



Talking to Stakeholders

How to add value and make an impact by building strategic working relationships

Alexandra Mack

Introduction

Years ago, one of my colleagues at Pitney Bowes was complaining to me. “They never listen to me! I work really hard and my work never moves forward! The product team just sits there and listens and then they do nothing.”

I had worked with this colleague for two years at this point. I knew she did excellent work, with a good eye for technical detail. She functioned as team lead well, and the research itself was good. However, she was frustrated, just like many technical specialists in a variety of fields are frustrated. How can you do good work and that work go nowhere? How can you make more impact when no one seems to listen to you?

At my colleague’s request, I sat in on her presentation of her team’s findings. They had been tasked with researching what the users wanted and needed from the product.

Unfortunately, she presented their findings in the worst way possible for a business audience. She began with the methodology in detail and continued to present all of their findings, piece by piece. The presentation was twice as long as it needed to be, and she never recommended anything concrete to make the product better.

Her manager sighed before the end, and did not ask her to present her findings to the client. Later that month, my colleague was passed over for a promotion.

I’ve seen this dynamic many times, not just with researchers, but also software developers, data scientists, and technical writers. I’ve heard about it in other fields, with aerospace engineers, architects, and up and coming lawyers. Good work alone is not enough. Even excellent work paired with ambition can leave you speaking into the void.

Maybe you’ve been there. You gave your client presentation, and they seemed to like what you had to say and agree with you. Yet they don’t seem to act on the information you’ve

given them, and you're left wondering. Your manager passes on your work, and praises you on a technical level, but your career goes nowhere. You're confused, and frustrated.

Fortunately, the invisible barrier you're facing is real, and it can be overcome.

The Next Level

Becoming excellent at your craft is necessary, and will earn you recognition—up to a point. Reaching the next level then becomes about other things, including managing people, balancing budgets, keeping track of complex projects, and maintaining timelines. People will naturally identify and address many of these missing skills as they become more senior, but some skills prove more difficult to address. For most people I've seen who continue to struggle, they're missing one skill in particular: talking to stakeholders.

The truth is that no one teaches talking to stakeholders. However, it's a critical skill; if you do it well, you will unstuck or dramatically accelerate your career growth. You'll obtain more business, referrals, and renewals for your organization, and make your projects more successful. You'll help ensure you're building the right thing at the right time in the right way, making your work exponentially more valuable to your organization and your clients alike. All of this will make it easier to build a great network, and to find your next opportunity.

The long-standing tale of the self-made career person is a myth. None of us make it entirely on our own,¹ and while peers can help you, the people with the most power to help or hinder you are, by definition, stakeholders.² They can support you in your projects, your

¹ Of course, I realize that we as a society put the lone abrasive genius on a pedestal, holding up Elon Musk and Steve Jobs in his day as uniquely successful, but they are the exceptions. Generally work is very much a team sport.

² There are many definitions of stakeholders, but in this book, we define them as people with the power to help or hurt your work directly. Typical stakeholders include bosses, clients, executives, and anyone with the power to influence outcomes, even if informally.

career, and your work, or become an active impediment. They can hire and fire you. Even if you become self-employed at some point, you will still need to talk to stakeholders (clients and others) to be successful. In the corporate world, your career literally cannot progress past a certain point without someone above you actively supporting it. Talking to stakeholders is critical.

Earning More Impact

Many technical specialists have the belief that doing good work should be enough on its own, but this belief is erroneous. For better or worse, all of our work only matters if people see why and how it is important. A simple painting without a frame, covered in dust at a flea market, will appear far less valuable than the same painting richly framed behind glass at an art museum. The context gives the work its value, but the context can be changed.

Talking to stakeholders well means learning to place your work in the right frame so that they can understand and value that work. It means deliberately building the type of relationships with stakeholders that lead to mutual respect, so that they will listen to your recommendations or even seek out your opinion.

When you can put yourself in the shoes of your stakeholder, understand deeply what is important to them, and do the work of connecting what you have to what they care about, you earn more impact. You also become far more valuable.

Talking Can Be Learned

In 2002, when I worked at a consultancy, there was a recession. The very small company had to do layoffs, twice. The first time, they made a mistake, calling three of us into the office and assuring us that we were safe due to the quality of our work. “You are our top

people.” This helped us feel secure, despite the challenges of knowing our friends and colleagues were out of work.

Time went on, the recession got worse, and the situation changed. The company was forced to do another round of layoffs. One of the three people who were brought into the office was let go, and she was justifiably upset. (Incidentally, this is why you should never promise anyone is safe; circumstances may force you to betray your promise, and lead to far more distress for everyone.)

With the second round of cuts, they told us that while the woman had been a truly amazing designer, she was also abrasive when she spoke to stakeholders. When they were getting down to a skeleton staff, they realized that her skills did not outweigh the abrasiveness. Soft skills do matter.

I have seen people who are extraordinary at what they do torpedo their careers through a few badly thought out interactions with stakeholders. Others who are nearly as good never get the hang of the skills involved in talking to stakeholders, and it prevents their ideas from being heard and their work from being acted on. I have even seen people who are not technical stand-outs advance their careers much faster than their peers by employing these sets of skills. Talking to stakeholders is absolutely a crucial skill, and it’s something you can learn.

Talking to Stakeholders

In this book, I will walk you through the essentials involved in talking to stakeholders, but the essence is simple. You will put yourself in the shoes of your stakeholder, understand deeply what is important to them, and do the work of connecting what you have to what they care about.

