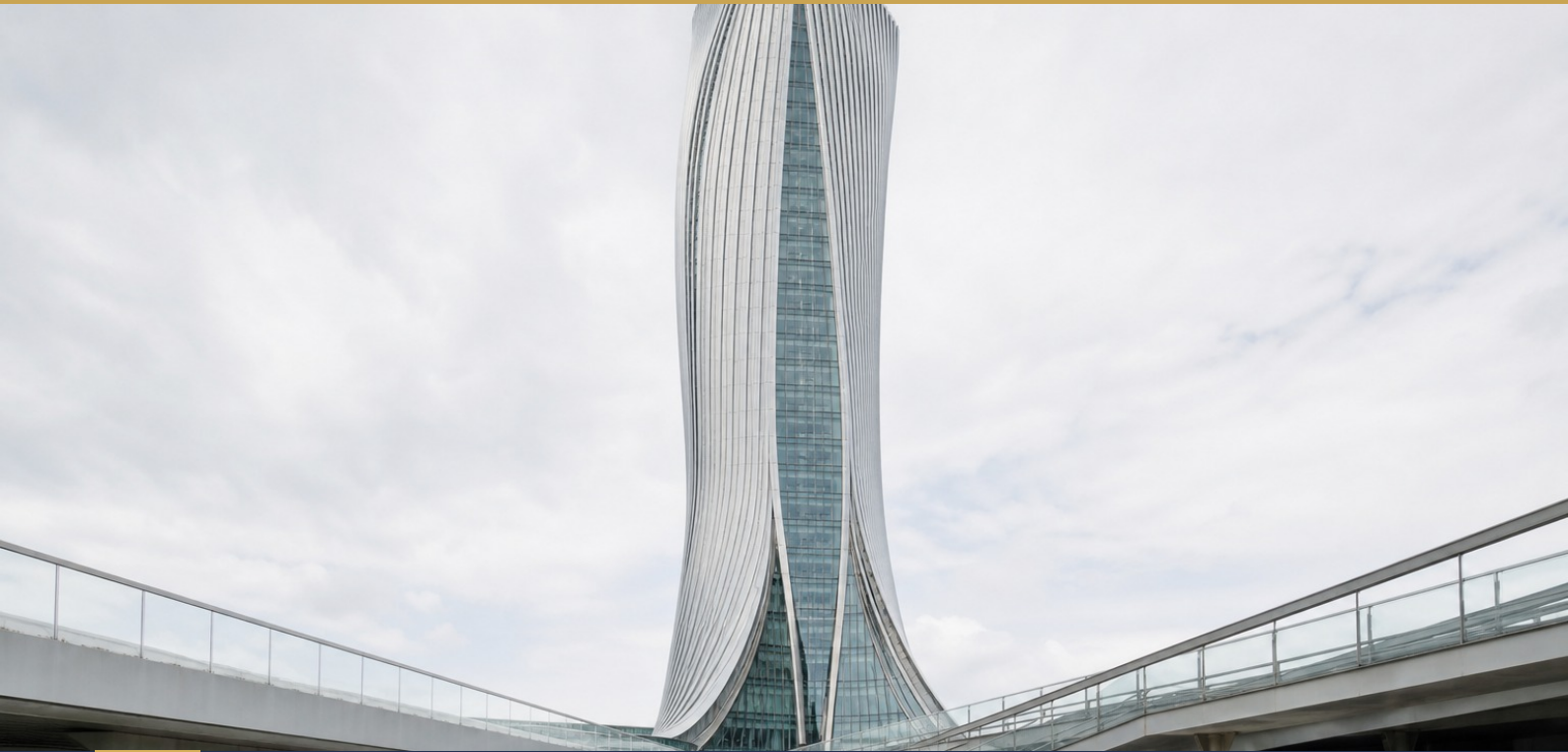




BEYOND THE MATRIX

Stakeholder Management Is Not Stakeholder Leadership

Why complex transformation programmes need coalition-builders, not better stakeholder matrices

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*“A stakeholder map records the landscape;
leadership changes it.”*

1. The Matrix Is Not the Work

The steering pack is immaculate. Eighty-four stakeholders have been plotted by interest and influence. Each has an owner, a contact frequency and a colour. The programme is green.

Then, ten days before the investment decision, a regional operations director says that the proposed service model cannot be supported. Two other directors agree in private. The sponsor is surprised. The programme team adds an urgent round of briefings and calls this a communications problem.

It is not a communications problem. It is the consequence of treating stakeholder engagement as an administrative discipline when the work was political from the beginning.

We have become highly competent at mapping people and strangely reluctant to influence them. We catalogue interests, distribute messages, schedule forums and record attendance. These activities are useful. They are not leadership.

