

Positive Reinforcement

How do you deal with a negative stakeholder?



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Understanding motivation for criticism is essential for tackling negative stakeholders. I spent time with one stakeholder's staff—often through “accidental” run-ins at a café—and discovered he criticized everything, often with limited rationality or reason. As I did not have the resources to invest in this person, I strengthened my positive engagement with his staff and fellow executives to neutralize his influence. It did not transform him into a champion, but it did limit the consequences.



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Clearly understand the goals of negative stakeholders by listening to them about what they do and how they do it. See if there is any way to satisfy their goals without jeopardizing your project. If an acceptable modification to your project eliminates their objections, you can turn their negative opinion to neutral or even positive.

If possible, rule out negative stakeholders from every critical project task to reduce the impact of their attitude, and make alliances with other stakeholders that agree with your way. They can help negate the influences of a negative stakeholder.



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Speak in terms of the stakeholder's world. Does the project address a problem the stakeholder is experiencing? Does it add value in another way? Ask questions to understand where the stakeholder is coming from.

My initial approach to get buy-in for the value of a project management office (PMO) did not work. I approached my stakeholders again and asked what problems they encountered getting work done. Listening to their stories, I aligned the PMO value statements to their pain points. They started to understand how a PMO could help their business and became influencers in the organization.



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Acknowledge that stakeholders may not agree with all aspects of the project. Therefore, ensure transparency and have no hidden agendas. Objectives, goals and targets need to be clear, set early and discussed with stakeholders as appropriate. This helps address stakeholder expectations. Allow buy-in through discussions, which allows ownership and engagement with the project.

Promptly follow up on committed actions and provide ongoing updates to acknowledge key milestones in order to earn their trust. You're working together for significant periods of time, so this relationship needs to be positive.

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