an empty period of time between two activities. It might sound controversial, but even activities on the Critical Path should have some slack.

Slack seems like an unacceptable luxury in our world. Nevertheless, I suggest you to try to explain the concept to the stakeholders. It might secure your deadlines and make planning more realistic.

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

Cognitive Scope Limitation

Key stakeholders are usually busy people. They may be responsible for hundreds or thousands of employees, other stakeholders or users.

Their mind is not capable of working with all these people on a personal level. So they tend to group them into "teams" and "projects". It is not they are mean or cruel; it is just a limitation of our brains called Cognitive Scope Limitation.

Quite often stakeholders put a lot of stress on a project team by setting unrealistic demands or pushing the deadlines. While they try to achieve their goals they tend to forget that "teams" and "projects" include people who have personal lives, hobbies, families and kids, their own objectives, needs, and problems.

Stakeholders have not thought much about all of them. A human brain just doesn't have enough mental capacity.

Influence stakeholders by personalising your team.

The only way to influence stakeholders and overcome this problem is by personalising your "project". Use your team members names, put their photos as avatars in your communication tools, acquaint them with the key stakeholders and guard their personal time.

Call to Action

The last thing I wanted to tell you about is a Call To Action.

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This concept is widely used in marketing. Whatever you communicate to stakeholders, you must direct them to the action you want. They can't read your mind. You need to tell them exactly what you want them to do at the end of your message.

It is better to have only one call to action per message. It will increase your chance to get the response you are looking for.

Even if you do not expect any actions from a stakeholder, it is a good practice to give him a way to clarify things and ask questions. Invite him to write you back with any questions he might have as a call to action. It opens up a way for a constructive dialogue.

Requirements and Expectations

Requirements are what a stakeholder wants you to do in your project.

Expectations are what a stakeholder wishes to achieve or to get as a result of your project.

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Requirements vs. Expectations. Guess what is on the surface.

These are entirely different entries. They do not correlate.

South and North pole and all things related

Let's review the following example.

From one side a requirement from a Quality Manager: "The project has to follow all the quality processes and policies by the latter".

On the other hand, his expectations from this requirement might be:

- Following the processes and policies will help the project to meet its goals.
- If they follow the processes and policies my involvement will be minimal.
- The project is risky. I don't want to be personally involved. Let them follow standard processes and policies.
- If the project follows the processes and policies and it is successful I can get a promotion.
- The project must show good quality, otherwise, I might be fired.

And the list may go on and on. One and the same requirement might have entirely different expectations.

Relying on a guesswork usually results in false assumptions. They lead to wrong decisions. You need to define real expectations of each stakeholder and log them to the Stakeholder Register.

Relations With Other Stakeholders

How important is to know that your junior team member is a close friend of CEO? How important is to know that several key stakeholders are translating the will of another person who is behind the scene?

Would you plan and act differently knowing that the sponsor fully follows the suggestions of his CTO?

Many stakeholders seem quite unimportant if you analyse them separately and out of context. However, if you dig deeper, you will soon see that all of them are interrelated and fall under the hierarchy of power in your or their organisation.

Most of them have superiors or peers that they want to impress or influence. All of them have friends, foes, allies and associates. Some of them have shared goals.

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Once you have a clear picture of the relations between stakeholders, you will have a better chance to define real expectations.

You will also gain a better position in any related negotiations.

Understanding a real agenda and real influencers you can propose solutions that will be beneficial to all the parties. Otherwise, you will only be able to see the problem from the project's point of view.

Assess How Key Stakeholders are Likely to Behave

It is mostly a mind game or partially an interview based activity. I like to approach this step as a "what if" analysis. I investigate pros and cons of both active and passive scenarios. Here is an example.

What if I send Peter a progress report in a full extent? What benefits will I get? He is a team leader, so he will be better informed and be aware of the situation. I hope it will make him more engaged. He may find some inconsistencies. But it may distract him and take his time.

What if I don't send him the report? Nothing will really change. I may lose some opportunities for his engagement, motivation and process improvement. So I will better send the report to him.

Here is another example.

What if I send the information directly to the customer without consulting with John?

How to Manage Stakeholders Engagement in a Strategic Way

He is a leading subject matter expert. I have heard about his previous project a bit. Well, there is a probability that he will be upset. I really want to keep him engaged as much as possible. So I will better contact him in all cases. He likes that. On the other hand, it may cause delays. So it is wise to plan communications well.

This part of the stakeholder analysis is mostly used later to decide how to maintain the engagement level.

All the information may go directly into a Stakeholder Register.

Prioritise Stakeholders

Stakeholders are valuable and useful. They are numerous. But you, I hope, have only eight hours per day to manage your project. So you need to list the most important stakeholders. Those that can bring the most value or cause the most problems.

It is just the Pareto Principle in action. 20% of stakeholders will produce 80% of the benefit to you.

