

BEYOND THE SIGN-OFF

Resistance Disguised as Support

Why a green stakeholder register now tells you less than ever about who will actually help



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“The register stays green because green is the cheapest thing to be.”

The register is green and nothing is moving

Every large programme now runs a stakeholder register, and by the second or third steering meeting it has usually gone green. The sponsor has signed the mandate. The workstream leads have initialled the PID. The RACI is agreed, the communications plan is live, and the engagement log records a satisfying run of supportive and on board. On paper, alignment is total.

And yet the thing does not move.

I have watched this pattern harden over the past few years into something close to a discipline of its own, and it is worth naming plainly, because most programme leaders are still misreading it. The consolidation that was fully supported by the finance director is nine weeks in and has not received the two analysts he promised; his people are “just finishing year-end.” The process redesign that every regional head endorsed sits behind forty clarifications, each individually reasonable and collectively fatal. Of the action items handed to “the business” at kick-off, thirty-one of forty are still open at the first escalation. No one has said no. No one will.

This is not apathy, and it is not incompetence. It is resistance — deliberate, rational, and dressed as support.

What has actually changed

The passive-aggressive stakeholder is not new. What is new is how thoroughly the environment now rewards him.

A decade ago, opposition to a programme was mostly overt: budgets were fought over in the open, and you knew where you stood. Since then the apparatus has caught up. Post-Sarbanes-Oxley governance, the spread of MSP and PRINCE2, the stakeholder-engagement chapter that has worked its way into every methodology — all of it has industrialised the appearance of agreement. We have become very good at collecting sign-offs and very poor at asking what a sign-off is worth.

Look at the incentives we have built. Visible dissent in a steering committee is now career-limiting: it marks you as not a team player, unable to see the bigger picture, resistant to change in an era that treats resistance to change as a character flaw. Agreement, by contrast, is free — it costs a nod and buys a quiet exit from the meeting. So the stakeholder who dislikes the programme does the sensible thing. He agrees in the room and withholds outside it. He endorses the initiative and defunds it. He raises no objection and books no time. The register stays green because green is the cheapest thing to be.

Formal stakeholder management has made agreement almost costless and honest dissent expensive. Passive aggression is not a character defect inside that system – it is the equilibrium the system produces.

Why it matters more than it looks

The reason this deserves attention now, rather than as a perennial grumble, is that we have begun to trust the instruments. A green stakeholder status is increasingly treated as evidence – reported upward, used to unlock the next stage gate, cited whenever the programme is challenged. We have built a control system that measures compliance with the process of agreement and mistakes it for commitment to the outcome. The more sophisticated the engagement tooling becomes, the more confidently we misread its signal.

And the failure mode is a particularly expensive one. Overt opposition is almost a gift: it tells you where the problem sits, and it can be argued with. Covert resistance offers neither. It surfaces as slippage with no owner – a date that drifts, a resource that never materialises, a decision endlessly "socialised" – and by the time it is undeniable, months of runway are gone and the trail leads nowhere, because everyone, on the record, was supportive.

The obvious reply is that this is simply poor stakeholder management, and that firmer discipline – tighter tracking, clearer accountabilities, a more forceful sponsor – will put it right. I think that reply is not just wrong but dangerous. More tracking raises the cost of honest dissent while leaving the cost of quiet non-compliance untouched; it makes the register greener, not the programme faster. You cannot instrument your way out of a problem your instruments are creating.

What to watch instead

If the register is not the signal, what is? Three things, none of them found in the engagement log.

- Where the calendar goes, not where the sign-off goes. Real support shows up as booked time, named people, and released budget. Spoken support shows up only in the minutes. Track the first and discount the second.
- The specificity of the yes. "I fully support this" is weaker than "I'll free Priya from the 14th." Vague endorsement is the tell; a commitment you can put in a diary is the substance.
- The distance between the room and the corridor. What a stakeholder says with the SRO present, set against what his team does the following week, is the only measure of stakeholder support that has ever meant anything.

The uncomfortable truth is that a programme's real level of backing is usually visible within a fortnight of kick-off – in the resourcing decisions nobody commits to writing – and it rarely matches the register. The passive-aggressive stakeholder is not lying to you. He is telling you, in the only language the system has left him, that he was never going to help. The work of leadership is to learn to hear it before the slippage says it for him.