Stakeholder Engagement

People don't resist change, they resist being changed. When developing and introducing changes to people and communities, your chance of success improves when you engage stakeholders in meaningful ways. This module addresses how to think about who stakeholders are, when their involvement matters, and how to get their engagement.

How to Use This Module

This short video describes how to use this module: Stakeholder Engagement

This module is organized in nine sections. Each section includes from a paragraph to a page or two of reading. The text is meant to be used along with active learning, and including links to:

- Handouts with additional information
- Worksheets for practice assignments
- Short videos expanding on the written content

Click on the items below to read more detail and to link to our own ideas and context. Completed worksheets can be compiled to become a record of your own thinking, practice, and application. Your work creates the basis for a practical stakeholder engagement plan.

Why Engage Stakeholders?

We know we should bring the voices of people who will be affected by a project into the planning. Many of us know what it's like to be on the receiving end of changes that were well intentioned but missed the mark, to our annoyance, frustration, or detriment. Yet though stakeholder engagement is common knowledge, common practice, and our sincere intent… we also know that it is easier said than done.

Let's begin this module with your own thoughts on why it's important to engage stakeholders. Use the Worksheet Why Engage Stakeholders? to reflect on change efforts from two different perspectives, and to bring your awareness to the value of stakeholder engagement.

Who are your Stakeholders?

A stakeholder is anyone who can affect, or who is impacted by, the issue, project or system you are focusing on. An entire ecosystem of stakeholders – including those most affected by the issues, those whose voices are often overlooked, and even unlikely allies – brings a wide variety of perspectives. All stakeholders are concerned about the outcome of a change. Many are also sensitive to the process of change. Notice how this broad definition matches how you usually think of as stakeholders. How does it expand your usual focus? Who do you tend to include? Who do you tend to forget? For instance, when developing a screening tool it can be easy to focus on institutional stakeholders who will administer the screener. Remember also to think about the individuals who will be screened, their families, and their communities.

Use the Who Are Our Stakeholders? Worksheet to list all the stakeholders you can think of for your project. You are describing the project's stakeholder ecosystem, its human, community and institutional context. Make a long list. Then make it longer. Make it specific, down to particular teams and individual names. The universe of possible stakeholders for your project is large. The point, for now, is to expand your view and think beyond those you usually engage. Note: this exercise is best done with your core project team to help you get as much input as you can at the beginning of the process.

Many of the ideas for identifying and analyzing stakeholders are based on Penny Walker's e-book Working Collaboratively – A Practical Guide to Achieving More. See the resource list at the end of this module.

Types of Stakeholders

You created a long list of stakeholders. Next, work with your list to sort out different types of stakeholders. You will use the Types of Stakeholders Worksheet to answer two questions:

- How much impact does the system have on them?
- How much influence do they have on the system?

STAKEHOLDERS BY INFLUENCE & IMPACTEDNESS		
	Degree of Influence on the Current System	
Extent Impacted by Current System or a Change to It	Low	High
Low		
High		

Note that your list of stakeholders is likely to shift over the life of your project, as you keep learning more about the entire system. Keep asking yourselves and your partners:

- Who are the key players?
- Who else can have an impact?
- Who will be affected?
- Who's missing?

As you identify more people, add them to your stakeholder matrix and plan to engage them as the project proceeds. In addition, your analysis of where initially-identified stakeholders fit in the matrix may also shift over time. Stay flexible!

Ultimately, you will have different ways to engage different stakeholders – those who have more and less influence and those who are more or less impacted. Some stakeholders on your list are core collaborators and partners throughout the process. Others need to be engaged from the very beginning to provide perspectives, test ideas, and help shape the approach. Others simply have to be informed along the way.

When to Engage Stakeholders

Sometimes we equate stakeholder engagement with a public meeting announcing a new initiative, a final set of decisions, or the launch of new protocols. But that's a limited view of stakeholder engagement. At what points should you engage specific stakeholders? We can plan specifically when to engage stakeholders by keeping the phases and timeline of a project in mind.

There are many ways to define the steps of a planning process. You probably have your initiative laid out in phases. Your project phases may resemble this generic problem-solving sequence:

- Pick the project; choose to take up a question, decision or project
- Define the scope of the question/decision/project; refine it
- Generate ideas, gather data, research others' experiences, collect options
- Test or do small scale experiments to learn more about the options
- Synthesize, analyze, develop recommendations for the decision makers
- Make the decision, or delegate it
- Plan how to organize and roll out implementation of what was decided

You should consider mapping out the timeline for your project, using your current project phases or the sequence above. Aim for 5-7 key phases. A phase should end with an observable outcome or deliverable such as a major event, key decision, data analysis or criteria prioritization that advances the project. The Project Timeline Worksheet provides a template. Tailor it for your project's timeline. Fill in your project timeline with key stakeholders whose engagement you know will be important at different phases of the project. Note that engagement may not be evenly distributed throughout the process. Some phases may need heavy engagement; others may need little to none.

