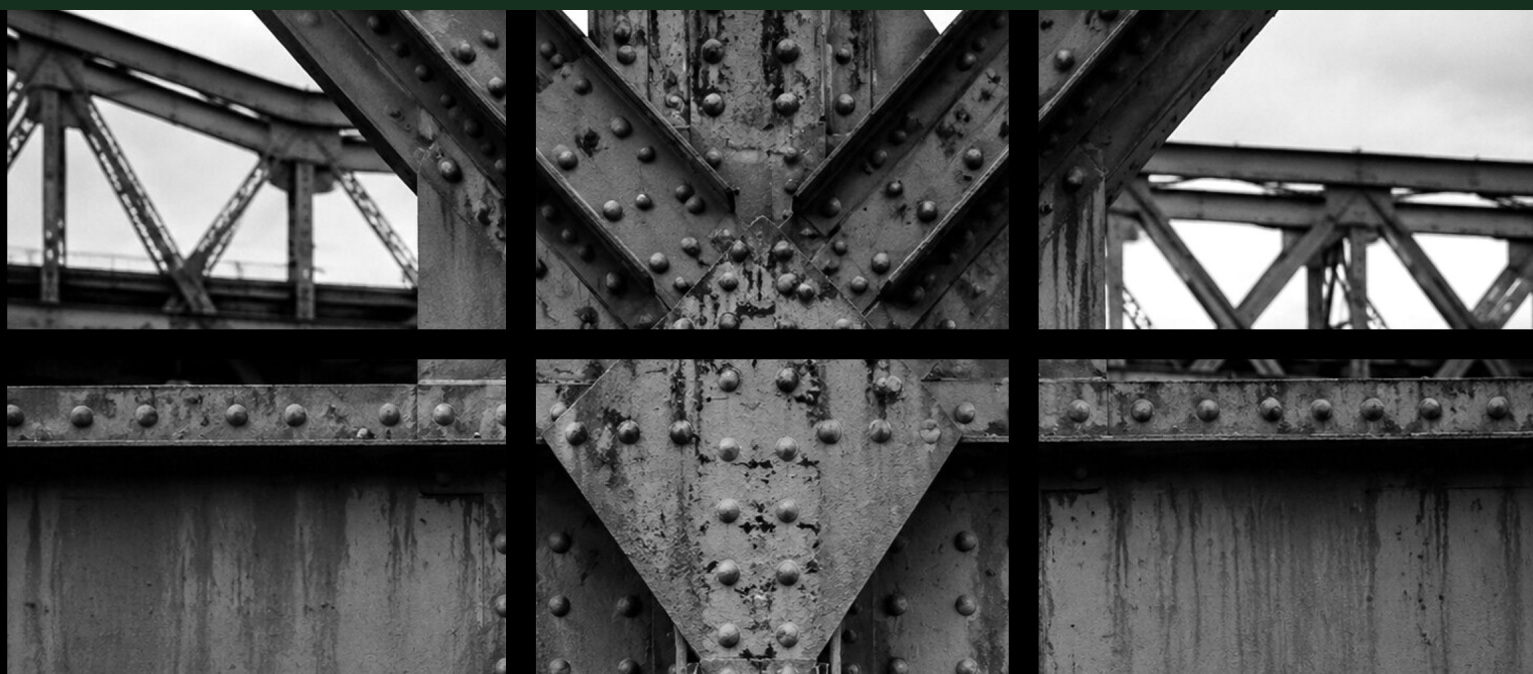


BEYOND THE STAKEHOLDER REGISTER

The Second Map: Why Programmes Survive on Political Literacy, Not the Stakeholder Register

Stakeholder analysis charts who sits on the org chart; programme survival turns on reading the power beneath it.



Giovanni Leonardi

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“A programme is a redistribution of power, budget, and standing that arrives dressed as a delivery exercise.”

1. The report was green

Every indicator on the programme dashboard was green. The stakeholder register was complete and current — forty-odd names, each with an influence rating, a preferred communication channel, and a status of its own. The RACI matrix had been signed off, revised, and signed off again. And yet anyone who had spent a decade around large programmes could sense, walking out of that steering committee, that the thing was already dying. It would take another eighteen months to surface in the numbers, but the verdict had been reached — not in the meeting, but in the conversations that happened before it, in corridors and over coffee, none of which appeared on any register.

This is the uncomfortable observation at the centre of this piece. The instruments we rely on to manage stakeholders are describing the wrong map. RACI, the power/interest grid, the tidy quadrants of the engagement plan — they chart the organisation as it appears on paper. Programmes, however, do not live or die on paper. They live or die inside the political system running underneath the org chart: who owes whom, who fears what, whose budget is exposed, and where a coalition can form fast enough to strangle a change before it takes hold. Learning to read that second map is not an optional refinement of stakeholder management. On any programme large enough to matter, it is the survival skill.

2. What RACI was built to do — and where it stops

It is worth being fair to the tools before criticising them. A responsibility matrix does one job well: it removes ambiguity about who holds the pen. When a deliverable stalls because three managers each assumed another owned it, RACI is the cure. Managing Successful Programmes gives us the governance scaffolding; the power/interest grid at least concedes that some stakeholders carry more weight than others. None of this is wrong, and a programme that neglects it will fail for duller reasons than the ones discussed here.

But notice what every one of these instruments has in common. They are static, and they are innocent of motive.

- RACI tells you who is accountable for a task. It says nothing about whether that person wants the task done at all.
- The power/interest grid places each stakeholder as a fixed point in a quadrant. It treats a living political system as a seating plan.
- The engagement plan assumes resistance is a communication problem — that the resistant stakeholder simply lacks information, and that the right briefing, at the right

cadence, will bring them along.

