

# Leading bystanders

Being able to engage with all stakeholders, not just the supportive ones, is the sign of a successful leader, says **Mike Clayton**

**T**he concept of 'leadership' almost always focuses on the leader's relationship to his followers: his team members and supporters, and those who look to him for inspiration, guidance and direction. But not everyone looks towards the leader. Yet, if you seek to lead, you cannot leave them behind.

Engaging the bystanders – the undecided fence-sitters – and your opponents, working with them to win their acceptance and maybe even support, is the mark of deep leadership. It is not just about winning them over and converting them to 'your side' – desirable as that may be – people often have a wholly reasonable cause to disagree and how you treat them is a mark of the quality of your leadership.



Much has been written in *Training Journal* about the tools and techniques of influence and persuasion, so I don't propose to cover that topic here. Instead, I want to focus on your influence agenda: the process of identifying and understanding who you need to influence, and of putting together and implementing a deliberate plan of influence.

The process is straightforward, and illustrated in Figure 1 (below).

**Fig 1 Stakeholder engagement process**

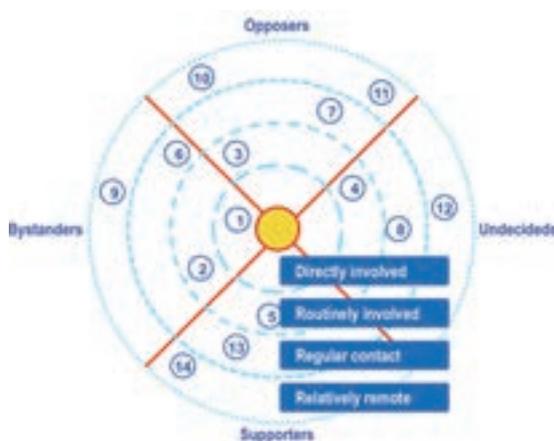


### Identify

The first step is to identify who your stakeholders are: individuals and groups. The simplest and often the best approach for this is to gather a small group of trusted colleagues and ask them to suggest anyone they can think of who might have any interest in what you are doing.

It is at this step that you also need to identify your goals for engaging with these stakeholders: what do you need to achieve to support and enhance your leadership?

**Fig 2 Proximity Map**



## Where you have apex stakeholders, you must give them a lot of your attention

Do this in the context of your organisation's purpose and goals, and those of whatever division, unit or initiative you are leading.

An excellent tool, illustrated in Figure 2 (below left), is a Proximity Map. Use this to help you spot different stakeholders at different levels of proximity to you and your core concerns. Your supporters are the easy ones: what about the rest? You need to think more carefully about each of them.

### Analyse

Once you have identified who your stakeholders are, the next step is to analyse them. The more you understand about them, the better equipped you will be to engage with them effectively. You also need to develop a prioritisation list so that you can focus your limited time and resources where they can have most effect.

It is at this step, too, that you will need to inventory the resources you have available: your assets, skills, character, abilities and also the commitment of your supporters to help. Effectively matching these up to your stakeholder challenges will be a key factor in your success.

Of all of the many considerations you will identify for your stakeholders, I consistently find that the 'Big Six' characteristics dominate my thinking in terms of the practical actions I will want to carry out. These are:

- **their interests** What will influence their decision-making, for example financial, political, social, moral and commercial concerns?
- **their needs** What, for them, is non-negotiable?
- **their attitude** to you and to your wider leadership agenda
- **their impact** How can they affect you and what you are trying to achieve?
- **their power** To what extent can they impose their will over people and events that matter to you?
- **their influence** How can they affect other people's attitudes and behaviours?



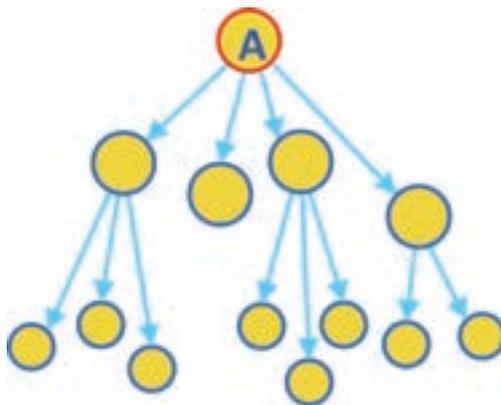
## References

- 1 Clayton M *The Influence Agenda* Palgrave Macmillan (2014)
- 2 Thaler R, Sunstein C *Nudge* Penguin (2009)

Of course, there are more factors that may be relevant to you (26 in total for individual stakeholders and a further nine for stakeholder groups are listed in *The Influence Agenda*<sup>1</sup>), but addressing these big six will often get you most of what you need. It is another manifestation of the Pareto 80:20 rule, that something like 20 per cent of the factors dictate something like 80 per cent of the outcome.

This is also true of the stakeholders themselves: something like 20 per cent of them will have something like 80 per cent of the impact on your leadership. In particular, we ought to single out the very small number of stakeholders who can each influence many other stakeholders. Yet these stakeholders themselves are often very little influenced by the people around them. They are hard to influence, but offer you a lot of leverage if you can. They are your 'apex stakeholders'.

**Fig 3 Apex stakeholders**



Where you have apex stakeholders, you must give them a lot of your attention. They come in three flavours:

- apex supporters – powerful allies
- apex agonists – potentially dangerous adversaries
- apex neutrals – who are waiting to be persuaded.

Because of their sense of independence, it is not a simple task to influence apex stakeholders; they will not be easily persuaded. You need to build their trust and tap into their thinking by allowing them to share their ideas and concerns. You must then be sure to make use of their contributions, responding to their ideas and embracing those that have merit.

