How to Collect Feedback from Stakeholders Effectively

Knowing how to get good, honest feedback from your stakeholders is a key part of stakeholder management. Gathering quality feedback may be the fastest and most efficient way to improve your product and services, your internal team dynamic, the way you interface with clients — really anything.

You can quickly uncover unmet needs, separate what you're doing well from what still needs work, then take all this information and develop an effective plan for improvement. It allows you to get to the heart of the matter fast.

So, why can it often be so hard to get this feedback?

In this guide, we'll take a closer look at:

- What makes stakeholder feedback so critical
- Common challenges of getting stakeholder feedback
- How you can make this whole process a lot easier

What is stakeholder feedback?

Stakeholder feedback refers to any input, opinions, or perspectives from anyone who has an interest in a project or decision. It can come from either internal sources, such as employees or administrators, or external sources, such as clients, customers, partners, or even members of the community.

Whether complimentary or critical, the purpose of collecting this feedback is to make sure your project, organization, or processes are aligned with needs or expectations of your stakeholders.

Why stakeholder feedback is so important

While there are many ways to get stakeholder feedback — from focus groups to anonymous surveys — pretty much everyone can agree that collecting it is crucial. Here are a few reasons why:

- **It makes it easier to manage stakeholder expectations.** If you don't know what your stakeholders want, then you won't be able to deliver it. Collecting their feedback is a direct way to measure how well you are meeting or falling short of their expectations. Once you know, you'll be in a better place to manage them.
- **You can use it to improve alignment.** Stakeholders can fall out of alignment with you for a variety of reasons. Perhaps there was a miscommunication, or maybe you disagree on how you're thinking about the problem. In any case, regularly checking in and getting their feedback can help you quickly identify when this happens.
- **It helps identify process improvements.** Your internal stakeholders, such as your employees, have visibility into how you are actually doing your work, which means they are in a good position to tell you what is working, as well as what isn't. Regularly collecting their feedback is a great way to ensure your processes remain effective and efficient.

- **It can lead to greater innovation.** Getting feedback from a diverse set of stakeholders enables you to tap into a diverse range of perspectives. This will help break you out of your normal processes and hopefully spark new ideas and encourage more creative problem-solving.
- **It's good for building trust and engagement.** Actively soliciting and listening to stakeholder opinions and advice shows that you care what they think. This, in turn, will help foster a sense of trust, transparency, and collaboration, all of which are essential for building strong stakeholder relationships.

Internal vs. external stakeholder feedback varies

At some point, you'll want to collect feedback from both internal and external stakeholders. Because of this, it's worth quickly noting how the type and format of this feedback will be different.

Internal stakeholder feedback

Internal feedback comes from stakeholders within an organization, such as employees, managers, or even whole teams or departments. Because they have direct knowledge of an organization's processes and culture, they can give valuable insights into workflows, operations, employee satisfaction, and overall organizational performance. They can also provide a layer of accountability by helping you identify places where there may be significant internal issues.

Collecting internal feedback can be done formally, although it is typically a more informal process. The classic format is the suggestion box, although asking for feedback could also be a regular part of manager reviews or weekly check-ins.

External stakeholder feedback

External feedback, on the other hand, is from anyone outside of your organization. This will usually be clients or customers, but it could also refer to partners, suppliers, or even governmental bodies. These stakeholders are well-positioned to give you insights around your products or services, customer satisfaction, reputation, or any other aspect of how your organization presents itself externally.

Because these stakeholder groups stand outside of your organization, you'll likely need to take a more formal and hands-on approach to collecting their feedback. For instance, most organizations these days try to create stakeholder feedback loops by incorporating them into their regular processes. They may send out a survey after a customer purchases a product, or ask for input after a project wraps up. This way, they can make sure they are regularly measuring and listening to the opinions of the external stakeholders who are most affected.

Common challenges of collecting stakeholder feedback

As useful as it is, gathering good stakeholder feedback can sometimes be tricky. Here are a few reasons why this may be the case:

- **Identifying stakeholders can be difficult.** The process of finding and engaging relevant stakeholders can be challenging, especially when there's a large number of them or the project is complex. You may have to look closely into who your project is really affecting before spending time reaching out.
- **The quality and reliability of feedback can vary.** Once you've identified your stakeholders, you'll also have to separate out those who can offer detailed, honest, and actionable input from those who just give you vague opinions or feedback skewed by outside interests.
- **Their availability could be limited.** If your feedback depends on holding a conversation or session with your stakeholders, you'll likely have to contend with conflicting schedules and competing priorities. Collecting quality feedback can take time, which may require you to provide your stakeholders with an incentive.
- **They may require a variety of outreach methods.** Especially when you're dealing with a large and diverse group of stakeholders, you may have to employ a number of different methods to gain their input. Gathering and synthesizing this feedback to ensure inclusivity can be difficult.
- **You may get too much feedback.** While some may think of this as a good problem to have, it can present significant challenges. Overcoming it and getting useful insights may mean putting in place an effective feedback management system.

