

Stakeholder Management for Innovation Projects

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It's time to work on you, so sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

So, you've capitalised on an idea. You've pitched it, been given the green light, and now it's time to manage your innovation project. Now, how do you continue to develop your plan as an intrapreneur? One crucial element is managing your stakeholders and their needs and expectations for your innovation project. That is today's main objective.

Until now, your stakeholders have been the people who championed your project, but that group is about to expand. Once your innovation gets going, you can consider anyone who is (or thinks they are) impacted by your innovation a stakeholder. From the top brass who set the project in motion to the junior employee taking an organisational role in it, that can be anyone. Knowing who your stakeholders are and what they require is critical as you continue to develop your project towards success.

But how do you manage all these people? Luckily, in most organisations, you have some help and can delegate tasks to those involved in the innovation project. The first thing you need to do is take a deep breath and start writing. Get down on paper every person or process that your innovation can somehow influence. At this point, it is okay to go all out — it is easier to strike someone off an organisational column than reorganise the column to add someone new.

This brainstorm will become a living document of your stakeholders: what they are doing, what needs to be done, their collective and individual needs, and anything else related directly to the people influenced by your project. You can use an app such as Trello [1], which uses the Kanban system of project management, to maintain the living document as you manage your project. In the beginning, it is just a map of your

innovation's reach so that you can keep all of these people in mind as you move forward. If it seems like a daunting task, that's because it is. However, performing this daunting task at the start of managing a project is much easier than trying to do it when you're halfway through. This is the first step in creating a structure that will help manage your stakeholders and their development.

In a blog post, Christopher Waldner makes a distinction that is quite helpful when managing your innovation project and the people involved. He talks about stakeholder management as stakeholder development [2]:

This includes finding appropriate stakeholders, matching their ideas with yours, and trying to keep them for your project. I like to call it stakeholder development because it can be seen as some sort of internal business development.

Waldner's distinction helps us see stakeholder management as a living, mutable process rather than a top-down delegation system. Developing your stakeholders gives them a more significant stake in the project and, in turn, will create stakeholders who are independently passionate about your innovation. While top-down delegation may create a system where your ideas are followed to a tee, it doesn't promote loyalty or ownership within the project. These feelings can be the difference between a project that gets out of hand and one that can succeed thanks to the ongoing commitment of the stakeholders. Think about the last time you were told to do something where you weren't involved in the decision-making process versus when you were part of the team that made the decisions. Which made you feel more passionate about that task or project?

Once you have brainstormed all your stakeholders, it is time to categorise them. They can be organised into whatever system works for you, that might be an engagement matrix or a simple colour-coding system. Whatever works for you.

As long as each category has specific characteristics by which you can divide your stakeholders, it should work just fine. For example, with an engagement matrix, you may be dividing your stakeholders into nine categories:

- High Power, Low Interest
- Medium Power, Low Interest
- Low Power, Low Interest
- High Power, Medium Interest
- Medium Power, Medium Interest
- Low Power, Medium Interest
- High Power, High Interest
- Medium Power, High Interest

and finally, Low Power, High Interest.

Since they're highly invested in the success of your innovation and have the power to cancel or continue it, your superior - who championed the project - would fall into the

category of "High Power, High Interest."

Again, the engagement matrix is just an example of a type of system you can use to categorise your stakeholders. It is essential to ensure that your stakeholders are aligned within these systems. That means that each stakeholder is on board with your innovation and committed to its success. For example, you don't want someone with High Power and High Interest to block someone from a different category for what they "think" you want. Communicating your ideas to all stakeholders can help ensure everyone is on the same page as you progress your project. Mapping people also means mapping authority — easy to do in the early stages but harder to manage as you move forward [3].

Inevitably, there will be personal and political conflicts. This is the nature of any workspace, whether we like it or not. To a certain extent, it is up to you to smooth these conflicts over. One way to manage disputes - yes, you guessed it - is to maintain an open communication channel to all stakeholders. Communicate more than is necessary early on to get your stakeholders aligned with your vision [4]. That will make it easier to remind them when conflicts arise that they are all here for an impersonal purpose: to implement your innovation project. Don't forget that this channel of communication goes both ways! Ask your stakeholders what their expectations are — it may even illuminate gaps and ideas you hadn't thought of!

Creating that people map is relatively impersonal, but dealing with those people is certainly not. As you continue along the implementation path, it is a good idea to monitor all levels of your people map and respond to their needs accordingly [5]. When creating that map, you'll see that every stakeholder falls along a spectrum of engagement from completely disengaged to actively engaged. Someone who is completely disengaged could be a person who is influenced by the innovation project but isn't working on the implementation of it. Someone who is actively engaged could be a person in a leadership role, perhaps the leader who has championed your project. These people will have different needs from you as the project manager. They will require different responses — but that doesn't mean you can ignore either. It is a good idea to outline the boundaries of communication for yourself while you are creating that original map. The boundaries of communication will guide you on how much information you need to share, thereby not overwhelming anyone or causing unnecessary stress.

Take care to remember that stakeholders are people too. It's impossible to manage people rigidly, and innovation projects are constantly changing. This can make managing stakeholders in your innovation project feel a little like building a house on shifting sands. Your role now is to use the system you created as a map rather than a set of rules. A map shows you where to go, but it also offers you alternate pathways you can take. Your stakeholders may illuminate solutions you hadn't seen before. If you reject those solutions in favor of a rigid view of your project's hierarchy, you may soon find yourself stranded on a deserted island.

Brett Hoffstadt, the owner of Brett Hoffstadt Consulting, writes, "Ideas live or die in the minds of others." — what does he mean by this? It means the execution of an idea requires other people to succeed. By the time you are implementing an innovation project at a company, you need cooperation and widespread engagement to see it progress. Stakeholder management — or development — is crucial to the success of any innovation, and at the end of the day, that means communication.

To recap, before you launch into your innovation project we suggest creating a map of your stakeholders, categorising them, and monitoring them. These are all systems you should put in place to successfully communicate with stakeholders throughout your project. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what system you develop as long as it works for you. When you have a team aligned with the goals of your innovation project and open channels of communication, you'll find that all this development happens smoothly. By preparing your people and managing their expectations initially, you can more easily take a step back and enjoy the fruits of your innovation.

So this week, dive into the first stage. Start mapping out every single person who you think would be affected by your innovation. Once that's done, you'll start to get up a real head of steam.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening and remember: keep building the best you.

[1] *Trello*
<https://trello.com>

[2] *Stakeholder Development in Innovation*, Christopher Waldner (2017)
<https://christopherwaldner.com/stakeholder-management-intrapreneur-2/>

[3] *The Single Best Way to Engage & Manage Your Stakeholders*, Mark Nevins (2021)
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hillennevins/2021/08/12/the-single-best-way-to-manage-your-stakeholders/?sh=585c2bae20aa>

[4] *Economist Education - Aligning Stakeholders for Faster Innovation*, K. Rodriguez
<https://execed.economist.com/blog/career-hacks/aligning-stakeholders-faster-innovation>

[5] *Stakeholder Mapping*, Systems Innovation (2020)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOMshCYLEVE>