

A Practical Guide to Dealing with Difficult Stakeholders

By Jake Holloway, David Bryde & Roger Joby
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMI)

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Introduction

Last month we reviewed John Brinkworth's book *Bridging the Business–Project Divide*. Assuming that we have now crossed that chasm, this month we are taking a look at Jake, David, and Roger's book: *A Practical Guide to Dealing with Difficult Stakeholders*, people who, we might add, are to be found on both sides of that "Divide" referred to in our previous paper. So who are these people?

The authors, Jake, David, and Roger, caution that:¹

"There are many different types of people, or Stakeholders, involved in your project; which in this book is always *the Project*. These include Sponsors and other senior managers, the project Team and internal or external Customers – not to mention other groups or individual Gatekeepers within your organization, such as operations, finance and project or service management process owners.

All of them have different needs, objectives, responsibilities and priorities. Indeed, your project will not necessarily be at the very top of their agenda. It is a disturbing realization that, for any number of personal or professional reasons, some of them may not be as cooperative and helpful as you want – or even want your project to succeed. The reality of project management is that ***Stakeholders can be difficult.***" (Emphasis added.)

However, the authors justify their work by observing:²

"Stakeholders can have a massive impact on the success, both real and perceived, of the Project. [So] the focus of our analysis is as much informed by social psychology as by pragmatic project management experience. It provides a way forward for dealing with unhelpful or difficult stakeholder behavior and it charts a path to achieve the best outcome for your project."

And further:³

"[T]his book offers insights, tips and techniques designed to help you through the difficulties you may encounter."

To reassure its readers, at the conclusion of their Preface the authors assert:⁴

"Our ideas are not new or untried – we have drawn heavily not just on our experience of involvement in hundreds of projects but on theories and research from social psychology that illustrate how and why people behave as they do."

In case you are wondering, the term "Stakeholder" is, for purposes of the book, defined as:⁵

"[A]ny person or group who can impact the cost, schedule, specification, resourcing, outcome or ***perceived success*** of a Project." (Emphasis added.)

In other words, anyone and everyone who has anything to do with the product of the project however remote they may be.

In the authors' definition, we have emphasized the label "perceived success" because this is central throughout the book. In other words, "on time" and "under budget" and all those kinds of classic criteria promulgated by the standard technical literature and their advocates, is not what this book is about. It's what *people think* about the product, when it is in use at the end of the project that is really important.⁶

Who is the book for? It is difficult to think of a project without stakeholders, let alone what their motivations may be. However, the more stakeholders there are, the greater the challenge is for the project manager and project teams to manage the project. It is probably reasonable to say that, by and large, information technology projects have the most stakeholders, and that assumption would be underscored by the backgrounds of the authors.

*About the authors*⁷

Jake Holloway is an experienced Project Manager, Management Consultant and Business development Director in the areas of IT, Digital and Marketing. He has managed and sponsored hundreds of projects and portfolios, and has been involved in building and designing project management systems. Jake's interest is in the difference between the reality of how people behave at work and how it is described in management theory.

Dr. David Bryde is a professor in Project Management at Liverpool John Moores University. Previously, David worked as head of the technical support department for Metier Management Systems, supplier of Artemis – a project management software package and as a project manager for ICI. David is an experienced researcher, teacher and consultant on various aspects of project management

Roger Joby is Managing Director of 1to1to1 and has over 20 year's experience in project finance, project management and line management within the pharmaceutical industry both in the UK and Europe.

Book Structure

The content of this book is set out in five chapters, a Conclusion and an Appendix as follows:

1. Project Stakeholders
2. The Project Sponsor
3. The Project Team
4. External Clients and Contractors
5. Internal Customers and Gatekeepers

Conclusion

Bibliography

Each chapter starts with a description of what the chapter is about, contains an example taken from the authors' experiences and concludes with a brief Summary. The book has a total of 115 pages. It does not include a Glossary of Terms.

The book is well written in a clear style and is a pleasure to read. It is illustrated by 24 Figures and Tables together with frequent bulleted and numbered lists for ease of reference. As the title of the book indicates, it is a Practical Guide rather than an in-depth study of the role of social psychology in the workplace. As such it introduces the reader to the real world of practical project **Stakeholder Engagement** where individuals and groups behave like ordinary people: often unpredictable, irrational,

emotional or just unhelpful.⁸

The authors find that many project managers do not enjoy this side of project management. That's not only because it can be hard and frustrating, but also because in the typical curriculum most project management training today does not include this side of a project manager's responsibilities. Hence, newly minted project managers in particular do not know how best to deal with the normal run of "everyday confrontations". Consequently they find their attention increasingly diverted, leading to high levels of stress, frustration and burn out. It doesn't have to be like that.

