

BEYOND THE GRID

Managed, Not Led: Why Stakeholder Management Is Not Stakeholder Leadership

How a discipline built for control quietly replaced the harder, more personal work of influence



Contents

1. Executive Summary	3
2. The grid on the wall	3
3. Two different verbs	4
4. Why the substitution is so comfortable	5
5. What leadership actually does	5
6. The strongest case against all this	6
7. Influence, and the temperament it demands	7
8. What it asks of us	8

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“Influence that costs nothing tends to be worth nothing.”

1. Executive Summary

Somewhere in most programme offices there is a grid on the wall. Two axes, four boxes, a scatter of names colour-coded by how much power each person holds and how much interest each one takes. It is the emblem of a discipline we have spent the better part of two decades perfecting: stakeholder management. We keep registers, engagement matrices, communication plans and RACI charts; we can say at any moment who must be informed and who must be consulted. What we cannot always say is whether a single one of them has actually changed their mind.

This essay argues that stakeholder management and stakeholder leadership are not two points on one scale but two different activities, and that our profession has quietly allowed the first to stand in for the second. Management treats the people around a change as fixed positions to be catalogued and handled. Leadership treats their judgements as movable, and sets out to move them. The substitution is not an accident of laziness. Management is legible, auditable and delegable, and in an era that prizes visible control it holds every structural advantage. Leadership of stakeholders is none of those things — it is personal, costly and unprovable in advance — and so it is the first thing to disappear under pressure, at exactly the moment it matters most. What follows traces how the substitution took hold, what leadership does that management cannot, the strongest case for leaving things as they are, and why the distinction so often decides whether a change actually lands.

2. The grid on the wall

Consider a programme that did everything the manual asked. Eighteen months of enterprise change: a new operating model, a systems replacement running underneath it, a business case that had survived three rounds of challenge. The stakeholder register ran to some eighty names, each carrying an assessed level of influence and a documented engagement approach. The communications plan was, in its way, a thing of beauty — a newsletter, quarterly town halls, a cascade through line managers, a fortnightly pack to the steering committee with its reassuring block of green. Every box was ticked. Every stakeholder was, in the language of the plan, managed.

And still, on the morning the new model went live, the three regional directors on whose cooperation the entire design depended carried on very much as before. They had attended the workshops. They had nodded through the town halls. They had been informed, consulted, escalated and rated amber-then-green. What they had never once been was led — brought, by someone they trusted, to actually want the thing the programme was asking of them.

The failure that recurs is rarely the programme that neglected its stakeholders. It is the programme that managed them immaculately and moved none of them.

We tend to file such outcomes under communication: we should have engaged earlier, messaged better, held one more workshop. That diagnosis is comforting because it keeps the problem inside the discipline we are good at. But more communication is more management, and the thing that was missing was not a message. It was influence — and influence is a different kind of work entirely.

3. Two different verbs

The confusion begins with a single word. "Stakeholder" entered our vocabulary as a corrective, a reminder that an enterprise answers to more than its shareholders — a claim about whose interests deserve to be reckoned with. It was a leadership idea before it was ever a management one. Somewhere in its passage into programme practice the idea narrowed. The stakeholder stopped being a person with a legitimate stake and became an entry in a register: a risk to be mitigated, a line to be kept green, a box on a grid.

Management, in this sense, is the discipline of handling positions that are assumed to be fixed. You identify who holds a stake, you assess their power and their disposition, you decide whether to inform, consult, involve or simply monitor them, and you execute that plan. It is genuinely useful work. It imposes order on a crowded field and it stops important people being forgotten. But notice what it quietly assumes: that where a stakeholder stands is a fact to be recorded, not a variable to be changed. The grid photographs the terrain. It does not move the mountains.

Leadership of stakeholders begins from the opposite assumption — that a person's position is a judgement, and judgements can be shaped. Its unit of progress is not the message sent but the mind changed; not contact made but commitment secured; not the stakeholder contained but the coalition widened. Where management lives in the programme office and can be handed to a capable coordinator, leadership lives in the leader's own credibility and can rarely be delegated at all.

