

Engaging Stakeholders in Dialogue

Levels of Stakeholder Dialogue

We respect that our stakeholders may be short of time and may have low bandwidth for the detail of our assignment. And so, typically, we limit our conversations to the essentials, generally the TASK or SOLUTION. However if we consider ourselves as a **professional service provider**, we can take a broader and richer approach to stakeholder dialogue; something ‘off-the-task’ and more courageous. We recommend paying equal attention to dialogue on three levels:

- **Managing the engagement**
- **Executing the project/task**
- **Building the relationship**

Managing the engagement

Managing the engagement is about choosing to step aside from the task, to engage in a different type of conversation. Central to this is talking about and contracting for mutual expectations about the service that we provide and, of equal importance, the service the stakeholder/stakeholder provides to us with respect to our assignment. This requires open enquiry, making proposals and negotiating openly. Topics to engage on include:

- **The stakeholder’s need/outcome; and**
- **Their more private issues/ agenda**
- **The senior politics around the work**
- **How you will collaborate**
- **How you will communicate**
- **Clarification of each other’s roles**
- **Boundaries and overlaps between you**
- **How much time will be committed**
- **How you will judge success in the role (both ways)**

The Engagement Conversation

Conducting these conversations can be difficult and something stakeholders often don’t expect. The following **SORE** framework for an engagement conversation can guide us through such client/stakeholder meetings:

- **Understand their Situation/Agenda**
- **Define required Outcomes**
- **Propose your Response**
- **Set two-way Expectations**



Once the SORE framework is understood and internalised, we can at any time conduct an engagement conversation, which the stakeholder will feel is effective, flowing and by two equal professionals in an adult-adult 50/50 relationship. Whether or not we tell the stakeholder that we are using the framework is a matter of choice.



The 50/50 nature of this dialogue is a key principle. Organisationally we may have less power in the relationship, and we may be walking into their territory, and so to succeed in our work we must punch above our weight. Respect comes from basics – being credible and doing a good job, but it also comes

from our ability and courage to have high quality dialogue, on an equal basis, irrespective of rank. This builds respect, trust can grow, and we find a stakeholder relationship which will enable us to deliver. We see this as a skill and also our ‘right’ that comes with taking on the responsibility for delivering our project or service.

In summary, the core principles for putting our stakeholder and stakeholder conversations to good work include:

- **Engaging the stakeholder on the role/service**
- **Stepping up into a 50/50 dialogue**
- **Building a high trust relationship**

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Situation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to the stakeholder's issues and agenda • Interrogating reality to fully understand what is going on for them, and why it matters 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's your current position with respect to this project/assignment/service? • Why is it so important to you? • Where does it sit within your priorities? • What are the consequences for you? • Tell me about the other stakeholders that we will need to work with? • Is there anything important that I can't see? 	<p>This is ENQUIRY. First and most important is listening to the stakeholder properly. He/she will feel your curiosity, and potentially feel challenged by your gentle probing interrogation of their reality. When the enquiry is skilful, the stakeholder will build a clearer picture for themselves. Our trust building starts here. S and O stages can iterate and overlap, but both must be done before proceeding to a way forward.</p>
Outcome	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking the Stakeholder where they are trying to get to • Reframing the situation/problems in terms of a positive outcome 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you trying to accomplish here? • How will the business be more successful? • Can you describe how success will look? • When do you need to achieve all this by? • How will you know it has been achieved? • Anything else important for you personally? 	<p>This is REFLECTING BACK and should directly flow from the first stage. Sometimes the positive outcome is missing, and this stage creates it. Other times it does not fit the problem, which should be challenged. This stage can be motivating for the stakeholder, and can help build trust as you paraphrase, showing your understanding and empathy with their purpose.</p>
Response	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposing and agreeing ways to collaborate together • Suggesting the size and shape of how the project/assignment/service will unfold 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I see the project/service unfolding like this... • It occurs to me that if we... • I see it as my role to...and your role to... • I would like to work closely with you on... • You can trust me to look after... • My skills are best...I will need more help... • I'd very much like to take this on... 	<p>You move to PROPOSING a way forward, led by you, yet at the same time where the stakeholder does not feel controlled. It is not about the solution, but a 'way forward' e.g. a top level view of the project/service, and how you would go about delivering it, <u>relevant to the stakeholder</u>. Let them ask for specifics, and give answers. These may be qualified, depending on the level of uncertainty, or with what you feel able to say.</p>
Expectations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing what the stakeholder can expect from you • Expressing the things that you need from the stakeholder 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you expect from me? • ...I can achieve (this), I can't achieve (that)... • How (much) do you want to be involved? • Can I tell you what I need from you? • ...I will need you to help me with... • ...If I am to deliver, I expect you to... 	<p>This is NEGOTIATION, a frank exchange of needs and wants, which in the nature of your tone and body language establishes your 50/50 relationship. Up to this point, the politics of organisational rank were more conventionally respected. Now is the big opportunity to define the relationship as robust, two-way and equal. It takes courage, and the 'contract' gives you a baseline that you can come back to at tougher times.</p>

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