Module 12

Read Ahead

Effective Communication, The Who

Stakeholder Identification and Engagement
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Objectives

After attending the training in Module 12, participants will be able to:

• understand how to define and identify stakeholders.
• provide techniques for engaging stakeholders.
• appreciate the benefits of engaging stakeholders.

Introduction

ALDOT serves a multitude of professions, industries, organizations, agencies, companies, and individuals. Sorting through and prioritizing the interests of these many stakeholders to facilitate effective communication can be a challenge. Module 6 helps us to recognize our communication needs and the needs of those we affect and influence. This Module addresses identifying stakeholders; analyzing, categorizing, and prioritizing stakeholders; and effectively communicating with stakeholders.

Characteristics of a Stakeholder

Our stakeholders share several common characteristics. To some extent, they all have the following characteristics:

• Power to Influence Outcomes
  They can affect if and how our work gets funded and how others view our work; they have influence over outcomes.

• Interest in Our Work
  They have concerns, questions, and possibly answers and solutions regarding our work.

• Attitudes in Support of or in Opposition to Our Work
  Whether with friends or on social media, potential stakeholders can make a difference in our work by sharing their outlook on what we are doing and how we engage them.

An early definition of the term “stakeholder” referred to those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist. That is a dangerous definition because, if we are only concerned with those who directly influence our organization’s existence, we could develop a tendency to ignore anyone else.

In general, the definition is now much broader. Today, we must consider all those who have an interest in our work. We can sort them out, categorize them, and consider each one differently, but we must acknowledge their existence and impact.
One challenge with this broader definition is that the list of stakeholders begins to grow and could possibly exceed our capacity to treat each as deserved. As with many areas of our work, we must categorize and prioritize. Our lists should be very context-specific and must be flexible as we engage those who are most affected or impacted by our work.

Stakeholders may be classified as:

- **Internal**: Those working for or with ALDOT to deliver a service or solution
- **External**: Those non-ALDOT people or entities categorized by the different stages of a project or initiative such as pre-construction, construction, and/or post-construction

The subject or initiative for either internal or external stakeholders may be project-specific as identified above or non-project-specific (like a department policy change).

**Special Stakeholders**

A few types of stakeholders may warrant particular treatment. We may not always need direct support or approval from these stakeholders, but many times our response and interaction with them will differ from how other stakeholders are treated. The rules for engaging ALDOT leadership, attorneys, elected officials, and the media are different from the rules for engaging other internal and external stakeholders. ALDOT leaders generally do not like surprises. When we are aware of something that could have a significant effect on ALDOT and/or any specific ALDOT leader, we have an obligation to make sure they are aware of the details. Special stakeholders may have special requests that should be treated as priority. Sometimes these types of requests will skip the official chain of command, and this is normal in some cases. We do what needs to be done and inform the appropriate people along the way. This advice is also true for ALDOT attorneys as well as community and media relations staff.

Legislators and elected officials have been given a special place of significance in our society. They are highly influential and can be our greatest source of support. Sometimes they may have the capacity to stop a project before it even gets started. Often, we are asked to prepare information or reports for elected officials. This should always be done in coordination with ALDOT leadership because they will be the ones most affected by our interactions with elected officials. With few exceptions, elected officials are generally welcome to our meetings, project sites, and information. Of course, coordination with our legal staff may be required for information requests.

The media serves many valuable roles for the benefit of the public and ALDOT. Transparency is most often the best course of action when dealing with the media. However, we must keep in mind that whatever we show or share with the media may be further shared with many thousands of people. We must be intentional and strategic when it comes to dealing with the media. ALDOT offers media training to those holding certain positions that may interact with the media. Bureau Chiefs and Region Engineers also have specific rules regarding sharing with the media or public officials. We should be very clear on internal expectations in this area.
Communication Issues

“Our recurring problems are because we don’t communicate well.” This quote from George Conner highlights and reinforces the fact that a lack of effective communication can make life more difficult for us as individuals, us as an organization, and our stakeholders.

We work for an organization that has the power to greatly impact people’s lives with the decisions we make. Think about the following consequences:

- We can cause a landowner to become very wealthy.
- We have situations where our work causes the family farm to be split up.
- We can enhance and bring awareness to a natural landscape.
- We can make a pristine section of stream disappear forever.
- We can displace entire neighborhoods if there is a need.