That last assumption is the expensive one. It is the reason so much stakeholder work amounts to sending ever more updates to people who understood the programme perfectly well the first time — and opposed it precisely because they understood it.

3. Programmes are redistributions dressed as deliveries

Here is the mechanism the registers miss. A programme is a redistribution of power, budget, and standing that arrives dressed as a delivery exercise. Every consolidation takes local control away from someone. Every shared-services move dissolves a fiefdom. Every new system strips discretion from the people who had mastered the old one. The sponsor at the top of the steering committee may want the outcome sincerely — but the outcome is assembled out of a hundred smaller losses distributed among people who were never really asked.

When we label those people "resistant" and reach for a communication plan, we make a category error. Their resistance is not a deficit of understanding. It is, very often, a rational defence of interest. You cannot brief someone out of protecting their headcount, their reporting line, or the discretion that made their role worth having. The information was never the problem.

Treating political resistance as a communications gap is the most common and most costly misdiagnosis in programme delivery. You cannot send a newsletter to solve a problem that is fundamentally about who loses what.

This is why the register can be immaculate while the programme is doomed. The register records positions; it does not record interests, and it certainly does not record the direction in which each interest is pulling.

4. The second map

Political mapping asks a different set of questions from the ones the register answers. It is less concerned with the org chart than with the influence network laid over it — and those two are never the same drawing.

Four things belong on the second map.

1. Interests. For each actor who matters, what does this programme give them, and what does it take away? Not their stated position in the workshop — their actual exposure. The regional finance head who will lose local reporting autonomy has an interest, whatever they say in the room.
2. Power, formal and informal. The org chart shows formal authority. The second map shows the rest of it: the respected veteran whose quiet scepticism can sink an initiative without a single vote; the finance director's assistant who controls the diary and therefore the agenda; the operating unit whose cooperation is technically optional and practically indispensable.
3. Coalitions. Stakeholders do not move as isolated points. They move in blocs. The useful question is not "how supportive is each person" but "who moves together, and around whom." A lone opponent is manageable. Three mid-level managers who lunch

together and have privately concluded that the programme threatens all of them are a wholly different problem.

4. Trajectory. A register is a snapshot; a political map has motion. Which way is each actor leaning this month against last, and is that lean hardening into a settled position? Silence is data. The stakeholder who was vocal and has gone quiet has usually not been persuaded — they have usually stopped arguing and started organising.

Consider how this plays out. A large organisation sets out to consolidate a dozen regional finance systems onto a single platform — a textbook efficiency case, unanimously endorsed by the programme board. On paper, every stakeholder is green. Yet the regional finance heads, who stood to lose the local reporting autonomy that made them powerful, never opposed it openly. They simply owned the data. Cleansing slowed. Reconciliations threw up endless exceptions. Every delay was legitimate, documented, and traceable to no individual. Eighteen months and a seven-figure overspend later, the programme was quietly recast as a "phased" effort — which is to say, it had lost. The cause recorded in the closure report was data quality. The actual cause was a coalition defending its interest, and it had been perfectly visible from the outset to anyone reading the second map rather than the register.

"Every delay was legitimate, documented, and traceable to no individual — which is precisely what effective political resistance looks like."

5. "Isn't this just cynicism with a diagram?"

The strongest objection to all of this deserves a straight answer. Does political mapping not simply dignify office politics — does it not corrode the transparent, rational governance we are meant to be building, and school programme managers in manipulation rather than in leadership?

I think the truth runs the other way. The naive position — the one that actually leaves programmes exposed — is the pretence that a programme is a purely technical exercise, a matter of plans and dependencies among reasonable people who will fall into line once they see the logic. That pretence does not abolish the politics. It merely drives them into the dark, which is exactly where resistance operates most effectively, as the finance-systems programme discovered.

A political map is a diagnosis, and a diagnosis is neutral. What you do with it can be honest or dishonest. You can use the knowledge that a manager will lose standing to manipulate them — or to go to them early, name the loss plainly, and negotiate a place in the new arrangement that they can live with. The first is manipulation; the second is leadership; both begin with the same map. Refusing to draw it does not keep your hands clean. It just means you are managing the most decisive force on your programme with your eyes shut.

6. Reading the second map as fluently as the first

If political literacy is a skill rather than a dark art — and I hold that it is — then it can be practised deliberately. A handful of disciplines separate the programme managers who survive from the ones who are perpetually surprised.

- Keep the map as a living artefact, held closely. It is not a slide for the board pack. Put an actor's true interests and leanings on a shared drive and you have manufactured a political incident of your own. This is a working document for the programme leadership, revised after every meeting that matters: who spoke, who stayed silent, what shifted.
- Test decisions against the map before the meeting, not after. The corridor conversations that settled the fate of the programme in the opening scene were available to be had — by someone who knew they needed having. Most steering committees ratify a decision already reached elsewhere. The real work is done in the elsewhere.
- Invest in the coalition, not only the sponsor. A single powerful sponsor feels like security and is in fact a fragility. Sponsors are promoted, reorganised, and poached; a programme resting on one back is one personnel change away from orphanhood. Breadth of support is what carries a programme across the leadership changes that any multi-year effort will outlast.
- Find the losers early, and design for them. Every programme creates losers. Identifying them at the start — and building their transition, their compensation, or their honourable exit into the plan — converts a future source of covert resistance into a problem already solved. Discovering them at go-live converts it into a crisis.

None of this displaces the formal apparatus. Keep the RACI; keep the governance; keep the register. The argument is not that the methodologies are wrong but that they are incomplete, and that the missing half is the half that decides most outcomes. RACI tells you who holds the pen. It is silent on the one question that most often determines whether the programme lives: who, sitting quietly within reach of the work, would rather the document were never written at all. Learn to read that, and you have learned the skill the manuals quietly assume you already possess.