

Stakeholder Engagement in the Public Sector

What is stakeholder engagement?

At WCL, we define stakeholder engagement as how a public body (e.g. central or local government, agency) engages others in the public, private or third sector, whether national, regional or local, to achieve its objectives. “Engagement” does not mean “doing things to people” or “telling them what to do”, but “creating and implementing frameworks and contexts to interact with your stakeholders to achieve the results you need”. Stakeholder engagement engages stakeholders in your process for delivering policy change – from before the change is considered through to consistent delivery of the in the field.

What stakeholder engagement involves

The main steps in stakeholder engagement are:

- Determining the objectives you want to fulfil through engaging stakeholders
- Deciding which stakeholders you should engage – and which not, and the relative priorities to be given to different stakeholders
- Using information about stakeholders, their needs and behaviour to develop and implement strategies for engaging stakeholders to fulfil these objectives
- Measuring your success in engaging stakeholders and using measurement to modify your approach.

Who are your stakeholders?

Stakeholders may be “downstream” of you – final customers or citizens or organisations which take your outputs and transform them or pass them on. They may be partners – working with you to deliver. They may be suppliers to you. At WCL, we only refer to customer-stakeholders, partner-stakeholders or supplier-stakeholders when the distinction is important. In many cases, it is less important than you might think, because a given stakeholder may take on more than one of these roles.

The challenge

If you engage stakeholders poorly, your outputs are unlikely to meet the needs of customer-stakeholders. Resources allocated to you to meet the needs of customer-stakeholders may be curtailed, while governance and scrutiny processes may dictate radical change. However, if you engage stakeholders well, then a virtuous circle is created, where stakeholders invest in managing relationships with you and each other, increasing the chances of good results.

In a well-ordered world of clear priorities and steadily phased initiatives, stakeholder engagement would be simple. However, in the real, impatient, world of rapid policy change, more attention may be paid to the intellectual integrity of policy than to the feasibility of implementation, or even to whether policies with different scopes, domains of implementation or speeds of development require different approaches to stakeholder engagement. For example, should policies which require new consortia of stakeholders use a different approach to stakeholder engagement that ones that involve existing consortia?

Should policies which require stakeholders to make significant changes to how they work be treated differently from ones which can be handled within existing norms of stakeholders’ policies and procedures. Frequent movement of staff between roles complicates matters – whether your own staff or stakeholders’

In this world, our research shows that the main stakeholder engagement challenges organisations face are:

- Translating your organisational priorities and strategies into stakeholder-oriented priorities and strategies
- Ensuring that your stakeholder-focused activities take place as planned and deliver the required results
- Allowing your stakeholders’ relationships to bed in and stabilise before the next policy initiative comes along
- Managing the conflicting interests of your different stakeholders
- Demonstrating to your senior management and politicians the importance of early and constant stakeholder engagement
- Creating a stakeholder-engagement oriented culture
- Ensuring that the resources you need for stakeholder engagement are defined and secured
- Failure to use research and other feedback mechanisms to identify your top priorities for improving stakeholder engagement, instead using it to confirm and congratulate on existing levels of engagement
- Building higher levels of reciprocity and openness with your key stakeholders
- Bringing together your stakeholder engagement cycle (e.g. recruitment and on-boarding through delivery and maintenance to transition) and the policy management cycle (from understanding your context, desired outcomes and options, through submission, recommendation and decision, to implementation, maintenance, monitoring and evaluation) – and bringing them together early enough and keeping them together

Ways to engage stakeholders

‘Stakeholder engagement can be delivered through a number of different and emerging models’, including

- **Relational** - with formal arrangements for managing direct relationships with key individuals or organisations, including influencing via senior informal personal networks. The main methods used here are account management, relational agreements, “keep in touch” meetings, bilateral information and other exchanges, and informal one-to-one meetings
- **Programmed** – involving achieving participation and collaboration through formalised engagement arrangements, and providing guidelines for achieving engagement in operating routines, administrative support and direction, plus facilitating conflict resolution. The main methods used here are governance boards, steering committees, stakeholder fora, advisory boards and expert panels

