

Stakeholders for Dinner

Question:

Samoht, I am working on a very large project. We are trying to be very diligent about keeping all of our stakeholders in the loop, but there are so many! I want to be sure I provide all of the stakeholders with the information that is important to them. How can I determine how I should engage our various stakeholders?

Jordan

Answer:

Jordan,

First off, you show great judgment by asking me this question. After all, who knows more about how to treat people than me? You don't have to answer that. It is called a "rotundical" question.

There are two things you need to look at to determine how much you need to communicate with these stakeholders and how you should communicate with them – how much interest you have in them and how important they are to your project.

High Importance and High Interest

These are the most important stakeholders and it is imperative that you tell them everything! I should rephrase this. You should tell them everything you want them to know. For instance, if you have just completed a milestone ahead of time you would definitely like to communicate this accomplishment. On the other hand, if a milestone is late, you might conveniently forget to mention this.

If these people get to be a pain in the ol' keister, you can overwhelm them with information. I would recommend requiring every member of your team to keep a detailed log of everything they do each day. Then give all this information in your status reports. That way, these very important stakeholders can never say that you didn't provide them with some piece of information that they needed. "Hey," you'll say, "That piece of information was in Month 2, Week 3, Thursday on page 25!"

Even better – take them to dinner. You will be completely covered.

High Importance but Low Interest

These are people that are important to the project but you have decided that they are not so important to you. They may have crossed you in a previous job, or maybe they have bad breath or B.O. In any case, you just might not like them.

These, of course, are the worst stakeholders. Trust me, it will not be easy to avoid them. They will call you, email you, knock on your office door, and approach you when they see you in the hall to ask annoying question after annoying question. I say don't answer their calls, flag their email address so that it goes into SPAM, and hide when they approach you. If hiding is impossible, just run in the opposite direction. Never talk to these stakeholders – you will only encourage them!

Don't take them to dinner.

Low Importance but High Interest

These are people that you want to please even though they have low importance on your project. They may be the people that sign your paycheck or provide your performance review. They may be friends of yours. Let's face it – they may be pretty women.

These people take a little finesse. You want to make it look like you are giving them information but you want to keep them as clueless as possible. The fact is they don't care what you are doing. As long as you keep them happy, they will have great things to say about your project, and you know the best way to keep people happy – give them free stuff! Feel free to get creative here. I was involved in one project where we sent these stakeholders cookie cakes every other week with the message “The Project is Great!” in frosting.

Better yet – take them to dinner.

Low Importance and Low Interest

These are people that are not very important and you don't like them anyway. These people might be the trickiest category to manage. On the surface they are not important, but you never know when they will rise up and bite you in the backside. Even though they won't want information, you should send them some anyway. However, make sure it is terribly boring information or you run the risk of piquing their interest, and then they might move up into the dreaded low importance / high interest category. This is the last thing you want. However, completely ignoring them would be a mistake – this could also cause their interest to pique.

For these stakeholders, the key is to make your project seem extremely boring. I recommend seeking these stakeholders out every once in a while and speaking in a slow, monotone voice about the most mundane details of your project - 5-10 minutes of that every other week will ensure that these stakeholders remain low interest!

If that fails – take them to dinner.

Summary

You won't read this kind of information in the PMBOK Guide, but it is based on a better reference – the SBOK – the Samoht Body of Knowledge. This is practical information you need to know to be successful. Make yourself look good regardless of how the project turns out. Now, go do it!