

STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT AS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR PROJECT SUCCESS

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Abstract

This theoretical paper will examine subject literature and will try to analyze how stakeholder management can increase the project success. The article provides background to the topic of stakeholders from the first usage of the term in 1963, supplemented by an analysis of project stakeholder management strategies. The article will provide the reader with insight to how one can increase the success factor of the project with the usage of appropriate stakeholder management tools. This article contributes to the body of literature by detailing about how project stakeholder management influences projects and their success. It is prepared as a response to an increasing role of projects, the influence of different stakeholders on the execution of projects and their own evaluation of project success factors. By analyzing the literature of the concepts and empirical research from 1980s till now, this article will provide the potential project agents (project managers, project teams, etc.) with a better understanding of the role of stakeholders in conducting successful projects. The literature reveals that effective stakeholder management is a critical success factor of projects as they should satisfy the needs of different groups of people in each part of the their lifecycle. The conducted analysis is a foundation for the future research about effective project stakeholder management and a base for additional research.

Keywords: *stakeholders, stakeholder management, project, project management, critical success factors.*

1. Introduction

Even though the field of project management has enjoyed significant interest of researchers, it is still not perceived as important as other fields of management or as a “real” discipline (Kwak and Anbari, 2009). Shenhar and Dvir (2007) have analyzed Harvard Business Review and found out that out of 7000 case studies published in it, only about 2% dealt with projects in general

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and only a few dozen were devoted to project management. In consequence, there are not enough case studies written with an aim to analyze the reasons for project failure thoroughly and in order to have deeper understanding of which factors have negative and which positive influence on projects. However, investigations into project success factors are especially important nowadays as a growing amount of work today is project-based. Projects help organizations achieve their goals and that is why studies into how to manage a project effectively are especially important. As more organizations base their activities on projects, more demand is put on ways of accomplishing a project successfully. Furthermore, stakeholders are not homogeneous; each of them has its own perspective of project success and understanding of the world. Studies show that their knowledge of critical success factors is limited and this shows that more research is needed about this subject, as a popularization of this discipline would benefit the practitioners (Davis, 2001). Project management specialists endeavor to reduce the number of failed projects and one of the directions of research should be stakeholder behavior as each project has various stakeholder groups who can influence the execution of the project at different stages. This article will try to analyze recent empirical research to find out whether and in what way stakeholder management can be an effective tool for increasing project success.

2. Who are project stakeholders?

The word “stakeholder” can be connected with a legal term of a party that is given money or the right to manage a property until the owner is determined, while in business it is understood differently, as a person or a group of individuals, who are affected by the results of an activity. In this way, the stakeholders of an organization are those individuals who are affected, can affect or are interested in an organization, while project stakeholders can be described as those who are involved in some way with the project or who can be influenced by its execution or result.

Stanford Research Institute introduced the term “stakeholder” into the business world in 1963, where it was defined as “those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist” (Freeman and Reed, 1983, p. 89). In literature, there are two tendencies in describing this term: the broad and the narrow one. An example of the former is by Starik (1994), who actually believes that anything, even a river can be a stakeholder as he defines it as “any natural occurring entity which affects or is affected by organizational performance” (p. 90). On the other hand, there are narrower definitions where stakeholder is usually described as “any identifiable group or individual on which the organization is dependent for its continued survival” (Freeman and

Reed, 1983, p. 91). Regardless of the definition one decides to choose, the most important stakeholders include employees, neighbors, government, clients, community, competitors and other organizations and in some cases even the natural environment and these vary across organizations. When narrowing the concept of stakeholders into only the project ones, the most important usually include the customer, project manager, users of the result of the project, project sponsor or project team and these also differ between projects.

It is usually very hard to predict the reaction of every stakeholder to the result of the project, and because of this they are seen as one of the largest uncertainties in projects. In order to decrease such, stakeholder theory is used to analyze who the stakeholders are and which of them can influence project success, while project stakeholder management is to understand the sources of uncertainty of stakeholders and find a managerial strategy to overcome these.