We have a very real obligation to consider the impact of our work. Stakeholders can help us to better understand the effects of what we do. On the one hand, stakeholders can provide much needed support for our work; however, on the other hand, they can create such barriers that our projects and initiatives never move forward.

Dealing with Conflict

Our stakeholder relationships involve ALDOT and may involve some other organization, agency, or corporate entity. While many people may be involved and impacted, we must remember that successful relationships start with individuals—individuals who possess effective interpersonal relationship skills.

Interpersonal communication often fails when it becomes difficult. In fact, one test of a leader is how he or she handles tough situations with others. Effective leaders possess or learn positive interpersonal relationship skills. When difficult and stressful situations or discussions begin, conflict arises, and many people have a tendency to run. John Spence, Top 100 Business Thought Leaders in America, offers a framework for addressing inevitable conflict as it comes about. He calls this technique “The Five Stages of Conflict.” The technique was created for an employer-employee relationship but can also work with other stakeholders.
The Five Stages of Conflict

- **Stage I: Empathetic Listening** – At the first sign of emotional escalation, a great communicator stops, focuses on his or her behavior, asks questions of the other party, and listens intently. We need to listen, hear, and learn the perspective of the other person(s).

- **Stage II: “I” Statements** – Stage I focused on our counterpart. Stage II is about us. It emphasizes being assertive without being aggressive. It is important—essential—that we learn to speak our point of view but without any anger or raised voice. This stage addresses our perspectives, feelings, and opinions but also addresses how we handle our behavior and words.

- **Stage III: Finding Common Ground** – This stage is about negotiation. We have listened to and truly understand the other person’s needs; that person has listened to and understands our needs; and now we search together for a solution that we can both feel good about.

- **Stage IV: Positive Redirection** – Stage IV occurs when we and our counterpart still do not see eye-to-eye. At this stage, we try to separate the person from the problem or behavior. We request a voluntary change from our counterpart after reminding him or her that we understand each other. We have tried to get to common ground, and if not successful, we simply ask in a straightforward but respectful manner for our counterpart to change. Please realize that this stage is more difficult with stakeholders because, in many cases, we do not have any authority over them.

- **Stage V: No Alternative** – We have gone through an appropriate discussion and attempted to bring about positive change. Mentally this suggests, “I understand you; you understand me, but we aren’t on the same page. I think you are a good person, but I need you to change on your own; if not, here is where we will need to go with the situation.”

**Saying “No” Gracefully**

There are several ways to do this, but one thing we must be able to say is “No.” “No” should never be our default reaction though. Sometimes we must decline and maybe disappoint others. However, we do this only after trying alternative solutions and great discussion.

Keeping in mind ALDOT’s mission or the mission of the project can help us. This should also be at the forefront of our minds as we are deciding to say “Yes.” Our top goal should be to stay in alignment with our mission, whether by saying “Yes” or “No.”

“No” can have different connotations: “Never, not ever;” “I can’t;” “I could, but I won’t;” or “I might, but something stands in my way.” Any one of these responses can be legitimate depending on the context and the listener. We should always be very clear about which meaning we would like to convey. If we mean, “No, not ever,” but the listener hears, “I might,” we may have a long-term and conflictive situation on our hands.
Here are some tips: If you can’t or shouldn’t, then don’t. If it’s possible and maybe we should, then offer something less than “No.” Maybe the request deserves more consideration. Some people don’t want to hear “No” and will continue to argue or move up the ladder until they find their “Yes.” For these folks, we should give them an avenue of our choosing for an appeal.

Tips for Engaging Stakeholders

- Have a plan. Be strategic and intentional when dealing with stakeholders on a project or otherwise.
- Connect with stakeholders early and often. Project management techniques consistently list communication with others as a top priority.
- Keep stakeholders informed and involved because they also have a stake in the situation.
- Identify stakeholders’ preferred action ahead of time so there are no surprises.
- Discuss, consider, and evaluate options before making decisions.
- When meeting with stakeholders, ask strategic and open-ended questions with mutual respect and purpose in mind.
- Look to make peace in every situation in order to overcome resistance. Making demands of others will only lead to resistance.

Quotes

“Open communication makes that relationship work better.” --George Conner

“You can’t influence someone you are not willing to hang out with.” --Barry Fagan

“Peace is not absence of conflict; it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.”
--Ronald Reagan

“Whenever you're in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.” --William James

“Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict—alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.”
--Dorothy Thompson

References