This book sets out by categorizing Project Stakeholders into four broad groups and then describes the sorts of situations that can arise, and then makes recommendations on how to deal with each.

What we liked

The Project Management Institute recently added a new section to its *Project Management Body of Knowledge* (The *PMBOK*[®] *Guide*) titled "*Project Stakeholder Management*".⁹ In the interests of conformity throughout the *PMBOK*[®] *Guide*, this new section is structured the same way as all the other sections. The result is that the contents read like you are dealing with clearly cohesive groups just like you would manage sets of costs or activity schedules, and all more or less at "arm's length".

Moreover, the *Guide* identifies stakeholders in groupings such as "customers, sponsors, the performing organization, and the public who are actively involved in the project, or whose interests may be positively or negatively affected by the execution or completion of the project."¹⁰ Interestingly, the *Guide* does **not** specifically include probably the most important stakeholders of all – the members of the project's own team.

While our authors take a somewhat similar approach to the *Guide* in terms of the process of identification, they take a distinctly different approach to grouping and handling their definition of Stakeholders. First off, as the Table of Contents shows, the authors choose to identify all the potential stakeholders in only four groups. These are: the Project Sponsor, The Project Team, The External Clients and Contractors, and the Internal Customers and Gatekeepers.¹¹ We think that this grouping is much more practical, meaningful and manageable.

Secondly, the authors avoid the use of the term "**managing** stakeholders", and instead prefer to use the term "stakeholder **engagement**". This makes enormous sense because stakeholders are, for the most part, influential and powerful in their ability to disrupt or delay the project, and do not like to be thought of as being "managed" by a project manager. So this book is not about "Textbook theory" but about practical reality. It is also laced with a little bit of typical British humor.

As an example, in a table comparing "Textbook v Reality", the first of eight examples characterizes the "*Textbook*" as follows:¹²

"Projects are started because there is a business case or positive outcome identified and the detailed plan shows that there will be a positive Return on Investment (ROI)"

Whereas in *Reality*:

"Projects are started because one or more powerful stakeholders want it to start. They believe that a positive ROI should be achieved (probably by you, the project manager) but have little or no evidence that it's possible."¹³

To give some idea of where the authors are coming from, the following is a very brief summary of the anecdote provided in Chapter 1 by David Bryde. It's called "*A Failure to Persuade*".¹⁴

"This incident occurred early in my career when I was a junior project team member. I was working on an infrastructure project that was mid-way through its implementation stage and going well in terms of performance. However, things changed when the project manager announced that they were leaving to take up a role in another company. . . .

It was not long though before word came from senior management that a replacement project manager would be arriving soon. . . .

The new project manager duly arrived for their first meeting with the Team, including myself, with the serious task of establishing their credibility in doing the job. Looking back now on what was a fairly embarrassing and unpleasant meeting it is clear that this need to establish credibility had not crossed the mind of the new project manager. They did the most cursory of introductions and got straight into the nitty-gritty of the tasks and activities remaining to be done to complete the Project. . . .

The major lesson I learned was never to assume anything. In this case the company assumed that the team would automatically accept their appointed person. . . ."

My, how things must have changed in the work place since our early days! Firstly, we too would never have thought of the issue of personal "credibility". After all, the Project is the company's Project, it's their money and their responsibility to manage at the staffing level. Secondly, we take a poor view of a project manager that fails to complete their responsibilities before moving to another company. And thirdly, we've always made a point on first arrival of doing a thorough research of all of the project's documentation from governance on down to the last change order. With this background in hand, perhaps credibility at our first team meetings was always a non-issue.¹⁵

What this example does emphasize is that people don't like change.

Downside

Chapter 3 – *The Project Team* is by far the largest chapter in the book. This is not really a "Downside", but the contents are certainly different to what you might expect. In fact, by way of Introduction, the authors assert:¹⁶

"Not all project management theorists consider the project Team as Stakeholders. However, as people who have massive influence on the Project, of course they are. Without the Team and their efforts the Project is not going to deliver – so you need them not just as resources but [also] as supporters. [So] In the first part of this Chapter we provide details of the various objectives and responsibilities that exist. [And] we focus on typical team members and on understanding what might be motivating them and how best to meet their individual objectives, whilst at the same time keeping the project goals firmly as the top priority."