3. Project stakeholder management

Project stakeholder management is an important part of strategic management theory (Cleland and Ireland, 2007). A lot of research has been done on the importance of project stakeholders as these can have a positive or negative influence on the project and thus it is essential for project teams to be able to maximize the positive influence and minimize any damaging behavior. According to McElroy and Mills (2003, after: Assudani and Kloppenborg, 2010, p. 70), project stakeholder management “is the continuing development of relationships with stakeholders for project success” which means that there is a correlation between one and the other and a skilful project manager should be able to manage them in such way that they would contribute to the project whenever needed.

In order to be able to manage different groups of stakeholders, a thorough analysis of them should be conducted. The most common way of identifying stakeholders of a project is to categorize them into different segments by their different level of influence on the project or involvement/position in the project. These categories can be adapted to the needs of the specific project or a project manager can classify them into general groups as Briner, Hastings and Geddes (1996), who used four groupings in their analysis: client, project managers organization, outside services and invisible stakeholders. Stakeholders can also be divided into groups by their type: project participants (those who actively take part in the project through its lifecycle), communication participants (those who are influenced by the project execution and implementation), and parasitic participants (who have indirect stake in the project) (Nguyen, et al., 2009). According to a very famous division of stakeholders by Pinto (1996), they can be external, so outside of the project (clients, government, ecologists,

competition) or internal, who are within the project organization (project team, the management of the organization doing the project). It is also useful to categorize the stakeholders into primary (or direct) and secondary (indirect) ones. Primary ones are those groups which have some kind of a responsibility in conducting the project while direct are those that directly participate in the execution of the project. Secondary or indirect stakeholders, on the other hand, are those that do not participate in the project directly (similar to parasitic participants).

The project deliverables and outcomes influence stakeholders, while these during the whole project lifecycle influence the project. The most basic project lifecycle is usually divided into four stages: formation, planning, execution, and close-down, and each of them poses different stakeholder management challenges for the team. In the first and second part, the choice of the stakeholders is of critical significance, as it is much more difficult to adapt the project to the needs of stakeholders after it has reached the execution stage. This is why the project manager must identify stakeholders, engage them in the project and establish an initial bond at the beginning of the project lifecycle. At this stage, the stakeholders themselves have the biggest possibility of affecting the goals and execution of the projects, as in general the level of their attributes (urgency, power and legitimacy) is the highest at this stage (Mitchell, et al., 1997). Knowledge about the project should be shared with them while ideas, expectations and goals should be negotiated. During the planning phase, the project manager should create awareness about the project delivery and outcomes and build a relationship with them, putting special attention to key stakeholders. During the execution stage, a follow-up of the stakeholder management should be performed and relations built with any new stakeholders while old ones sustained. During the closing of the project, disengaging activities should be held with the project stakeholders. This is where the project manager must verify that all the stakeholders that are engaged in the spreading the result of the project understand their roles, as these will be the individuals who will distribute the benefits of the project.

In order to effectively manage stakeholders, the project team should be aware of the exact tasks and targets of each stage of the project lifecycle as well as understand the nature of the clients' organization and the regulatory framework of all project related assignments. Goals and general planning of the project should be executed with keeping different stakeholder objectives in mind. Sutterfield, Friday-Stroud and Shivers-Blackwell, (2006) have developed a nine-step framework which shows the cyclical pattern of stakeholder management which can be seen on Figure 1.



Figure 1. Project stakeholder management strategy framework

Source: Sutterfield, J.S. et al. (2006), p. 33.

The figure above illustrates the nine steps of project stakeholder management from identifying the mission and vision through the feedback. It shows that even steps such as “Identify Project Vision & Mission” or “Conduct Project SWOT Analysis” which at a first glance do not seem connected with stakeholders do have some influence on stakeholder management. With the use of this framework, project managers can assess each stakeholder together with situational aspects and in this way decrease the risk of conflict while increasing the benefits and opportunities set by different stakeholder groups.

4. Project critical success factors: an emergence of stakeholder power

The topic of project success has been receiving scholarly attention for the past thirty years and throughout this time it has matured greatly. Back then, studies about this topic were generally quantitative, based on simple formulas, while it was believed that it could be measured against an objective set of criteria. In 1970s, researchers assessed whether the project was accomplished during the implementation stage and according to Freeman and Beale (1992,) success was mostly based on the performance of individuals that took part in the project

measured in subjective and objective methods. This is why most literature of that time suggests that the foundation of project success was achieving the technical aspects of the implementation, not soft skills like, for example, communication with the customer of the project (Jugdev and Muller, 2005). It was only in 1980s and 1990s that the researchers started examining the customers' viewpoint instead of just the technical aspects as a measurement of project success (Pinto and Slevin, 1988). Nevertheless, in general, it was believed that the main stakeholders influencing project success were the manager and the team while other stakeholders were neglected (Anderson, et al., 2004).

Researchers today realize the complexity of the term with at least five interrelated dimensions: technical, economic, behavioral, business and strategic. Even in our times, one set of criteria that a project must achieve to be called "successful" does not exist but the 21st century did bring new ideas into science about what project success is. Now it is believed that it is determined by short-term project lifecycle rather than strategic goals of the organization while it is attributable to the project owner and sponsor. Future studies on what factors can increase project success as per stakeholder perceptions will provide more insight into this topic, but at the current stage a successful project can be described as "realization of the strategic objectives of the client organization, satisfaction of end users and satisfaction of other stakeholders" (Ika, 2009; after: Assudani and Kloppenborg, 2010, p. 67).

Pinto and Slevin (1987) have attempted to categorize main project success factors, some of which do have elements of stakeholder management, which include:

- project mission defined;
- support from top management;
- detailed schedule and plans;
- consultation with client and his acceptance;
- suitable team members;
- technical expertise;
- monitoring of the project;
- on-time communication with main players;
- the skill to deal with unexpected situations within the project.

It is not easy to say that every project that is finished within the time frame, within scope and budget is a successful one, there are examples where projects have met this criteria but were failures when, for example, the project product does not solve a problem it was meant to. This is why there should also be a distinction between a successful project process and its product (intended level of client satisfaction reached, whether it benefits the end user, whether it allows better competing with competitors, gaining a new market

share, ability to use an upcoming opportunity). This is why nowadays project success is broken into three dimensions: process (meeting budget, scope and time requirements), product (benefits for the end user, meeting client needs) and organizational success (business and strategic benefits). Shenhar and Dvir (2007) believe a project can be successful when it fulfills five criteria: efficiency, impact on the team (team satisfaction, building new skills, motivation, etc.), customer impact, business success and preparation for the future. This means that two of these criteria can only be accomplished with the use of effective stakeholder management. Westerveld (2003) developed this thought and concluded that project success is only measured by stakeholders: by client appreciation, project team, users, contractors and any other interested parties. Furthermore, project can reach different levels of success and thus can be seen as a pyramid. Firstly, meeting the project goal and client expectations is at the bottom of the pyramid as this is the main criterion which must be met for the project to be called successful. Then the second level is finishing the project on time, within budget and scope. The next level of project success is meeting internal organizational criteria while at the top and hardest to achieve is observing external relations.

Turner (2004) set up four main criteria for a project to be called a successful one, all of which include project stakeholders: the criteria of the success of the project should be agreed upon with stakeholders before and during the project lifecycle, there should be active collaboration between the project manager and sponsor, the project manager should be given the right to take action when unforeseen circumstances appear, while the project owner should monitor the performance aspect of the project. According to Nguyen, Skitmore, and Kwok Wai Wong (2009) accomplishing a project is based on satisfying stakeholders as “the success of the project depends very much on fulfilling their needs and expectations” (p. 1129).