A stakeholder map records the landscape; leadership changes it.

Stakeholder management asks: Who must be informed? Stakeholder leadership asks harder questions: Whose judgement must move? What coalition makes that movement possible? Which legitimate interests must be reconciled? What must happen before a formal decision can safely be taken?

That is the argument our profession needs to have.

2. We Have Mistaken Order for Progress

The appeal of stakeholder management is understandable. Complex programmes are untidy. A matrix makes the social field look governable. A communications plan converts ambiguity into dates, channels and owners. A monthly steering committee creates the appearance that all important voices are in the room.

But order is not the same as movement.

A programme can complete every engagement action and remain politically impossible. The mechanism is simple: communication transmits a proposition, while influence changes the conditions under which a person can support it. Those conditions may concern loss of authority, exposure of weak performance, competition for capital, disruption to customers, or a promise made to a workforce. No frequency of newsletters resolves such stakes.

The familiar tools describe only a fraction of what matters:

- The organisation chart shows formal authority, but not who is trusted when the evidence is uncertain.
- The stakeholder matrix records an assessment, but not the relationships through which that assessment can change.
- The communications plan schedules messages, but not the concessions and commitments required for consent.
- The governance calendar identifies decision dates, but not whether the decision has been made possible beforehand.

The result is a professional comfort: we can prove that engagement occurred even when leadership did not.

Stakeholder activity is not evidence of stakeholder movement. The test is not whether contact occurred, but whether the conditions for a sound decision became stronger.

3. Influence Is a Leadership Duty

Some will object that influence is simply a respectable word for manipulation. They will argue, with reason, that programmes should succeed through evidence, transparent governance and fair process—not through private alliances or political manoeuvring. This is the strongest case for keeping stakeholder work procedural, and it deserves a serious answer.

Evidence matters. Governance matters. Fair process matters. Yet none operates in a vacuum. Evidence is interpreted by people with different accountabilities. Governance bodies can decide only among options that have survived the conversations before the meeting. Fairness does not eliminate competing interests; it gives us a disciplined way to negotiate them.

Manipulation conceals purpose, distorts information or removes another person's meaningful choice. Legitimate influence does the opposite. It makes interests explicit, tests claims, builds reciprocal commitments and creates a route by which people can support an outcome without pretending their concerns never existed.

Refusing to practise influence does not remove politics from a programme. It merely abandons the field to those who will practise it without discipline.

We should therefore stop speaking as if politics were an organisational defect. Wherever scarce capital, executive attention, professional identity and operating authority are being redistributed, politics is present. The leadership question is whether it is handled openly and intelligently or denied until it erupts in the formal forum.

4. The Coalition Does the Real Work

Consider a composite situation typical of a large service transformation in early 2015. A three-year programme carried a projected cost of £42 million and promised annual savings of £18 million through shared services, process standardisation and a new enterprise system. The business case had board approval. The programme office reported 72 per cent of milestones complete.

Yet the operating model decision had stalled for eleven weeks.

The stakeholder register said the principal parties were supportive. In reality, the finance director supported the savings but doubted the transition assumptions. Human resources supported the design but feared that consultation had been compressed. Three regional directors accepted standardisation in principle but believed the central model would leave them accountable for service failures they could no longer control. The technology director would not commit to a date until process variations were closed.

Another steering meeting could not solve this. Each person had a rational reason to withhold commitment, and the full group encouraged them to defend positions rather than construct a settlement.

The programme director changed the method. Not the message—the method.

First, the team replaced the single category of “supportive” with a record of each party's actual stake, the decision they controlled and the commitment they could credibly make. Then the sponsor held four small working sessions, each built around a contested term rather than a presentation. Finance tested the benefit assumptions against two slower transition scenarios. Regional operations defined five service failures for which local leaders required an escalation right. Human resources restored six weeks to the consultation sequence. Technology agreed to a staged release once the first twelve process variants were removed.

Nothing about this was soft. The revised settlement reduced first-year savings by £2.4 million and moved the initial release by seven weeks. It also converted private resistance into explicit conditions.

Before the next steering committee, the finance director and two regional directors jointly reviewed the revised case. The technology director confirmed the staged date. Human resources described the consultation plan rather than objecting to it. The formal meeting lasted fifty minutes. The decision had not been fixed in a back room; it had been made possible through a coalition whose members had helped shape the terms.

That is stakeholder leadership. It does not bypass governance. It supplies governance with a proposition that responsible people can actually approve.

5. Stop Counting Contacts; Start Reading Commitment

If we are serious about leadership, we must change what we notice.

