

# 'BUT THEY ALL WANT DIFFERENT THINGS'

*Dealing with Stakeholder Disagreement  
on Process Purpose & Outcomes*

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# INTRODUCTION



Analyzing, managing and improving business processes can be a tricky task even at the best of times.

End-to-end processes can be incredibly complex and typically involve multiple teams or departments, each of which has a different set of needs. Sometimes these differences can be subtle, in which case it is relatively easy to gain consensus or compromise, but on other occasions these differences can be vast. Plus there may be other stakeholders who have an interest in the process too – the customer, a supplier, a regulator and so. As business and process analysts it sometimes feels like we are caught in the middle – trying to facilitate agreement amongst stakeholders with vastly different views and demands. Yet facilitating this agreement is absolutely crucial, so how do we go about it? A practical approach is to start early, analyze the stakeholder landscape and look for areas of potential disagreement before they become fatal.

An important step in any kind of process initiative is to understand the stakeholder landscape. It's important to identify stakeholders and assess the type of interest they have in the process that we are analyzing, managing or changing.

It is worth reflecting on what we mean by stakeholder, as it is a widely used and broad term which can encompass many groups of people. The International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA®)'s Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABOK®) Guide defines a stakeholder as:

“ A group or individual with a relationship to the change, the need, or the solution ”

(IIBA, 2015)

When we are considering changing or managing processes this can include people that are involved with the process itself, people who are suppliers, people who receive the output, as well as people who have other types of interests in the process. It can include people who are internal and external, people who are involved as well as those who might not be directly involved in the process or the change, but are impacted by it. It is likely also to include some groups of stakeholders that have high interest even though they (individually) have very low authority. Imagine making a change to the process of withdrawing cash at a typical retail bank. There will likely be hundreds of thousands (or even millions) of affected customers, many of whom have high interest in the change, but individually they have little power and certainly cannot 'veto' the change.

## INTRODUCTION (CONT...)

An important first step is to identify the key stakeholders who are important for the process to be implemented and operate effectively and efficiently. We can identify potential stakeholders by looking at existing process documentation, organizational diagrams, and by speaking to those involved with the process and the change. It is important to consciously 'zoom out' when carrying out this exercise. So often, the default focus is set to those directly involved with the particular process that we are interested in. By zooming out we are able to spread the net wider, and ask who might be impacted by any change we make. Who receives the output of our process? Who is monitoring it? Who has oversight?

It's useful to capture basic details about each of the identified stakeholders. Basic information such as their name, contact details and the nature of their interest. If known, it can also be useful to consider their current attitude towards the process (or the proposed change), as well as their level of influence over the process, and their level of interest:

Name	Role/Title	Contact	Nature of Interest	Attitude	Influence (0-10)	Interest (0-10)
Jayne Green	Head of Business Improvement	j.greene@stakeholder-orbus.com	Sponsor	Advocate	10	10
John Brown	Head of Operations	j.brown@stakeholder-orbus.com	Owens process	Reluctant Supporter	9	10
Retail Customers (Regular Users)	Consumer/ Recipient	Not yet known: Focus group to be convened	Impacted by change	Not yet known	2	7
Retail Customers (Occasional Users)	Consumer/ Recipient	Not yet known: Questionnaire to be sent	Impacted by change	Not yet known	2	3
Etc...						

## INTRODUCTION (CONT..)

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This can fit into a wider stakeholder analysis exercise, perhaps preparing a power/interest grid or an influence/impact grid. Yet even this first stage of identification of stakeholders is illuminating for a number of important reasons. Firstly, it encourages us to put a 'name in the frame' for all of the key process roles. We might know, for example, that there ought to be a 'process owner'. Yet so often who that person is becomes a subject of debate. Getting this out in the open will ensure that we can ensure that it is discussed and dealt with before misunderstanding and miscommunications occur. Secondly, it will help us spot gaps and decide how we will represent and engage with groups that aren't directly involved. A crucial question, for example, can often be "how can we ensure that the voice of the customer is injected into our work?" This might involve seeking insight from focus groups or surveys, and identifying (and segmenting) the different types of customers allows us to start these conversations early.



# IT'S THE OUTCOME THAT MATTERS

Having assessed the stakeholder landscape, we can now start to ask the question “what does each stakeholder want from the process; what do they think it is for?”<sup>1</sup> and “what does each stakeholder want from the process change or management initiative?”. We will likely spend more time considering those that have higher interest or influence over the process, although careful thought should be given to the broad range.

<sup>1</sup> Readers familiar with Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) may see similarities with a ‘Root Definition’ (Checkland, 1981) here; although it’s important to note that here we are discussing why they think the process actually exists and what it actually does; as opposed to letting possible purposes emerge. However, for and messy problems, Soft Systems Methodology provides an excellent choice, see the ‘further reading’ section.