Project success can also be evaluated according to different stakeholder perceptions. One stakeholder group may perceive a project as a successful one while another as a failure. Such a situation happens, for example, in infrastructure projects, where ecologists may have a different view upon it as opposed to the future users. The same happens when project managers see it as success because it was finished within the estimated period, scope and budget while the end users may not find the project beneficial. Managers of the organization in which a project takes place may see success as the amount of profits the project brings, while the technical team may see success as the functionality and innovativeness of the product. This is why one of the reasons stakeholder management should be used as a tool to increase the chance of project success is by understanding how each stakeholder perceives success and tries to satisfy his or her expectations.

There are a number of factors by which stakeholders influence the project. One of the most widely known is the “power” influence. Dahl (1957, after: Mitchell, et al., 1997, p. 865) explains power as “a relationship among social actors in which one social actor, A, can get another social actor, B, to do something that B would not otherwise have done” and this definition fits also into the notion of stakeholder power. Project stakeholders can possess three types of power: positional, resource and expert. The next factor is legitimacy, which is seen as a prerequisite for a successful transaction with different stakeholders. It is conceived as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). In short, legitimacy is a reflection of contractual relations, as well as legal and moral rights in the bond between the project and the stakeholders. The third factor is urgency and with this attribute stakeholder groups may put pressure on the project team to take some emergency action. Urgency is the level at which the stakeholder calls for instant attention. They use this feature when their feelings are so strong they decide to act. The next is the proximity factor or the amount to which the stakeholder is involved in the project. It is advisable to rate the proximity of each stakeholder – from stakeholders which are directly involved in everyday life of the project to ones that are distant from the project. The relationship between the project and the stakeholder is often driven by vested interest, as stakeholders could have such for a number of reasons such as: political, environmental, opportunism, etc. These factors are very important to project success as there can be stakeholders which are in the case of proximity very far from the project but have large power to influence the project.

In this way, in order to maximize the possibility of project success, project managers must categorize stakeholders in order to develop beforehand the responses to the possible actions of each stakeholder group. Much research has been done on the possible ways of calculating the influence of stakeholders on projects to enable teams to manage them more successfully. Nguyen (et. al, 2009) have set up an equation to calculate stakeholder impact:

$$I = P + L + U + K + D$$

Stakeholder impact in this theory is equal to the sum of stakeholder power (P), legitimacy (L), urgency (U), level of knowledge (K) and the degree of proximity (D).

One technique of managing stakeholders is shown in Figure 2 where the relationship between the project team and the different groups of stakeholders is mentioned according to their power and interest levels.

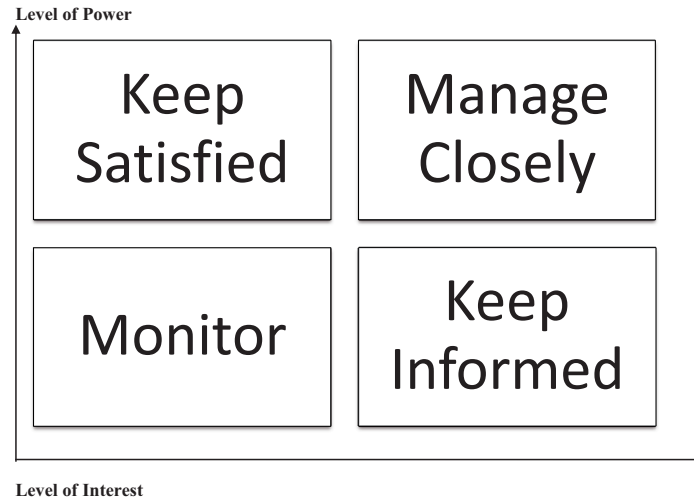


Figure 2. Power and interest grid for stakeholder management

This figure shows that on the one extreme, the project team should monitor stakeholders that are low in both interest and power but on the other side, those groups with high power and interest should be managed closely. The other stakeholder groups should not be neglected, either. Project managers must keep the interested stakeholders continually informed about the proceedings of the project while those individuals with a high level of power but uninterested in the project itself should be satisfied in order for them not to influence the project negatively.

Table 1 specifies critical success/failure factors for different stakeholder groups from empirical research with ones that involve stakeholder management distinguished in bold.