How to ask for and gather feedback

Making sure you always have quality feedback in hand, ready to help you start making improvements, doesn't have to be hard. With some proper planning, you can incorporate the feedback process into your everyday client engagements so you won't even have to think about it.

Here's how.

Have a clear understanding of which stakeholders will be most involved

Although you could just ask all the team members and stakeholders involved with a project to send you their thoughts, chances are not everyone will have the best insights. Besides, separating out the useful feedback from the irrelevant will take time. Instead, a much better way to get quality feedback is knowing who you will need to get it from in the first place.

You can do this by beginning your next project by clearly defining your stakeholders. This should include their roles and responsibilities, their needs and desires, their communication preferences, and any other qualities that will help you understand them and their expectations. Not only will this give you insight into the scope and structure of your project, it will also help you narrow your focus when it comes to collecting feedback — and that will make the rest of the process easier, faster, and more accurate.

Regularly check-in with stakeholders and schedule feedback milestones

Instead of asking stakeholders to give all of their feedback at once, you can make it much more manageable by scheduling regular opportunities for them to weigh in on how things are going. Depending on the length and size of the project, these could be weekly or monthly milestones, or even once a quarter. The idea is to make giving feedback an organic and natural part of the project so that it seems much less intimidating.

You can even take this a step further by coming up with creative ways to facilitate productive discussions. For example, the rose, thorn, and bud exercise is a fun and easy-to-use way to learn what's going well, what isn't work, and what kind of opportunities there may be for improvement. Once you make something like this a habit, you'll be able to get your feedback and start improving your processes fast.

Prioritize feedback and align on next steps

One common roadblock to getting good feedback are stakeholders who don't think of it as necessary. They may not want to take time out of their day to reflect on a project. Alternatively, they may only feel comfortable giving feedback long after it would have been most useful. This can be frustrating, although it can be fixed by making sure you and your stakeholders are aligned from the beginning.

Pro-tip: Be sure to get feedback from different stakeholders to help uncover blindspots or surface concerns that affect different aspects of a project.

One great way to do this is by using a prioritization matrix. Typically organized into two-by-two grids, these make it easy to visualize and weigh different project components, such as risks, costs, stakeholder interests, and, of course, feedback. If they don't think of feedback as important, a prioritization matrix should point this out, giving you an opportunity to make sure they give it the amount of attention you want. By doing this beforehand (such as during the discovery session), you can make sure you can get the input you need for continuous improvement.

Tip: Use a structured format for gathering feedback

The Mural feedback grid template makes providing feedback on engagements a deliverables a seamless process. Use the four quadrants to organize your respondents' likes, wishes, questions and ideas, and organize your feedback so you can improve your service according to customer needs.

Allow for anonymous feedback

Everyone loves to leave positive feedback, but it's often the negative or critical feedback that is the most useful. Unfortunately, whether out of politeness or a fear of reprisal, it's common for stakeholders to be much more reluctant to share these types of thoughts. That can deprive you of feedback that could otherwise help point out broken processes, glaring inefficiencies, or other issues that need to be solved.

You can easily fix this by allowing stakeholders to share their feedback anonymously. Mural's private mode makes it easy to put together sessions in which everyone can share their opinions, list out problems, and offer critical advice — all while remaining completely incognito.

Follow-up on feedback

Finally, after collecting your feedback, you can ensure your stakeholders will keep offering their input in the future by following up on their comments. This can take many forms. For example, you could compile the results of a poll and share it with stakeholders in a report, or you could detail the ways in which your organization plans to take action and address their most valuable feedback.

Even if you disagree with what they've said, you should at least send a note thanking them for taking the time to share their thoughts. The goal is to make them feel heard. That way, you'll be able to keep them engaged so that you can continue to get their feedback later on.

Work feedback loops into your stakeholder engagement strategy

Getting the right feedback can be like finding a shortcut to improvement by highlighting an unseen problem, pointing out an opportunity, or otherwise clarifying an action you need to take. This is why it's so important to make feedback loops a regular part of how you engage and interact with stakeholders. Doing so can make collecting it painless, frequent, and even fun.