This is best illuminated with an example. Let’s imagine we are aiming to improve a process within a garage/auto repair shop which services and maintains cars. Perhaps the end-to-end process of booking and undertaking a service is rather ‘ad-hoc’, resulting in delays when a customer arrives as the paperwork isn’t ready, with further delays if the parts are not in stock.

Two key types of stakeholders here would be the skilled mechanics/auto technicians who will undertake the work, but also the manager who has the overall responsibility for the organization, including the profit & loss of the organization. Initially it might appear that the aims of these two types of stakeholders would be identical, but further investigation might find that there are subtle differences:

	What is the process for, from their perspective? What is its core purpose?	What are the ideal outcomes from the process improvement initiative?
Mechanics/Auto Technicians	Service car in line with manufacturers standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demand is more predictable (less Saturday peaks)</li> <li>• Parts always in stock</li> <li>• Less paperwork</li> </ul>
Manager	Service car in line with manufacturers standards, give advice on preventative maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demand is more level, utilize Wednesday ‘slump’</li> <li>• Ability to place larger orders (lower prices)</li> <li>• Ability to ‘up-sell’ other useful services</li> </ul>

## IT'S THE OUTCOME THAT MATTERS (CONT...)

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Here we see that the mechanics/technicians are (quite understandably) more interested in the detail of undertaking the process, making sure parts are in stock and so forth. The manager has a macro-level view and is also interested in having the ability to predict future services that the customer might need, so that they can up-sell.

We could also extend the table and include 'parts suppliers', who might have no direct interest in what the process is for but if the garage/auto repair shop is a major customer they might have desired outcomes from any process change. Perhaps they would prefer all parts orders to be transmitted via their secure portal (rather than ordered via phone) which will cut down on their costs. Consciously thinking about our suppliers will create the ability to collaborate with them and build a process that works well for them as well as for us – and this can only be a good thing!

In this example, the perspectives and outcomes seem compatible. But this isn't always the way...



## WHEN THEY ALL WANT DIFFERENT THINGS...

Carrying out stakeholder analysis will help us uncover areas where disagreement is likely, or where vastly different perspectives exist. Sometimes there will be vastly different views on fundamental elements such as the core purpose of the process itself. If we have uncovered this difference of opinion early, we can work with the relevant stakeholders to deal with it. In many cases the most practical way of working through this is to convene a workshop, where the relevant stakeholders can discuss their differences of opinion. This might involve directly involved stakeholders, but also representatives (proxies) of larger or more distant stakeholder groups – in particular it is crucial to have someone representing the ‘voice of the customer’, and to ensure that person has a genuine understanding of the breadth of opinions that exist within the customer population.

*“ ... it is crucial to have someone representing the ‘voice of the customer’, and to ensure that person has a genuine understanding of the breadth of opinions that exist within the customer population. ”*

A workshop of this type sometimes provides the first opportunity that attendees have ever had to hear, first-hand, the views of others. A possible way to start the workshop is with each attendee giving their view on the core-purpose of the process being discussed, in their own words, along with their aspirations for the particular process management or improvement initiative that is being progressed. This can then lead on to a facilitated discussion over any differences of opinion that exist.

It is often the case that having heard each other’s perspectives and the reasons why those perspectives are held, stakeholder’s views ‘soften’. They might not immediately agree, but their positions (hopefully) move slightly closer together. We might even find that, upon discussion, two stakeholders who initially seemed to be vastly opposed to each other are actually far closer to agreeing than we thought. It may have been a simple misunderstanding due to terminology or language that has been used.

However, even if the perspectives of those present at the workshop have moved closer, it is unlikely (unless you are lucky) that they will be identical. There is unlikely to be consensus. It is therefore crucial to continue the conversation, and drive towards some type of conclusion. There are many techniques and ways of facilitating these types of conversation, the most appropriate way will depend largely on the organizational context and the subject matter being discussed. However two useful patterns include discussing process outcomes and outputs and chunking up a level.

# WHEN THEY ALL WANT DIFFERENT THINGS... (CONT...)

## Discussing Process Outcomes and Outputs

Where there is disagreement, a practical place to start is by discussing the outcomes or outputs that the process exists to achieve. Let's take a deliberately provocative high-level example, and imagine a private hospital run by a rich villain who is primarily interested in money. If we were examining the 'diagnose & treat patient' process (or set of processes), we'd likely find that the medical staff had a very different view.



Figure 1: A Deliberately Extreme and Provocative View!

If this difference was not reconciled, at least to some extent it is likely that there would be ongoing operational conflict, with the doctor wanting to act in the best interests of patients, and the rich villain wondering why the profits aren't higher (and wanting to add 'up-sell' opportunities at every junction).