Table 1. Project success and failure factors for the project stakeholders

Project Stakeholders	Success and Failure Factors
Investor or owner	Clear and accepted purpose Specific plan Open communications Stakeholder endorsement Project execution cost Interested owner (Jacobson and Choi, 2008)
Project executive or project sponsor	Open communications Political support (Jacobson and Choi, 2008)

Project Stakeholders	Success and Failure Factors
Consumers	Clear specifications Open communications Acceptance (Pinto and Slevin, 1988)
Operators/users	Clear specifications Commitment Open communications (Jacobson and Choi, 2008)
Project manager and project team	Clear and accepted purpose Specific plans Commitment Open communications Respect and trust Collaboration Political support Expert advice and review Risk awareness Clear roles and responsibilities Leadership style (Pinto and Slevin, 1988)
Senior supplier (design and/or management)	Open communications Risk awareness Respect and trust Collaboration (Jacobson and Choi, 2008)
Other suppliers (goods, materials, works, or services)	Commitment Open communications Respect and trust Collaboration (Jacobson and Choi, 2008)
Public	Transparency Accountability Community outreach Political support (Jacobson and Choi, 2008)

Source: Turner, R. and Zolin, R. (2012).

Based on the information provided in the table above, the following stakeholder management factors lead to project success, whereas the lack of them could cause project failure:

- open communications
- stakeholder endorsement
- interested owner
- commitment
- respect and trust
- collaboration
- political support
- community outreach.

Furthermore, some of the other factors are actually a result of ineffective or lacking stakeholder management such as risk awareness or clear and accepted purpose.

In order to have a successful project, project managers should also analyze the attitude of different stakeholder groups. In this way, the project team knows in advance which groups will have a positive and which negative influence on the project and consequently prepare yourself for the attacks and try to maximize the positive support. McElroy and Mills (2000) have categorized stakeholder attitudes into five groups: active opposition, passive opposition, no commitment, passive support and active support. Many studies, such as Bourne (2006) or Milosevic (2004) show that the success of a project is partly based on the identification of stakeholders, understanding their needs, creating mutual relationships with them, and preparing and exploiting resources to satisfy their needs. In order to keep the project on track, project teams must identify all stakeholders, create relations, fulfill the expectations of the most important groups, and communicate with the stakeholders in an effective way. If these points are not introduced into the project, the likeliness of project failure increases greatly. A permanent identification and prioritization of stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle is considered as good practice. At many instances, it is only possible to judge whether the project is successful or not, only after a few months or even years after it has been completed, thus project managers to ensure project success, must already manage stakeholders during the project to be able to identify what these individuals will consider as success in the future.

Many researchers have underlined the importance of stakeholder management and how this has become an essential soft skill for a successful project manager (Crawford, 2005; Winter, Smith, Morris and Cicmil, 2006). As previously noted the maximization of the positive influence of stakeholders and minimizing the negative is a way of enhancing the project success rate. Three recent empirical studies on this subject have proven that involving stakeholders into the project is one of the factors causing project success (Chan and Chan, 2004; Dainty et al., 2003; Wang and Huang, 2006).

Monitoring stakeholders can allow the project team to detect a hidden stakeholder, which, if ignored, can have a disastrous influence on the project. The sooner such stakeholder is identified, the sooner a plan can be made to manage such individual or group. Furthermore, separate stakeholder groups have distinct interests and power during the different stages of project lifecycle. With the tools of project stakeholder management, these can be properly treated and their actions reacted to. Jugdev and Muller (2005) argue that one of the success factors of projects is to agree upon the success criteria with the stakeholders a few times during the project lifecycle while a collaborating relationship should be built between the different stakeholder groups and the project manager. Ika (2009) believes that the success of a project is multidimensional, uncertain and reliant on stakeholders. Studies show that

project success is clearly tied to effectively communicating and managing relationships with the various stakeholders of the project (Assudani, 2010).