This sample timeline, the Cohort Design Project Timeline illustrates a project that made repeated use of stakeholder interviews as a form of input and engagement. Notice that this timeline is organized in four phases and details deliverables as well as activities. Remember that engaging with stakeholders is a benefit to you and your project, not just a burden. Their input makes you smarter. In addition to planning when to reach out, you will probably add outreach to stakeholders when something emerges as critical. You can create ad hoc stakeholder input sessions at any point in the process:

- When a particular task needs to be done, and you have specific questions only they can answer.
- When the project is stumbling, and you need a broader view about what's going on and how to get on track.
- When it's time to wrap up, thank everyone, and say goodbye.

Levels of Stakeholder Engagement

You have your project stakeholders sorted into a 2X2 matrix, a timeline showing the major phases of your initiative, and an idea about which stakeholder voices you need in different phases of the project. Here is an additional way to think about engaging stakeholders.

The Levels of Engagement matrix below suggests different intentions for engaging different stakeholders. Those who are not very impacted by the system and not very influential can simply be kept in the loop with periodic updates. Those who are strongly impacted but have little influence – for instance, the people your project is meant to help – may need to be brought in using creative forms of collaboration. Often this will require figuring out where they already are and how to learn about their experience and what really matters to them. Those who have a lot of influence or power but are not impacted directly have information you may need, perhaps about systems. And those who have both high influence and are highly impacted may be among your key partners and collaborators.

STAKEHOLDERS BY INFLUENCE & IMPACTEDNESS		
	Degree of Influence on the Current System	
Extent Impacted by Current System or a Change to It	Low	High
Low	**TELL THEM** Inform them of what you're doing	**LISTEN TO THEM** Understand the system from their point of view, check ideas with them
High	**ENGAGE THEM** Devise creative ways to help them have more influence	**WORK WITH THEM** Work closely with these stakeholders if you can

Use this concept to think about the stakeholder engagement activities currently part of your (or your team's) repertoire. What do you already do to connect and hear from people in each quadrant? What have you done before, and what have you heard or read that you can imagine doing?

Use the worksheet Levels of Stakeholder Engagement to add familiar activities, methods and strategies in each quadrant. Some will apply in multiple spots. How do your activities match with this matrix? Are there any quadrants where you want to expand your capacity?

You can take this stakeholder engagement analysis further for your own project. Select one key phase in your project. Pick a phase you need to plan for that is timely or of concern. With that one phase in mind, review the stakeholders you identified in Section 4. Check that these stakeholders are highly impacted, have high influence, or both. Focus on the subset of key stakeholders to engage actively in this phase. On the Worksheet titled Stakeholder Engagement by Phase & Quadrant, fill in the project name, the phase you're focused on, and key stakeholders by quadrant. What ideas do you have for how to engage them? Write in your engagement ideas and notice where you want to expand your options.

Formats and Methods for Engaging Stakeholders

You have targeted key stakeholders by phase in your project and identified some familiar methods for engaging them. The handout Stakeholder Engagement Formats & Methods displays ways to think about engagement based on size and type of group. It frames them by individual, similar group, mixed group, and large mixed group (think of that as the whole system in the room.)

For highly impacted and/or highly influential stakeholders with whom you want significant engagement, these formats and methods can yield great rewards. They create the conditions for you to hear stakeholders' ideas so you can take their perspective into account and improve the quality of the changes you develop. At the same time, you may secure their understanding, commitment, and support for the changes.

This short video describes more about this sort of high-engagement method: High Engagement Methods

Asking and Listening with Focus and Curiosity

Recall the change processes you reflected on in Section 1, as a changer and as a recipient of change, and remember your reasons for giving attention to stakeholders. Whatever engagement methods you use, you have the gift of being able to connect with people. They will be talking; you will be listening. As a listener, you have the opportunity – and in the context of your project, the responsibility – to convey respect. The simple act of listening can be powerful. Not only can good listening elicit more and better information, it can foster a moment of human connection that could alter the trajectory of ongoing relationships.

Of course, we've been listening our whole lives. But here's a new perspective on listening: Listening creates the environment for thinking. The quality of our listening actually can improve the quality of others' thinking. The handout Listening to Create a Thinking Environment, based on the work of Nancy Kline, elaborates on some of the components of a thinking environment, an environment created in large part by effective listening. These familiar ideas, understood through the lens of listening to support thinking, remind us to be our best selves when listening – to give attention and appreciation, to treat others as peers, and to welcome different perspectives.