Yet in this example, even though the stakeholders disagree on a fundamental core-purpose, it is likely they would agree on at least some of the process outcomes. Both would probably agree that you have to

actually treat the patient and that they have to leave healthy (and alive!). The doctor would also probably appreciate the need for the patient (or someone) to pay, even if she or he wasn't as fixated on money as the hypothetical villain manager. Driving the conversation from these outcomes will foster a collaborative conversation where hopefully some middle ground will be found. This can lead on to other analysis techniques such as the definition of a handful of initial end-to-end critical success factors and key performance indicators (perhaps using a 'balanced scorecard' type approach – see the 'further reading' section).

## Chunking Up a Level

Another approach that can be used to facilitate and foster tricky conversations when stakeholders are disagreeing on fundamentals of a process is to chunk up to a higher level. This concept is illustrated in figure 2.

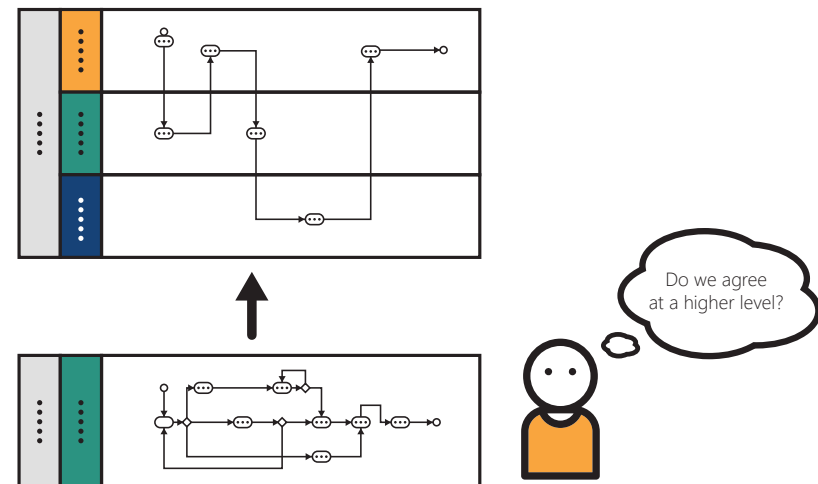


Figure 2: "Chunking Up": Climbing the Ladder of Abstraction



## WHEN THEY ALL WANT DIFFERENT THINGS... (CONT...)

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If you are examining a sub-process, or individual task and there is vehement disagreement, then zoom out and establish whether the disagreement actually exists at a higher level of abstraction too. If it does, it's important to deal with it at that level; else even if you resolve the issue with the particular (micro-level) issue that is currently being discussed, it will likely come back when others are discussed. Equally, 'chunking up' and finding that there is agreement can be a very positive thing – for the facilitator and for the group! It validates that everyone is broadly on the 'same page', but there is room for discussion over an individual, smaller (but important) issue. Having commitment to the higher level goal can help shape thinking at the more detailed micro-level too.

### **Different views can co-exist (as long as they are compatible)**

Finally, it is worth highlighting that different views can (and do) co-exist within organizations. Ask twenty different staff what a particular process is for and you'll get some subtly different answers. Yet it is crucial that the views of key stakeholders are at the very least compatible, and not in direct opposition to each other. Once measures of the process are defined, if done well, this can amplify agreement too – since useful conversations about 'what is important to measure' will take place. Collaborating in this way will ensure that there is a broadly common view on the process, and that discussions on how to run, improve and manage the process will be easier and slicker.





## CONCLUSION

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In summary, stakeholder disagreement is best dealt with early in an initiative, by identifying stakeholders and understanding their perspectives. Considering what they think the process is for, and the outcomes they desire from the initiatives will help uncover potential areas of disagreement. When we identify disagreement (or if conflict emerges), we can work collaboratively with the relevant teams to foster agreement, typically by convening a workshop and working through the issues. Discussing process outcomes and outputs can be a way to drive this conversation, as can 'chunking up a level'. Acknowledging different or conflicting views is crucial, as it enables us to foster agreement and move forward smoothly and effectively. There will likely be some difference of opinion later – it is impossible to completely quell conflict and prevent future differences – but by starting with a common view we build a firm foundation on which to build.

## REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

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Readers interested in the topics discussed in this e-book may find the following resources useful:

Cadle, J., Paul, D. and Yeates, D. J. (eds) (2014). *Business Analysis*. Swindon: BCS Learning & Development Limited.

Checkland, P. (1981). *Systems thinking, systems practice*. Chichester: Wiley.

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Kaplan, R. and Norton, D. (1996). *The balanced scorecard*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.



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