Stakeholder management can even reduce paperwork and thus project time and success rate as the usage of communication tools between participants leads to a better coordination of the project which as described above is one of project success factors. There are many other habits, which are part of effective stakeholder management, such as proper use of charters and communication plans or soft skills of project manager to be able to build relations with stakeholders such as the ability to motivate, empower or to resolve conflict.

In order to have successful projects, leaders must remember that stakeholders nowadays have the biggest ever amount of knowledge due to an easy access and spread of information. In this way, the more information the stakeholder groups possess, the more ultimate influence they have on the project. McElroy and Mills (2000) have underlined that this knowledge can range from total ignorance to full awareness of the project. Stakeholders can gain information about the projects from hearsay and gossip rather than true validated information. Thus, in order to have a successful project, it is essential to be sure that truthful information is spread about the project and any misleading information leakages must be avoided.

Based on extensive research, Beringer, Jonas and Kock (2013) have proven that stakeholder management is even a critical success factor in project portfolio management. Moreover, Lycett Rassau and Danson (2004) have demonstrated that stakeholder management is the basis also for program management. Furthermore, there is strong evidence in literature that there is a connection between effective stakeholder management and the performance of a project (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). By definition, a project should also reach acceptable ethical and sustainability levels to be considered successful and ignoring individuals who are influenced by it can be considered as a failure to reach such project targets.

One of the main benefits of project stakeholder management is decreased risk. If the project team is able to identify stakeholders and analyze their needs and expectations, this will enable the team to predict any action from these individuals aimed negatively at the project and have a plan not to allow it to happen. When such risks appear in a project, like when Złote Tarasy construction was stopped halfway through the project because of protest of a co-called “Friendly City” association, it is possible to say that the team made an inadequate analysis of how their decisions can affect the interests of others. Insufficient communication with the stakeholders of the impact of the project leads to conflict and disputes and possibly slowing the project down. Especially in large infrastructural/real estate projects where the change in landscape is quite large, some people will be resistant to such change because

they have been accustomed to the way it was previously. Based on an analysis of the extensive body of literature Mohan and Paila (2013) concluded that the two essential ingredients of reaching project success are: high performance teams as well as effective stakeholder management. On the other hand, the lack of or ineffective stakeholder management can lead to delays and/or going over budget because of controversies or disputes.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, judging on some definitions of the term project as a temporary partnership of stakeholders coming together to create something new, stakeholder management is not only a critical success factor for project success but an inevitable part of any project. In the most recent edition of Project Management Body of Knowledge Guide, one of the project management methodologies, a whole new 10th knowledge area was added about stakeholder management which shows that more emphasis than ever is put to this subject. Even though there have been many studies done on project success, there is still no one unified criteria which a project must meet in order to be considered successful, which makes it harder to analyze stakeholder management as a success factor. In the past, it seemed that a project was successful when it reached cost, quality, scope and budget limits, but even so there are many examples where the project has not met those but still is considered as a success whereas some projects met all three but still but left the client unsatisfied. An example of the first is the Sydney Opera project, which was finished with an 8 year delay while costs have greatly exceeded the initial budget. The building, however, met other success factors and today not only serves as an opera but it is one of the main attractions and symbols of the city.

It is evident, though, that stakeholder identification and prioritization as well as building relationships with the stakeholders are the essentials of effective project management and thus, achieving project success. There is no doubt that effective dealing with stakeholders is essential to projects as it is them who need to be satisfied and who possess power and influence and thus largely shape the planning and result of the project. Based on the findings of this article it is possible to agree with Bourne and Walker (2005) who have argued that “the ability to understand the often hidden power and influence of various stakeholders is a critical skill for successful project managers. Without attention to needs and expectations of a diverse range of stakeholders, a project will probably not be regarded as successful, even if the project manager was able to stay within the original time, budget and scope” (p. 650). There is still, however, the need for further research on the topic of stakeholder management as a way of tackling possible project failure problems as, for example, no

study has still been done on trying to find a relationship between stakeholder responsibilities and cost overrun.

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