



Same Project, Different Perspectives

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One of the biggest frustrations I encountered in my early days as a project manager was that conversations with different stakeholders never seemed to clarify matters, they just made things more complicated. That was because each stakeholder had their own views of what was important, what needed to be done, and what success looked like.

I had a tough time reconciling those different positions in a way that would allow me to manage the project effectively. I know there were times when I just shrugged my shoulders and focused on what I understood to be important, and I also know that approach frustrated some of my stakeholders and reduced their belief in my abilities.

What causes this environment, and as a project manager what do you need to do about it? As a new PM, the biggest gap in my understanding was that I didn't appreciate that this was a perfectly normal situation. My projects tended to start with the sponsor sitting down with me and walking me through the business case, explaining why the project was being done and why it was important for the business.

I assumed that if that was the sponsor's position, then that would be the position of all key stakeholders. I understood that different stakeholders would focus on different things (resource owners were more concerned with the work their people were doing than the overall project, for example), but I didn't expect different interpretations of the project fundamentals. But that's exactly what happened.

Every project manager is faced with this situation, but for new PMs it can represent a more significant challenge. That's because they don't have established relationships with the project stakeholders and they don't have a sense of the natural bias, approach, etc. that each of those stakeholders has. The new PM likely also doesn't understand the inevitable political environment that sits below the surface and impacts some stakeholder actions. Of course, new project

managers also lack the experience to confidently balance conflicting perspectives from different stakeholders.

Understand, assess and adapt

I believe that there needs to be a three-step approach to dealing with these situations, and the same approach can be applied whether it is your first project or if you have been managing projects for years. It's just likely to become more of a subconscious effort with experience. Those three steps are:

1. **Understand** – What is the position each stakeholder has?
2. **Assess** – How does that position compare with the organizational view of the project?
3. **Adapt** – Adjust elements of the project to manage any variance between views and perspectives.

Let's look at each of those in turn.

First you need to **understand each stakeholder's position**. That isn't just what they think, but also *why* they think it. For example, if the customer representative doesn't believe that some of the features should be included, why is that? Is there a sense that it adds nothing to the solution, or did the stakeholder "lose" a debate over what should be included and are now trying to reopen those discussions? You also have to consider another element to gain complete understanding of each stakeholder—their position relative to other stakeholders.

As a simple example of what I mean by that, it's easy to understand that resource owners are concerned about what their resources are doing; the finance representative is focused on how much money is being spent (and what it's being spent on); and the customer is focused on the end product. Each of those roles will create a different view of what is important, and that can easily lead to conflict in the event of challenges on the project.

That's a natural segue to the **assessment** piece. Once you understand those different perspectives from different stakeholders, you have to determine which stakeholders carry the most weight and which ones must be viewed as more peripheral. The natural assumption is that the sponsor is the most important stakeholder and that their position is the baseline for the project—the perspective that all other stakeholders are compared against.

In many cases, that's true—but it doesn't mean the sponsor is without bias. Sponsors are often looking to leverage the success of the project for their own gain, and that may even have been the driver behind getting the project approved in the first place. While the sponsor likely has the most accurate assessment of the project at the start, be prepared to assess their motives if the project experiences challenges along the way. You must assess the motivations, biases and perspectives of all stakeholders throughout the project, because that is what drives your actions—the **adapt** piece of our three steps.

Let's start by stating what adapt doesn't (necessarily) mean. It may not require changes to how the project is managed. There will be occasions where different positions taken by stakeholders

are an attempt to influence how the project is delivered, and that is something you must consider in the assessment piece.

However, on many occasions, all that is required is an adjustment to how you communicate to those stakeholders. New project managers can easily feel overwhelmed by the number of things they have to do, and as a result they look for ways to save time and effort. Often that results in a single (rather brief) status update being provided to all stakeholders in the project.

That's unlikely to satisfy anyone's needs. It is a generic update that doesn't address the specific needs of individual stakeholders. Instead, you need to tailor communications for your audience—focusing on money for the financial stakeholder, concentrating on the work that their team is doing when communicating to resource owners, etc. New PMs also often fail to provide context—they may provide the customer with information about the end product, but don't explain why changes have occurred, how problems are being resolved, etc.

The bottom line

If there's one thing I've learned in my project management career, it's that stakeholders will always find new and innovative ways to frustrate you. Sometimes it's deliberate, often it isn't; but they will always be one of the most challenging aspects of project delivery. That's unavoidable, but if you focus on understanding what they need and why they need it, assess their motivations and respond appropriately, you'll go a long way toward creating a satisfied set of stakeholders.

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