Note that listening is active, not passive. Listening means we are quiet but not necessarily silent. There is room for follow-up questions that convey curiosity, acceptance, and interest in gaining more insight into the other's experience. Many engagement methods depend on well-aimed, well-framed questions that invite thinking and input relevant to your particular project, at whatever phase. Frame questions that invite imagination, not just complaint. Frame questions that assume the stakeholder's input is significant. Frame questions that invite people to share their direct experience (and believe them.) Frame questions that ask for positive experiences (you'll get good and bad, but at least some good.)

How Decision-Making Conveys Respect

It's a lot of work: identifying and sorting key stakeholder voices, synching their engagement to project phases, framing questions to elicit their input, and listening fully

to their answers. Besides listening person-to-person, your system must be structured to listen to stakeholders as well.

When you are planning who to engage, when, and how, look at your project's decision-making process. Whenever you have a stakeholder input step, be sure you have corresponding steps in your system to listen, understand, and respond to the input:

- Review and analyze the input
- Decide how to use it
- Close the loop by communicating back to stakeholders about how their ideas were used

Be sure you know what individual or group gets to make which decisions. This implies another step:

- Plan in advance who has decision-making authority

Be clear with stakeholders from the start, and repeatedly, about where you are in the process and who the decision makers are. Let them know why some ideas were accepted and other ideas were not. Remind stakeholders (and yourselves) that listening to their input is not the same thing as obeying their wishes. Remember that input from different people and groups will be contradictory. Reconciling divergent experiences and interests is not simple. Still, you can communicate that you did listen, and you can explain the logic you used in deciding how to proceed.

If you ask, and if you listen, you must do something with what they tell you. If you repeatedly do not apply input from a stakeholder or group, your reputation and influence will suffer. People whose input is consistently ignored or overruled may, understandably, stop participating. (See the [Designing Great Meetings](#) module on the three Conditions for Commitment and Participation, including 'Do I have some influence?' and 'Will I be able to contribute?')

Review your project process in the [Project Timeline Worksheet](#) from earlier in this module. Check that your process includes clear decision-making and specific steps to incorporate the input you receive from stakeholders. Insert explicit decision-making steps if you didn't have them already.

Glossary

- **Change effort** – an initiative or effort to improve a complex set of systems and people.
- **Collaborate** – work jointly in a cooperative way; work as partners on an issue of mutual concern; work together with an understanding that separate parties have overlapping or interdependent interests.
- **Engagement** – giving full attention, usually accompanied by activity from thinking, to listening and talking, to action.

- **Influence** – have an effect upon; exert power to have an impact.
- **Stakeholder** – anyone who can affect, or who is impacted by, the issue, project or system you are focusing on.
- **System** – a complex set of organizations, principles, policies and practices that interconnect to function together as a whole.

Resources

Concepts & Frameworks

- See the Designing Great Meetings module in this toolkit for more guidance on how to design the details of an engaging stakeholder event.
- **Time To Think**, by Nancy Kline. This book develops the concept that good listening can ignite good thinking. Kline has identified 10 behaviors that form a 'thinking environment' and improves the way people think.
- **The Collaboration Response**, by Gil Steil. Collaboration is an underlying value for engaging stakeholders. Steil describes 8 axioms that elicit the natural response of collaboration and yields collaborative action for the greater good. The book includes many illustrative stories.
- **Working Collaboratively** – A Practical Guide to Achieving More, by Penny Walker. This e-book, short enough to be read in 90 minutes, is a wonderful explanation of the stakeholder analysis concepts, methods and values at the core of this module. It is available at the Sustain Ability Institute website.

Inventories & Methods

- Events & Convening's Designed to Support Multi-stakeholder Collaboration, compiled by Community At Work. This inventory of over 20 collaborative convening models includes everything from multi-day events to those requiring just a few hours.
- IAPP, the International Association for Public Participation, has a wealth of information about the practice of public engagement at the International Association for Public Participation. See especially a spectrum of participation keyed to decision making.
- Liberating Structures is the web-based version of the book. The drop down menu of Liberating Structures thoroughly describes the what and how of 33 activities designed to elicit information, creative thinking, and a collaborative mindset.
- NCDD, the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, has a valuable Resource Guide on Public Engagement. A little bit on concepts and context frame extensive listings, descriptions, and examples of effective engagement in multiple locations for diverse topics.

Examples from Demonstration Sites

[Ohio Youth Elevator Speech](#)