A stakeholder is not “managed” because a meeting took place. Support is not a sentiment to be coloured green. It is a sequence of observable commitments. Someone who praises a programme in conversation but will not lend a capable manager, defend the business case or state a position in the decision forum is not yet a supporter.

We need a more demanding vocabulary:

Management shorthand	Leadership test
Informed	Can explain the choice and its consequences
Supportive	Has made a visible commitment or accepted a defined cost
Resistant	Has identified an interest the current proposition fails to address
Powerful	Controls a decision, resource, permission or trusted interpretation
Engaged	Has helped test, shape or carry the outcome

This is not semantics. Labels determine action. “Resistant” invites a stronger message; “holds the customer-risk veto” invites redesign. “Low interest” invites less contact; “trusted by the regional directors” may make that person central to the coalition. Better language reveals the mechanism by which outcomes move.

6. Practise the Craft We Pretend Not to Need

Stakeholder leadership is not charisma. It is a craft, and it can be practised with rigour.

- Read power beyond rank. Identify formal decision rights, control of resources, access to the sponsor and the people whose interpretation others borrow. The most senior person is not always the pivotal one. A respected operations manager may determine whether five sites treat a new process as workable or absurd.
- Begin with stakes, not attitudes. “Against the programme” is rarely a diagnosis. Ask what the person believes will be lost, what they are accountable for, which evidence they distrust and what would permit a responsible change of position.
- Build propositions with people, not for them. Consultation after the design is complete is usually theatre. Involve pivotal stakeholders while choices remain real. Influence becomes legitimate when the other party can alter the proposition.
- Sequence the decision. Do not confuse the scheduled meeting with the moment of decision. Determine which questions must be settled, in what order, and which

commitments make the next commitment rational. A sponsor cannot credibly ask for public support while material objections remain privately unanswered.

- Trade honestly. Coalitions are built through reciprocity, not cheerfulness. One party may accept a slower transition in exchange for lower operational risk; another may surrender local variation in exchange for a clear escalation right. Record the trade and expose its cost.
- Turn private assent into public ownership. Quiet agreement is fragile. Ask supporters to contribute evidence, sponsor a workstream, lend resources or state the case in the relevant forum. Commitment strengthens when it becomes visible and consequential.
- Keep principled dissent inside the work. A critic who exposes a weak assumption is an asset. The aim is not universal enthusiasm; it is a coalition capable of acting while preserving the challenge needed for a sound decision.

These practices require judgement because their trade-offs are real. Early coalition-building can appear slower than issuing a finished plan. Concessions may reduce the headline benefit. A wider design conversation can reopen questions the programme hoped were closed. But the apparent speed of unilateral design is often purchased with delay at the point of adoption.

The choice is not between politics and purity. It is between skilful politics made accountable and unskilful politics discovered too late.

7. Change the Measures and the Behaviour Will Follow

Programme assurance commonly asks for the stakeholder plan, the latest heat map and evidence that communications were issued. Those controls protect basic discipline, but they reward motion rather than effect.

A leadership standard would ask different questions:

- Which critical decisions have become easier or harder during the past month, and why?
- What has each pivotal stakeholder committed to do, not merely agreed to believe?
- Where does formal authority differ from practical influence?
- Which objection has changed the design, the sequence or the business case?
- Where is the coalition dependent on one relationship, and how will that fragility be reduced?
- What bad news is still being expressed only in private?

These questions expose reality. They also change the role of the programme leader. The leader is no longer the custodian of a register but the architect of a decision environment.

That role cannot be delegated entirely to a communications team or a junior stakeholder manager. Specialists can bring valuable discipline, but the programme director and sponsor must own the relationships in which authority, risk and

commitment are exchanged. When the stakes concern operating control, capital or reputation, leadership must meet leadership.

8. We Need Fewer Green Squares and More Courageous Conversations

The profession has spent years refining the machinery around stakeholders. We have better templates, more elaborate classifications and increasingly polished engagement plans. The machinery has value, but it has become a hiding place.

A matrix cannot tell a sponsor that a celebrated benefit depends on an assumption no regional director believes. A newsletter cannot reconcile two executives whose accountabilities point in opposite directions. A steering committee cannot manufacture trust on the day a decision is required. Only people can do these things, through conversations in which interests are exposed, evidence is tested and commitments are earned.

So let us keep the register—but strip it of its false authority. Keep the communications plan—but stop calling distribution engagement. Keep formal governance—but recognise that responsible decisions are prepared through legitimate coalition-building.

And let us judge stakeholder work by outcomes worthy of leadership: stronger decisions, surfaced conflict, durable commitment and change that can survive contact with the organisation.

Stakeholders are not an audience surrounding the programme. They are part of the system through which the programme succeeds or fails. We should stop managing them as entries on a grid and start leading with them as authors of the outcome.