Dimension	Stakeholder management	Stakeholder leadership
Treats the stakeholder as	a fixed position to be handled	a movable judgement to be shaped
Primary artefact	the register and the comms plan	the conversation and the commitment
Unit of progress	contact made, message delivered	mind changed, coalition widened
Where it lives	the programme office	the leader's own credibility
Can it be delegated?	yes, and usually should be	rarely, and never entirely
Can it be evidenced in advance?	yes	no — only afterwards, by the result

Read the table as two columns rather than a spectrum. The point is not that leadership is the grown-up version of management, or that management is leadership done badly. They answer different questions. Management asks: who is out there, and have we accounted for them? Leadership asks: whose mind must actually move for this to succeed, and am I the person who can move it? A programme can be flawless on the first question and never seriously ask the second.

4. Why the substitution is so comfortable

If the distinction is this clear, why do we collapse it so reliably? Not through ignorance. The forces that pull us toward management and away from leadership are structural, and each one is, in isolation, reasonable.

- The methodology rewards the map. Our project and programme disciplines matured, over the last fifteen years, into something impressively systematic — and the systematic parts are the manageable parts. A method can specify that you produce a stakeholder analysis; it cannot specify that you win someone over. So the artefact becomes the deliverable, and the deliverable becomes the point. We assure ourselves the stakeholders are handled because the register is complete.
- Governance rewards the appearance of control. A steering committee wants to see that the situation is under command. A completed engagement matrix and a plan of green-rated communications look exactly like control. A candid admission that two critical directors remain unpersuaded looks like risk. The reporting apparatus therefore selects, quietly and continuously, for the language of management over the substance of leadership.
- Only management leaves an audit trail. We work in an era shaped by a decade of tightening corporate accountability, in which the ability to evidence a process has become almost as important as the outcome of it. You can evidence a communications plan: here are the dates, the audiences, the sign-offs. You cannot evidence influence until it has either happened or failed, and by then the planning is over. What can be documented crowds out what can only be done.
- The map is delegable; influence is not. A stakeholder register can be maintained by a coordinator. Persuading a sceptical executive cannot be handed to anyone but a person of comparable standing, and usually only to one who will spend their own credibility in the attempt. Faced with something delegable and something that is not, an overstretched leadership team will always find reasons to lean on the first.

None of these forces is malign. Together they produce a discipline that is superbly equipped to describe a stakeholder landscape and strangely reluctant to enter it. We have, without ever deciding to, optimised for legibility over effect.

5. What leadership actually does

It is easy to praise influence in the abstract. The harder question is what, concretely, the leader does that the manager does not — and here the difference becomes mechanical rather than merely tonal.

Return to those regional directors. Managed, they were an audience: informed on schedule, invited to the right forums, tracked on the grid as "supportive" because none had openly objected. Led, one of them would have been a conversation — an unhurried,

one-to-one conversation whose purpose was not to explain the programme again but to find out what he actually feared.

And the fear, when it surfaced, was specific and legitimate. The new model would pull two of his strongest people into shared central functions. For perhaps two quarters, while the transition bedded in, his region's service numbers would dip — and he was measured, hard, on exactly those numbers. He was not resisting the change out of inertia or territoriality. He was resisting because the change, as designed, asked him to accept visible damage to his own performance in return for a benefit that would accrue somewhere else, later, to someone else's credit. No newsletter was going to touch that. It was not an information problem.

What moved him was not a message but a trade, and the trade required someone with the authority to make it. His numbers would be held harmless for two quarters against an agreed transition baseline; one of his two people would return to his region afterwards rather than being permanently absorbed; and the shared metric that would eventually judge the new model would be one he had a hand in defining. In a single hour, a stakeholder rated "supportive" on the grid — and in truth quietly opposed — became an owner. The engagement approach in the register had not changed. Everything that mattered had.

Notice what that hour actually contained, because it is the anatomy of the thing the grid cannot hold:

1. It sought the real interest beneath the stated position. "Supportive" was a surface reading. The leader's first act was to disbelieve his own register and go looking for the objection it had smoothed over.
2. It reframed the stakeholder's interest rather than merely accommodating it. The point was not to placate the director but to change the terms so that the programme's success and his own were no longer in conflict.
3. It spent something real. A protected baseline, a returned team member, a share of authorship over the metric — these were costs, paid in the leader's own influence and political capital. Influence that costs nothing tends to be worth nothing.
4. It accepted being changed. The design shifted to meet a legitimate objection. A manager defends the plan; a leader lets the plan be improved by the very people they need to lead.

That last point is the one most often missed. We speak of influence as though it flows one way — the leader, unmoved, moving others. In practice the leader who changes no one's mind is usually the leader who was unwilling to have their own changed. Coalition is built by trade, and trade requires that both sides give something up.

