



Data-Driven
Human Capital
Strategies

HOW TO GUIDE:
Involve
Stakeholders
in Decision-
Making



Stakeholder engagement is key to successfully manage changes. This “how to” brief describes how leaders can **identify, engage with, learn from, and use the perspectives of stakeholders** to improve any resource or process.

Why involve stakeholders?

Leaders who meaningfully engage stakeholders believe three things:



They understand that they don't know everything or have all the answers; **they're humble.**



They know that others may have perspectives, values and beliefs; **they're culturally competent.**



They are interested in learning from others; **they're curious.**

When a leader has these three beliefs, stakeholders are more willing to courageously share their challenges, and commit to trying solutions and strengthening their relationship with the leader and their team. For example, leaders who are aiming to improve school culture and working conditions and who engage in earnest and regular stakeholder engagement may have more success in learning about areas to improve working conditions and in gaining useful suggestions from their staff.

Who is a stakeholder?

While planning, it's worth mapping all the stakeholders who contribute to or use your resources and processes. These maps will help you understand the values, needs and expertise that influence your priorities and ability to get things done.

*For change management purposes, though, there are **three types of stakeholders**:*

- **“Owners”** have a challenge or issue that you can address; they are the people who have a problem.
- **“Users”** will implement your solution to the problem; they are the customers for your new product or process.
- **“Contributors”** have expertise or resources that can help.

There's obviously overlap among these types.

For example, efforts to refine an LEA's teacher hiring process may include the following stakeholders:

- **Owners:** HR team; principals
- **Users:** principals; hiring committees
- **Contributors:** principals; recently-hired teachers; students; parents; school board; educator preparation programs

There are some roles that require continuous attention as stakeholders, such as principals, labor partners, and policymakers. Having structures in place to continually identify and track their challenges and test possible solutions has a high payoff and creates buy-in. Any of the tools and techniques below can be used for this purpose.

Define where stakeholders fit in your decision-making process

It's important, up-front, to always **be explicit** about where the specific stakeholder activity fits into the decision-making process.

Address three concerns:

- **what you're asking** of the stakeholders;
- **how you're going** to use their input; and
- **who will ultimately** be making the decisions.

For example, you can say to stakeholders:

“

*We want to know **how a better online job applicant portal will make your hiring easier**. We'll use your input to prioritize system requirements for a new portal. We'll share this prioritized list with you and then use it to create a budget request for next year.*

”

When to engage stakeholders

Stakeholders can share information that will improve your project at five stages:



Problem-finding

Scanning for common challenges and inhibitors to success



Problem-framing

Digging into a prioritized problem to understand root causes and conditions



Solution generation

Considering a range of solutions that address the root cause and the problem



Decision-making

Selecting a solution or action to pursue and/or planning the details



Solution testing

Identifying the most promising solutions and testing prototypes/pilots

How to engage stakeholders

Five types of activities allow stakeholders to provide meaningful input:

Sponsoring ongoing role-alike or advisory groups

Spend more time asking about their work, successes and challenges—and less time sharing your work—and you will have an excellent venue for finding problems you can address. For example, a group of special education teachers from across the LEA can provide input on how proposed changes will impact their work.

Creating working groups and project teams

Ensure that working groups have a wide range of stakeholders. Be specific at each stage about what kind of engagement you want from the group; it's not about having them do the work, it's about hearing their input and ideas. Leverage their connections to gain input from a wider range of stakeholders.

Hosting focus groups

Participants in focus groups should be talking to each other, not to the facilitator. Six to ten members is an ideal group size. Have a protocol of six to eight questions ready, focused only on the stage you're in.

Interviewing

One-on-one interviews give you a chance to probe and go deeper. Allow 45 minutes for eight to ten questions, with follow-up questions.

Surveying

Avoid open-ended questions. Use five-point scales, multiple choice, and pull-down items which make analysis of responses easier. Send surveys to as many people as possible with a clear explanation in the survey introduction about its purpose and use. Ensure participants' confidentiality and send an email reminder to recipients about 72 hours before the survey will close. For more information, see [**the how-to guide on surveying stakeholders available here.**](#)

Overcoming potential obstacles in effective stakeholder engagement

Because stakeholders may not be able to see an immediate benefit to giving input, the biggest obstacle is that **the barrier to participating in stakeholder engagement is too high**. Common barriers can include: the advisory meeting/focus group is scheduled at an inopportune time, the location is inconvenient, or the “ask” is unclear. Using the type of plan shown on [page 7](#) will help you avoid this obstacle.

The second most common obstacle is that **the activity—the interview protocol, the survey questions—isn’t aligned with your purpose** so they don’t give you useful information. Whenever possible, “test drive” protocols and surveys with a small sample of stakeholders and revise them as needed to improve their usefulness.

If you are trying to engage senior leaders such as superintendents, be clear about the importance of hearing from the superintendent specifically, rather than someone else the superintendent may send instead.

Finally, the hardest challenge is **when stakeholders feel that their input won’t really be used**, and that you are asking them to engage just to check a box in your process. Describe upfront how you will use their input and, if you have input from earlier engagement activities, share it. For example, summarize the input from another stakeholder survey or focus group; explain how it changed your thinking and revealed new information.

Planning for stakeholder engagement

Build stakeholder engagement into your project or work by **creating a plan up front**. Identify dates and phases for the project, the stakeholders for each phase, the input you want from them, and the method for gathering that input. Here’s a sample, looking at new teacher experience:

Stakeholders	Problem-finding <i>[Jan. – Feb.]</i>	Problem-framing <i>[Feb. – March]</i>	Solution-generation <i>[April – May]</i>	Solution-testing <i>[June – August]</i>
Novice teachers	Survey about their experience so far in the school year	Conduct focus groups (six to eight members) about the specific challenges of new teachers	Reconvene focus groups to generate high-impact, low-cost, research-based solutions to challenges	Interview one novice teacher at each school about one proposed tool or change
HR staff leading onboarding & induction	Interview HR staff about the onboarding steps & resources available	Conduct focus group w/HR staff; share teacher survey data and discuss connections between HR & school sites	Ask HR lead to generate potential solutions for HR involvement in onboarding & induction	Map new tools against a revised onboarding & induction calendar and look for gaps or additional needs

Reflecting back stakeholder input

To build trust and foster productive relationships, it’s essential that stakeholders **hear their input reflected back**. Options include:

- **Share survey result summaries** (common, free online survey tools such as [Google Forms](#) or [Poll Everywhere](#) provide these automatically).
- **Write a brief memo** summarizing the results of focus group discussions.
- **Outline next steps** and connect them to the input stakeholders provided.

If stakeholders see that you are committed to using their input, they are more likely to continue participating in planning and implementation.

HOW TO GUIDE:
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for High Impact**

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