- **Delivery chain** – involving connecting and improving relationships along the delivery chain from planning through to delivery, via consultative channel testing, channel representation and work-commissioning relationships (sharing of resources, expertise, information and requirements). The main methods used here are delivery chain mapping, joint planning and recruitment, twinning arrangements and secondments, and processes for piloting and testing
- **Targeted interactions** – using specific and targeted interactions to stimulate engagement and delivery via seed resourcing, provision of information or focused resource, expertise or support. The main methods used here are conferences and seminars, deep-dive reviews and stock-takes, deliberative dialogues, and focus groups or ad hoc surveys
- **Structured environments** - engaging through structured engagement environments, virtual and physical places, to enhance engagement outcomes. The main methods used here are dedicated stakeholder engagement facilities and online stakeholder collaboration sites
- **Systematic process** – using systematised and automated processes, procedures, tools and support models to create organised routines for engagement for information, enquiry, feedback and measurement. The main methods used here are stakeholder databases, content download systems, online surveying and polling and e-consultation

What is the best approach?

Your optimum approach is determined by many factors including technology, costs, regulation, legislation, priorities, resources, timing, capability, size/feasibility of task, stakeholder needs and behaviour, and your experience and expertise. The most critical determinants are your stakeholder strategy and priorities, the nature of your current and desired stakeholder relationship and your capacity and capability to ensure impact.

Too many organisations rely on traditional engagement models, which are becoming more expensive and are now challenged by the efficiency of new methods of working with and engaging stakeholders.

Where does good stakeholder engagement start?

In our experience, your chances of succeeding in stakeholder engagement are increased if you:

- Keep stakeholder engagement objectives tightly prioritised and ensure that required output is matched to your capability
- Focus on engagement - communication, interaction, involvement, partnering with and empowering stakeholders
- Measure what you deliver, in terms of meeting stakeholders needs and objectives
- Ensure that the feedback and learning loop is used to take stakeholder engagement forward
- Create clear accountability for stakeholder relationships, and monitor the fulfilment of this accountability

What WCL does to help organisations engage their stakeholders?

We can help you improve how you engage stakeholders, in these ways

- Creating and/or refining your business case for improved stakeholder engagement
- Developing and/or helping you implement or improve your framework for generating and using insights into stakeholder needs and behaviour
- Creating strategies/tactics to improve stakeholder satisfaction, involvement, engagement and commitment and to improve results from stakeholder engagement
- Devising/implementing programmes to improve your capability to engage stakeholders and your stakeholder engagement effectiveness and efficiency
- Helping you design, create or improve systems and data needed for improved stakeholder engagement
- Helping you develop a stakeholder-focused organisation, leadership and culture, via training, coaching, mentoring and organisational design
- Benchmarking your capabilities and performance against similar organisations and recommending where improvement is likely to yield the best results

In doing this, we focus on optimising in these five areas:

1. Strategy
2. Planning and Analysis
3. People and Organisation
4. Engagement
5. Measurement and Reporting.

Why WCL?

We have a strong track record in helping organisations achieve their stakeholder engagement objectives. WCL has developed various assessment and management tools to identify what clients need to do to improve their stakeholder engagement capabilities and to help them do so.

What are the benefits of using WCL to improve your stakeholder engagement?

Impactful stakeholder engagement and clear visibility of what you need to do next to improve stakeholder-related outcomes, leading to realistic, well-paced delivery, with reduced low risk.

Who are WCL?

We specialise in helping large public and private sector organisations manage complex change. Our people-centred approach to delivery and performance management is strongly facilitative. We work alongside our clients to help them achieve their goals while ensuring maximum transfer of knowledge to their staff to ensure that momentum is sustained.

Do you want to know more?

If so, contact WCL at info@w-c-l.com