In our view, the goals of the project itself should be the primary motivation for the members of the project team. If that is not the case, then either the benefits of the project have not been adequately explored and conveyed to the team, or you have the wrong team. Or, of course, you have a loser of a project in which case it should be modified or scrapped.¹⁷

The rest of the chapter tackles two general scenarios: a) A Demotivated Team, and b) Support for the Project has clearly evaporated. In the first scenario, the authors introduce a Cause-Effect Diagram of

Project Team Demotivation so that the reader gets advice on dealing with such issues as: Team Boredom; Team Distractions; Frustrations; Disharmony, and (excessive) Stress. The last is typically from above and imposed on the project manager and team to produce results.¹⁸

The second part of this chapter, where *Support for the Project* has already evaporated, is downright scary, but nevertheless very necessary. It describes *Team Mutiny* in two shades: total or individual, and suggests four *Tactics to Deal with Mutinous Situations*.¹⁹ Failing that, then how about *Getting the Team to Work in a Different Way*?²⁰

Moving on to the final chapter: *Internal Customers and Gatekeepers*, the authors observe:²¹

"As noted throughout this book, sometimes projects get into trouble.²² At these times most could benefit from help from their Stakeholders, but which has the most power? It's tempting to go straight to the Sponsor and the project board. However, there is a compelling argument that using other internal Stakeholders of the Project can ultimately be more effective – even if they are "just operations". The reason for this is that these internal Stakeholders are often either the direct Customer (or End User) of the Project, or that they represent or act as advocates for the end Customer (for example, if they are the Sales or Customer Services Operations team)."

We do have some difficulty with this advice. Firstly, the framing of this piece of text implies that the whole book is just for Information Technology readership. That's a pity, because most of the book provides good advice for any and every type of Project in the whole wide world of project management application. And certainly all projects are confronted sooner or later by "Gatekeepers".

Secondly, whatever you do as project manager, always, always keep your Sponsor informed. In other words, take your Sponsor with you. If your Sponsor should ever get wind of a real or perceived end run round him or her, your tenure will be short-lived indeed.

Summary

This book concludes with the following observations:²³

"Even before you opened this book you already knew that your project, *the project*, could only succeed with contributions, support, sponsorship and approvals from *people*. Unfortunately, in the real world, individual people and groups often do not behave according to the clean, uncomplicated rules implied in project management textbooks and in methodologies old and new. In fact these Stakeholders present difficulties simply by behaving as people – that is unpredictably, irrationally, emotionally or unhelpfully – which in turn has an impact on the Project and you."

"This book only scratches the surface of these issues and we're are not the first to consider the role of social psychology in the work place."

"[But] we hope this book opens up a new type of thinking within the project management community that is honest about the impact of human behavior."

We believe that over all, this book provides sound advice at a level of depth to make it understandable and actionable. In short, it provides valuable content for every project manager's emergency kit back.

And further, may we take this opportunity here to suggest that the "classic" body-of-knowledge sections on Project Human Resource Management and Project Stakeholder Management be appropriately

amalgamated, rewritten, and retitled: "*People Engagement*".

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¹ Holloway, Jake; David Bryde; & Roger Joby, *A Practical Guide to Dealing with Difficult Stakeholders*, Gower Publishing Limited, printed in the UK by Henry Ling Limited, at the Dorset Press, Dorchester, 2015, p xi.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, pp. xi-xii

⁵ Ibid, p1

⁶ We are tempted to add here that these days when the piling up of massive debt at all levels of government is so pervasive and popular, who cares if we run over budget? But then we are straying into real politics.

⁷ See the book's back cover.

⁸ Ibid, p89

⁹ *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Fifth Edition*, 2013, p391

¹⁰ Ibid, p394

¹¹ *A Practical Guide to Dealing with Difficult Stakeholders*, Chapters 2 through 5.

¹² Ibid, Table 1.1 Textbook v Reality, p4

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid, p8

¹⁵ We cannot resist adding that we have always liked to take on a project that was in failure mode. That's because management was then always more willing to open the purse strings when presented with a good, but likely expensive, recovery or salvage plan. Moreover, it is usually difficult to do worse than the previous incumbent – the "bar is simply lower".

¹⁶ Ibid, p29

¹⁷ Don't be afraid. Go tell that to your project Sponsor!

¹⁸ Ibid, p31-48

¹⁹ Ibid, p49-51

²⁰ Ibid, p52-54

²¹ Ibid, p75

²² Ibid – Oh really? We didn't know that.

²³ Ibid, p89-90