

Seek commitment from key players who can make or break your communication plans

TURNING STAKEHOLDERS INTO ADVOCATES

Having a carefully thought out communication strategy is one thing, but putting it into practice successfully depends on strong relationships and alliances. Sue Dewhurst and Liam FitzPatrick look at how taking a structured approach to managing stakeholders can build support and commitment where you need it.



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How to get buy-in from senior leaders is a common conversation in internal communication circles. It's easy to see why. Practitioners want to be recognized as strategic advisers instead of writers of e-mails. They dream of getting line managers to take their communication but responsibilities seriously, but they also need the budget and resource to achieve their objectives.

Most of the issues we continually chip away at as communication professionals depend to a greater or lesser extent on having the confidence and endorsement of the right people behind you.

Gaining commitment at the top is important but in most organizations there are people at other levels who can also help or hinder the success of a communication strategy. Think of your stakeholders as any individual or group that has the resources you need to deliver an initiative successfully. Or even more widely, a group or individual that has a stake in that initiative, i.e. they stand to gain or lose something from the outcome.



Liam FitzPatrick



A structured approach

Change management specialists working on major projects routinely take a structured approach to identifying and

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categorizing their stakeholders.

Change management advisor Tim Payne explains why the discipline is equally important for communication teams: "Support functions often struggle to get what's important to them onto the corporate agenda because they're not immediate revenue-generating functions. So they have to be able to influence other people who have the power to help make things happen."

A structured approach to stakeholder management typically involves three steps:

1. identifying stakeholders;
2. mapping where they are now and where you want them to be; and
3. deciding how to close the gap.

1. Identifying stakeholders

Effective stakeholder management starts with identifying the people who could impact your strategy. Use a simple matrix such as the Johnson and Scholes model (Figure One, below) to work out where to concentrate time and effort.

Figure One: Johnson & Scholes model

		Interest	
		(Low)	(High)
Power	(Low)	Minimal effort	Keep informed
	(High)	Keep satisfied	Key players

Decide how interested each stakeholder is likely to be in what you're proposing to do and how much power they have to impact the success of your plans.

People or teams with a high power rating might control budgets or resources. Board members will probably have a high power rating.

But it's important not to overlook less obvious stakeholder groups. Think about who you need on your side to operate successfully, who can smooth the way for you and who might block your progress if not engaged early on?

This could include, for example, the scheduling team that can grant or block access to team meetings or training time in call centers. Or the project leaders who can influence whether you're brought in on discussions early enough to influence decision-making. It might be the person in the HR team who the HR director relies on for advice and to make things happen. It could even include the MD's personal assistant.

The terms used in the Johnson and Scholes model are relatively neutral. One colleague working in change management cautions against choosing more emotive terms to categorize stakeholders: "I heard of someone who produced a stakeholder map with quadrants that had labels such as 'blockers' and 'derailers'. Needless to say, it can be very counter-productive if somebody gets hold of a copy and sees their name in one of those boxes. You might know in your own mind that someone is a potential 'blocker,' but writing it down is not a good idea."

2. Mapping out advocacy

Once you've identified and categorized your stakeholders, the next step is to map out how they are likely to feel now about your proposed strategy or activity and how you ideally want them to feel for the strategy to be successful.

You can choose whatever terms you find helpful to do this. Perhaps somebody is currently "broadly supportive" of your team but you want them to be an "advocate."

The Internal Communication Black Belt Programme

Maybe they're "vocally opposed" to investing in that line manager training you're proposing, in which case you may well be satisfied if they at least become "neutral."

Some people use a numerical scale, rating people from 0 (may be negative towards the plans) to 5 (likely to be an advocate).

Tim Payne uses a consistent four-point scale when considering how stakeholders might respond to a planned project: make it happen; help it happen; watch it happen; or stop it happening.

3. Closing the gap

You should now have a good understanding of the range of your stakeholders, how much power they have to influence your plans and their likely reaction to those plans. The final step is to consider how, for each of your chosen stakeholders, you will close the gap between where they are now and where you want them to be.

The methods you choose will depend on the same principles you would use to develop a standard communication plan (see Figure Two, below, for an adapted model from Bill Quirke of Synopsis Communication).

The amount of effort you put in will depend on how key players are to your strategy's success, where you need them to be on the scale from awareness through to commitment, and where they are now.

For those stakeholders who you established early on as needing

Figure Three: Example of a stakeholder management plan

Stakeholder	Category and reasons	Current disposition	Desired disposition	Mechanism for change
Ops director	Key player – owns our main audience	Neutral	Advocate	Offer comms solution to help with sales (her biggest issue). Involve Mike (her key influencer) in developing approach.
Training manager	Key player – want to train line managers next year	Advocate	Advocate	Continue to involve in planning

"minimal effort" and who simply need to be neutral towards your strategy, simple awareness-raising through e-mails and updates may be sufficient.

For the key players who you would like to see become advocates and help put your strategy into practice, a more proactive process of engagement is needed. You will need to involve them in your thinking early on, understand their point of view and show how you have incorporated it in your approach. You might also actively enlist them in developing solutions and make compromises in response to their input.

Ultimately, says Payne, it's about being as proactive, consultative and transparent as possible: "It's all about choosing the right conversations and having enough of them. There's a lot of basic stuff you can do like listen to them, understand and care about their issues and try to find a way to play to them. Build the rapport. And there's a bit of negotiation required; what can you give up to give them a win?"

Putting the pieces together

The end result should be a plan that can be refined and amended over time as new stakeholder relationships are formed and the priorities of the communication strategy change (see example in Figure Three, above).

Stakeholder management is like most things in the world of communication – it's not rocket science, but it needs thought and planning to be effective. And it's best considered at the start, while developing strategies and plans, instead of at the end when there are fewer opportunities to involve others in their development and less room for compromise.

A successful approach will build on the usual foundations of speaking the language of the business and understanding the audiences and issues through research and analysis.

Gaining stakeholder buy-in is a critical part of a successful communication strategy. Without the support of key players, what we may see as best-practice plans can remain on the shelf, be subject to frustrating delays or be officially tolerated but treated in practice as an add-on to the "real" agenda.


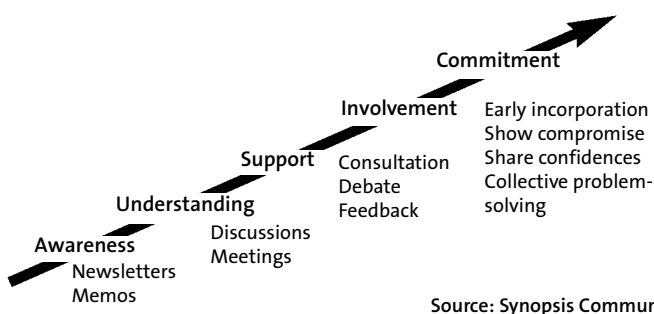
Alison Quest, UK head of internal and change communication for Royal & SunAlliance sums it up: "An internal communication strategy is not much good if you can't deploy it. My stakeholders are my license to operate. How could I possibly do my job without them?" 

Figure Two: A model for moving from awareness to commitment



Source: Synopsis Communication

This article reflects some of the course work covered in Melcrum's new training program, the Internal Communication Black Belt Program. For more information go to: www.melcrum.com