Therefore, you need to prioritise Stakeholder Register to focus your efforts.

Here is a catch.

Characteristics of stakeholders are constantly changing. During different phases balance of power changes.

Therefore, you need to revisit the register regularly.

Conclusion

So, you have mapped the desired level of engagement for stakeholders.

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What's next?

Well, now you need to work consistently to get the desired goal.

How?

If you expected to get an action plan to influence people, I have bad news for you. There is no such plan.

It is interaction with people. They are so much different and unpredictable.

During their journey toward the engagement level you set, you will have to adapt. You can't keep to one prescribed tactic.

Nevertheless, by now you know enough to understand each one of them. After that, you need to try to find the approach. A key to each separate person.

If it doesn't work – try another way. Track progress and adapt.

However, there is a set of tactics that can help you reach the desired goal.

My (Secret) Tactics to Build Project Stakeholders Engagement

Peter is a valuable project stakeholder. We need him more than he needs us. So, no matter what you do Peter puts your request to the bottom of his priority list. He is not engaged.

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How about this one?

Dory is a project customer. She wants to get the results. Therefore, she puts quite a lot of stress on the team. Nevertheless, Dory wants to hear nothing of the difficulties on the project. She is not engaged as well. It freaks out even more.

Does it look familiar? Every project manager has such kind of problems. Unengaged stakeholders.

It may seem like there is nothing you can do about it.

Not true.

I will share some secret tricks that will help you to boost stakeholders' engagement right away.

What Kills Engagement?

Let's get clear on the approach.

You should never act as if a stakeholder wants to sabotage your work. That is wrong unless proven otherwise.

Therefore, approach it from a position of mutual benefits. Even if a person acts somewhat aggressive, passive or in any other unsuitable manner.

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It doesn't mean that he or she is your enemy. You have not discovered the cause of disengagement yet.

It is easy.

In most case the root cause is one of the following:

1. Overwhelm

People will disengage from your project in case they are overwhelmed with other tasks and projects.

The simple example is when they are ignoring your requests. They just don't have time for you.

It is more complicated when a person has to answer to your requests. But there is still no spare time. In such case, a stakeholder may loop your request.

Most likely you will get a bunch of rather stupid questions in return. Likewise, this person may drift to another topic with even more unrelated questions.

The goal is simple.

To buy some time while you try to answer the questions politely.

2. Lack of Knowledge

This case is difficult to differentiate from the rest accurately.

People don't like to show their weakness or lack of knowledge. So, they get creative.

The worst thing…

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Once they got away from a project where they lack knowledge, it will be twice as hard to bring them back.

In the majority of cases, you will notice an unusual buzz around "following the processes and policies" stuff.

Also look for tunnel vision. Such stakeholders will insist on a proven solution only. Even if it doesn't serve the project goal.

These are the ways to cover the back in case of a failure.

3. Lack of Interest

A stakeholder has nothing to gain from your project. The most common and the simplest of cases.

There are many reasons to have a weak interest. Even high paid, central persons in the company often disengage because of little benefits.

You will know these people by the attitude:

"Get me a solution and I will reject and criticise it. Repeat until the times runs out, or I will see a safe to approve one."

"Tell me what exactly I need to do. Even better write it down I will do it as you say."

That is so common I'm sure you saw it many times.

4. Conflicting Requests

It usually happens due to miscommunication or the lack of communication in the first place.

You can also expect this case when a person has two or more bosses or managers. Both of them may have different expectations from your project. Therefore, they will put a lot of stress on the stakeholder you need to engage.

Discovering the conflict is difficult. Especially when it comes to a higher level of the organisational hierarchy.

The person in the centre will try to get away from two powers until they solve the conflict.

What's the catch?

In most cases, you will be the third party to push on that stakeholder.

So, now maybe you understand a reason for disengagement of a person. Though I would exercise extreme caution here.

You may assume a wrong root cause of the problem. So, unless you are entirely sure, continue to explore the factors influencing the stakeholder.

Understand the Meaning of Communications Methods

Even if a person is engaged, some communications methods may restrict his or her enthusiasm to help you.

Why?

Every communications method has it's designated purpose.

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Use Emails for Everlasting Trails

Here is an important thing you need to remember.

An email lives forever.

It is a MacLaud of the modern office. Even if you and receiver delete it, there is a strong chance that a backup version is stored somewhere on the mailing server.

That is not all.

Email can be used as evidence in the court.

OK, even if doesn't go that far.

Emails will be used to sort out whom to blame.

For these reasons, people are reluctant to share thoughts and concerns in emails. They tend to keep it as formal as possible.

Therefore, it is not the best way to get support and brainstorm.

But there is a catch.

Email may not be the best way for the first move during escalation. That will put a lot of stakeholder into defensive mode at once. While you may require their expertise.

Use Instant Messengers to Warm up Engagement or Clarify Specifics

Instant Messengers are deemed to be more private.

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But!

