

BEYOND THE STAKEHOLDER MAP

Stakeholder Management When Everyone Is Afraid — Why Crisis Communication in Programmes Is Not a Communication Problem

A Practitioner's Perspective on Programme Leadership During Organisational Fear



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rational about different things.”*

The Failure of Normal Stakeholder Management

Every programme manager learns stakeholder management early. Map the stakeholders, assess their influence and interest, develop a communication plan, manage expectations. It is sensible, structured work, and in normal conditions it is usually enough.

The past eighteen months have not been normal conditions. What I have observed across multiple programmes is a consistent pattern: the standard stakeholder management toolkit — the RACI matrices, the communication plans, the carefully crafted steering committee packs — stops working when the organisation is afraid. Not because the tools are wrong, but because the problem they are designed to solve is no longer the problem the programme faces.

In stable times, the stakeholder management challenge is informational. Stakeholders need to understand what the programme is doing, how it affects them, and what decisions they need to make. The communication plan addresses this. In crisis conditions, the challenge shifts from informational to emotional. Stakeholders are not struggling to understand the programme — they are struggling to manage their own fear about what the future holds. No communication plan addresses that.

What Fear Does to Programme Stakeholders

Fear changes stakeholder behaviour in ways that are predictable but rarely anticipated in programme planning.

Decision-making slows dramatically. Stakeholders who were previously willing to approve scope, budget, and resource decisions become paralysed. Not because the decisions are harder — often they are simpler, with fewer options available — but because the consequences of being wrong feel catastrophic. In an environment where people are losing their jobs, nobody wants to be the person who approved the wrong thing.

Alliance patterns shift. The stakeholder map drawn six months ago is obsolete. People who were allies become neutral; people who were neutral become hostile. These shifts are not driven by the programme itself but by the broader organisational dynamics — restructuring rumours, budget reallocations, changes in reporting lines — that the crisis has set in motion. The programme manager who relies on last quarter's stakeholder analysis is navigating by an outdated chart.

Short-termism dominates. Stakeholders who previously supported long-horizon programmes suddenly demand immediate, visible results. The strategic business case that secured funding twelve months ago no longer resonates with sponsors whose primary concern is surviving the current quarter. Programme leaders who cannot reframe their programme's value in immediate, tangible terms find their support evaporating.

Fear does not make stakeholders irrational — it makes them rational about different things. The programme leader who understands this distinction has a chance. The one who dismisses anxious stakeholders as "difficult" does not.

What Works Instead

The programme leaders who have navigated this environment most effectively have done three things that the textbooks do not prescribe.

First, they have shortened the feedback loop. Instead of monthly steering committees with comprehensive packs, they have moved to weekly fifteen-minute updates focused on a single question: what has changed, and what does it mean for us? This frequency is not about information — stakeholders do not need weekly updates. It is about reassurance. In an environment of fear, silence is interpreted as bad news. Frequent, brief contact prevents the vacuum that anxiety fills with worst-case speculation.

Second, they have separated the programme conversation from the organisational conversation. When a stakeholder raises concerns about headcount reductions in a programme steering committee, the instinct is to redirect the conversation back to programme matters. The more effective response is to acknowledge the concern, address it honestly if possible, and only then return to the programme agenda. Stakeholders who feel their real concerns are being heard are far more willing to engage with programme concerns.

Third, they have become translators of uncertainty rather than projectors of confidence. The instinct in programme management is to project certainty — to present a plan, a timeline, a set of deliverables. In crisis conditions, false certainty is corrosive. Stakeholders know the environment is uncertain; a programme leader who pretends otherwise loses credibility. The more effective approach is to be explicit about what is known, what is uncertain, and what the programme will do in each scenario. This is harder and less comfortable than presenting a single confident plan, but it builds the trust that confidence alone cannot sustain.

The Broader Point

The crisis has revealed that stakeholder management, as typically practised in programme management, is a fair-weather discipline. It works when the organisational environment is stable, when stakeholder concerns are primarily informational, and when the programme is the most important thing on its stakeholders' minds. None of those conditions hold in a crisis.

What works in their absence is not a different technique but a different orientation: treating stakeholders as human beings navigating fear, rather than as nodes on an

influence grid to be managed. That sounds obvious when written down. In practice, under the pressure of programme delivery, it is remarkably easy to forget.