6. The strongest case against all this

There is a serious objection to everything I have said, and it deserves better than a straw version.

It runs like this. You cannot lead eighty stakeholders. There are not enough hours, and most of those eighty genuinely do not require leading — they need to be kept accurately informed and no more. Triage is not a failure of nerve; it is arithmetic. The stakeholder grid exists precisely so that scarce leadership attention is spent where it counts and not squandered on the merely interested. Management, on this view, is not the enemy of leadership but its essential substrate: the map that tells you where the few conversations worth having actually are. Abolish the discipline in the name of authenticity and you get

not more leadership but chaos — important people forgotten, effort scattered, the vital few lost in the noise.

This is right, and it is important that it is right. The arithmetic is real. Most stakeholders on any large change genuinely do need only to be kept informed, and a programme that tried to lead all eighty by force of relationship would collapse under its own sincerity. The grid is a good tool. Used well, it is exactly the instrument that concentrates leadership where leadership is needed.

But the objection defends the grid against a charge no one is making. The failure is not that we use the map. It is that we mistake the map for the journey. The grid is superb at telling you which minds must move; it does precisely nothing to move them. The error I am describing is the one where the vital few — the handful for whom the whole exercise of triage was meant to clear space — receive, in the end, only more management. They are identified as critical, marked high-power and high-interest, given a bespoke "engagement approach"... and then sent a tailored newsletter. Triage that concentrates attention and then spends that attention on management rather than leadership has completed the map and skipped the expedition.

"The grid tells you where to point your leadership. It cannot do the leading, and it quietly persuades you that pointing is enough."

So the argument is not against management. It is against the substitution. Keep the register; keep the triage; keep the discipline that stops important people being forgotten. Then, having found the three or four whose judgement will decide the outcome, do the other thing entirely — the personal, uncertain, credibility-spending thing that no matrix will ever contain.

7. Influence, and the temperament it demands

Why, knowing all this, do we still retreat so readily to the grid? The honest answer is that leadership of stakeholders asks something of us that management does not, and it is not a skill so much as a temperament.

Influence is relational, and relationships cannot be run from a plan. It is personal, which means the leader is themselves the instrument — their standing, their track record, their willingness to be in the room when the conversation is difficult. It is expensive, drawing down a finite reserve of credibility that cannot be topped up by a communications budget. And it is exposing, because to try to move someone and fail is to have visibly failed, whereas to have sent them the approved message on schedule is to have discharged one's duty no matter what they then do. Management lets us succeed at our process while our outcome quietly fails. Influence offers no such shelter.

The recent interest in emotional intelligence has, at its best, been an attempt to name this — the recognition that the capacity to read what another person actually needs, and to stay in an uncomfortable exchange long enough to find it, is not a soft adornment to leadership but close to its core. Where that idea goes wrong is in being absorbed back into management: reduced to a competency, assessed on a form, added as a row to the very

grid it ought to have unsettled. The temperament that leads stakeholders cannot be captured that way, for the same reason the influence itself cannot. It shows up only in the doing.

This is why the retreat is so tempting and so damaging. Management externalises the work — onto the plan, the coordinator, the reporting pack — and leaves the leader safely at one remove. Leadership refuses that distance. It requires the leader to walk into the room, put their own credibility on the table, and accept that they may be changed by what they hear. Every structural incentive we have built points away from that room. The measure of a leadership culture is how many of its senior people walk into it anyway.

8. What it asks of us

None of this is an argument for throwing away the grid on the wall. It is an argument for remembering what the grid is: a photograph of the terrain, not a plan for crossing it. The completeness of the map has a way of feeling like progress, and the fortnightly green status has a way of feeling like control, and both are seductive precisely because they ask nothing personal of us.

The discipline worth cultivating is a kind of suspicion — a habit of looking at a stakeholder marked "supportive" and asking whether anyone has actually tested that, of looking at a perfect communications plan and asking which mind it has changed, of noticing when the vital few have quietly been demoted from people to be led into audiences to be managed. The question to carry out of every steering committee is not have we engaged our stakeholders? — we always have, on paper — but whose judgement still has to move, and who is going to spend their own standing to move it?

We are, as a profession, fluent in the management of stakeholders and oddly mute on the leadership of them. The fluency is worth keeping. But it is not the same accomplishment, and the day a programme lives or dies is almost never decided by the quality of the register. It is decided by whether, somewhere in the preceding months, the right person sat down with the one director who mattered and did the harder, humbler, unauditable work of actually leading.