Most of them have an ability to save the conversation history. So, they are quite the same as emails.

Nevertheless, it gives you an option to solve a problem quickly and quietly.

Here is the tip.

It always pays back to follow up on the agreed upon points in the messenger. But do communicate this intent with your interlocutor.

Use Meetings to Sell Emotions

All of us have meetings. They can be powerful. Most are useless.

Here is the real story.

Meetings are a perfect place for a stakeholder to say a lot while promising nothing.

At the end of the day, an email with action points is what matters.

So, unless you end up the meeting with voting, it is not the best method to make the final decisions. Use it to share information, sync up and generate ideas with stakeholders.

Go for Personal Agreements (Phone Calls) to Getting Things Done

I believe personal agreements are the most efficient ways to push the project further. While at the same moment it is the most risky one.

Many delicate problems can be solved this way. You can find out a lot of useful information in private talks.

So, it is the best way to build the engagement.

And while everything goes well no one will ever blame you for managing a project this way. However, in a case of a crisis, you may not verify all agreements.

So, balance the risks and the trust you can put into a stakeholder.

Use Request Tickets to Finalise a Deal

This kind of communication is even more formal than email. It follows the strict protocol to request someone's action.

But there is a trick.

While it is formal, it can get very bureaucratic. Therefore, it is good to summarise the agreed upon action, not to solve problems.

Why did I just wrote so much about this means of communications?

Here is why:

Don't Get Caught in the Loop

I want you to learn how to resolve impediments and get things done.

Communication loops are the worst enemy of productivity and engagement.

Why?

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Imagine you need assistance from a stakeholder. You write an email, describe the context, ask one direct question. Yes or No. Simplified as it could be. Send.

Several hours later you get the response.

What the hack? It says:

"Why do you need this in the first place?"

You type even more text. Explaining the whole history of the matter.

The next reply says:

"Please send me the specification, designs and all related communication."

Oh my... You do have all these in your inbox. Why do you ask me to do that?

Several days later and seven more useless email and the stakeholder asks you for a meeting because he needs to clear things out.

That is the communication loop. You know the possible reasons already...

But how can you avoid it?

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Tactics That will Help You to Build Engagement

"Unengaged sponsor sinks the ship."

– Angela Waner

Project Management Basics
pmbasics101.com

1. Know Your Stakeholders To Push in Right Direction

It all starts with stakeholder analysis.

You simply must know who they are. What do they want and why. And you must have a plan.

Why does it matter?

Did you notice professional psychologists in a movie? They always record their sessions, and they keep notes in the process.

Why do they do that?

They test and verify the result. Test again and check whether there is a pattern. They are searching for an approach that will work for the person.

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That is the same way you should work on stakeholders engagement.

Plan, do, check, correct. Plan, do, check, correct.

2. Adopt Continuous Communication to Control Engagement

The most common mistake is to build engagement with a stakeholder only when you need it.

That doesn't work.

You need to warm up their interest to the project continuously.

Keep them informed on the project progress, ask their opinion and ideas, invite to meetings.

You don't want to overwhelm stakeholders with all the information on the project. However, you do need to keep the door open for them to contribute.

3. Giveaway Ownership to Build Motivation

People don't like to commit when they don't feel control over the assigned task.

Also, consider the following:

A high-level expert is assigned to help you with a project. She is a top star in a department. Maybe she leads some projects on her own.

However, on your project, you limit her abilities to only answering your questions.

That is not as exciting as leading own project, is it?

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Therefore, sometimes you have to give away responsibility and control over a part of a project.

To build engagement stakeholders should feel the ownership for the work.

Nevertheless, you are still interested in keeping overall control of the project.

4. Acknowledge Contribution to Build Engagement

It goes without saying for the project team. Hopefully, you say "Thank you" every day.

But what about a person who participated only partially? When his or her impact was critical.

Do you remember to acknowledge the commitment of a person beyond you team?

If not, that might be a reason why stakeholders do not want to engage with your projects.

5. Give Behind the Scenes Access to Stakeholders

This tactic works well with top level stakeholders like clients, sponsors and customers.

The idea is simple.

Whenever you communicate with this kind of stakeholders you describe the efforts, it takes to do the work.

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It should have common sense in it, but:

- When the team works on challenging task, say they are working hard and doing their best.
- When the team has to overtime, describe how committed they are.
- When you are working on creative tasks, tell how engaged the team is.

You want to achieve two responses from stakeholders:

1. They should understand that everything takes time, efforts and, in general, it is hard work.
2. Stakeholders should see real people behind the work they request.
3. They should feel commitment of the team.

That will make stakeholders more reluctant to waste team's time, delay answers, or to request unneeded changes.

Also, it is hard to stay passive alongside such an engaged group of people committed to doing your project.

Conclusion

1. Stakeholder engagement is a continuous effort.
2. You do need a plan to measure your progress.
3. You must choose correct means of communications.

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