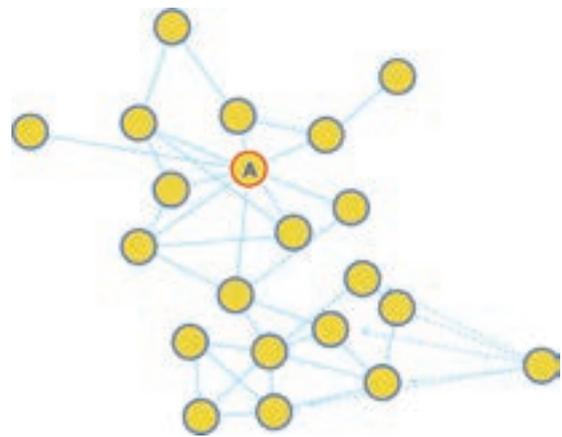
When an apex stakeholder shows enthusiasm for your leadership, shower them with support and offer resources to help them make your case for you. Keep this appropriate of course – not just for the sake of due propriety, but because you

do not want to offend their perception of their independence of mind.

When you are able to influence apex stakeholders, you become *the* apex stakeholder and can, through them, dictate the agenda of many of your stakeholders.

Apex stakeholders occupy a pivotal position in a web of influence. Another useful tool for analysing your stakeholder ecosystem is a sociogram, or social network diagram, like that in Figure 4 (below). In it, all the stakeholders are represented as nodes, with connections between them shown by lines. Stakeholders are clustered in a crude representation of the organisational proximity, but this may not match all of the forms of influence.

**Fig 4 Sociogram**



We can enhance the amount of information we put onto our sociogram by using arrows to depict the direction of influence, so that, if A primarily influences B, the arrow points from A to B. If A and B can equally influence each other, we can use a double arrow. We can also use line thickness to indicate the strength of relationships or level of influence, a thicker (or double) line indicating a stronger link.

In a sociogram, apex stakeholders tend to show up as occupying hub positions, connected to many other stakeholders. They can also show up as connectors: stakeholders whose influence spans two or more groups.

## Plan

Once you understand your stakeholders and resources, it is time to build a plan. Avoid the temptation to dive into engagement straight away. Instead, create a structured yet flexible sequence of actions that are designed to achieve the strategic results you need. The broad thrust of your plan



of control for the stakeholder – avoiding the perception that they are being backed into a corner

- **the critical frame** Look for risks and points of failure to give the stakeholder a feeling that his concerns are being respected and incorporated into the process
- **the outcome frame** Focusing on what the stakeholder wants at the very end of a process: the end rather than the means. Use this frame if the process is uncomfortable but the result will yield real benefits to your stakeholder.

### Act

And then you have to get out there and engage with your stakeholders... You have to listen, ask, persuade, cajole, tease, induce, counter, appease, collaborate and more.

And as you do that, you will have successes and setbacks. Sometimes you will have to deal with resistance: resistance to your ideas, to your leadership and to the change you are trying to promote. You have three clusters of tools available to you.

**Gentle persuasion, or 'soft power'** Gentle persuasion often achieves more than stronger tactics ever can and it is fundamentally based on liking. We do more for the people we like than for those we either don't know or don't like. So what is the secret to being liked? Let's ask a selection of people to get some typical answers:

- **'I like people I trust'** So practice openness and integrity so people feel they can trust you
- **'I like people I see often'** This may be a case of chicken and egg, but increase the frequency of meetings
- **'I like people I can believe'** So demonstrate your credibility and depth of knowledge and experience
- **'I like people who listen to me'** So take time to focus on people and what they are saying
- **'I like people who help out'** So offer practical assistance
- **'I like people who respect me'** So don't enforce unwanted assistance
- **'I like people who are like me'** So demonstrate how our interests and perspectives overlap
- **'I like people who are like I want to be'** So set high standards and a good example, without bragging or arrogance
- **'I like people whom the people I like, like'** So associate with the people I like, trust and respect
- **'I like people who make me feel good'** So smile, offer sincere praise and show me you respect me.

**Hidden power, or 'behavioural economics'** This is a theory of decision-making, popularised in

## Real, sustainable success comes through perseverance

the book *Nudge*<sup>2</sup>, which starts from the position that human behaviour is often irrational yet is largely predictable, if we can gather enough social, emotional and cognitive data. If we understand the patterns well enough, we can exploit our knowledge to influence stakeholders.

**Handling resistance** Perhaps the most feared aspect of stakeholder engagement is dealing with resistance. We sense the potential for the situation to escalate to conflict and few people welcome that. Yet we also know that resistance is all but inevitable. This knowledge can therefore prevent us from properly engaging with stakeholders, for fear of the resistance that we will, at some point, encounter.

As a leader, you need to understand how to diagnose and handle resistance in a positive and respectful manner. Two of my earlier articles in *Training Journal*<sup>3</sup> describe my onion model of resistance<sup>4</sup> (in the context of engagement) and how it was developed.

### Review

The process so far is guaranteed to work... sometimes. Real, sustainable success comes through perseverance. You need to monitor what you are doing and constantly evaluate the results you are achieving (or not) and feed that new knowledge into revised plans.

Day by day, and even hour by hour, you will be making changes to your approach to adapt it to the new prevailing conditions, to the changes in your stakeholders' perceptions and to new events.

### Call to action

How you handle *all* of your stakeholders will be the basis for how you are judged as a leader. But it is not enough just to engage with your stakeholders: if you want to lead with integrity, you need to do so in an ethical way.

I have crafted a set of six commitments for ethical stakeholder engagement, in the form of a charter. I invite you to sign it, to share this charter (you can download a copy from [www.theinfluenceagenda.co.uk](http://www.theinfluenceagenda.co.uk)) and to encourage colleagues to sign it too. **TJ**

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