Talking to stakeholders is often about who is doing the work. Are you making them do the work to connect your ideas to their reality, and understand why your input is valuable? (They may or may not be able to do this work given the other demands on their schedule.) Or, do you go the extra mile to connect your ideas to their reality? If you frame your technical insights so that the connection is already clear, the stakeholder can own it and run with it immediately.

The people who earn influence for their work are the ones who understand how to frame that work for the most impact, and do so, consistently.

My Experience

Perhaps it's not surprising that talking to stakeholders is difficult. In many circumstances, we are actively taught other ways of approaching people. Before I worked in corporate America, I came up through academia. Behaviors that are very standard in academia to prove your case, and show your authority, turned out to be counterproductive when I moved into industry. Starting with methodology and including every detail, for example, as my colleague did in the story that starts this introduction, is a powerful authority builder in academia. Academia teaches you to *prove* your case, and to do it in an argumentative fashion. You are taught to focus on being right and/or proving others wrong. Even more importantly, making your stakeholders feel wrong will operate as a strike against you, and getting them to "right" is most effective when done gently. In a perfect world, they will come to see the "right" idea as theirs.

I made many mistakes when transitioning from academia to industry and government spaces, but I learned steadily from those mistakes. To survive and thrive, I slowly began to communicate at the level that stakeholders expected, within the frameworks they understood. While I will stand by my work as strongly now as I did in academia, my approach to communication has changed dramatically.

Over the last two decades, I've spoken with stakeholders successfully in a wide variety of situations and industries. As one of the first anthropologists they hired, I helped establish the new research and analysis program at Pitney Bowes. I have worked on projects across a variety of industries, including health care, retail, software, government, non-profit, and financial services. I have also served on the Executive Board of several non-profits, and advise faculty entrepreneurs through Yale Ventures. And perhaps most importantly at the moment, I am the current Director of Research at Ad Hoc LLC, working with teams of researchers, designers, engineers and product managers building digital services for government clients.

Across all of this experience and all of these industries I have found talking to stakeholders to be *the* skill that no one teaches, and the skill that my teams most need. And since I had to learn it the hard way, I found that I was uniquely able to teach the people who came to me for help.

Learning this skill has made an immense difference in the work and careers of the people I mentor. I have presented these ideas in talks and classes, with positive responses, and requests to speak more widely. This interest has led me to want to offer a resource to the community at large. Talking to stakeholders seems to be one of those things that you are simply expected to figure out, but so many people struggle to do so. I feel strongly that it's time for the community to have resources on learning it, and this book is the result.

What You'll Learn

This is intended as a practical, but not a prescriptive book. In these pages I will explain what works and what doesn't in talking to stakeholders across a variety of fields, with examples where possible. The book is written specifically with technical practitioners in mind, though it may also be useful for managers or more general businesspeople,

depending on circumstance. The core is still most useful for technical practitioners already excellent in their field.

In this book, I'll cover how to:

- Talk so stakeholders will listen
- Make effective stakeholder presentations
- Discover (and deliver) the true goals of your stakeholders
- Manage situations in which you and your stakeholders are not on the same page, and
- Deal with that one difficult stakeholder.

Along the way, I'll explain principles and give examples and scripts where needed. My background as a researcher will still necessarily inform my approach to the topic, so you may find certain nuances change for your own circumstances. Still, based on what I have seen and the feedback of my colleagues, the overarching principles remain true across technical specialties and within most industries.

Since I believe in assumption mapping, I will detail my assumptions here: I assume that you are already excellent in your specific set of technical skills, whatever they are, or that you are working diligently to become so. I also assume you are working with stakeholders on a regular basis, or that you have enough experience in your organization to have done so in the past. So while you *could* use this book to improve interactions with your boss alone, that's not its primary value.

I also assume that you are familiar with and competent in basic people skills, or know that you are not; if the latter, I suggest you seek out a book on people skills, of which there are many, and read and study that one before coming back to this book. The advanced skills here will be greatly benefitted by the basic ones already mastered.

How to Get More Out of This Book

Each of the seven chapters in this book builds on the last, so you will get the most out of the book if you read it through at least once, as a whole, rather than jumping around. You will also get more value if you read the book with a problem or situation in mind; the general principles will often become far more useful when applied to a specific circumstance. At several points, I will also encourage you to take time to reflect, and having a situation in mind will help you learn application of the general principles in a deeper way. You may also find it helpful to come back and re-read important chapters as new situations come up.

Like any craft, talking to stakeholders can't be entirely learned from a book, regardless of how carefully you study. Just like learning a new part of your technical specialty, learning this may feel awkward at first, but if you persist, your confidence and abilities will grow. Be aware that since talking to stakeholders is a *complex* skill, it will take time to master all the dependent pieces and to integrate them together. You may need several tries to be able to successfully apply a general principle to a specific situation, or to learn to dial in the right approach without it feeling awkward and unnatural. The good news is that the difficulty is directly proportional to the payoff; if you persist, you'll be able to see your projects and your careers improve in ways that your less-skilled peers may not see.

And lastly, as you already know from your own technical specialty, advanced practice of a craft requires judgment. While the general approach to all situations may be remarkably similar, each situation is different. As such, this guide to talking to stakeholders cannot be a step by step algorithm. Rather, it is a framework, and one that will require adapting to your style and situation. Try the techniques, learn them, and apply them to your circumstances. Once you know and can practice the principles, make them yours, and break them for good reasons when the situation requires it. Where I provide a script, change the words to make them yours.

For your interactions with stakeholders to come across as authentic, you *must* act in a way that is true to yourself, and your personality. Experiment, learn, and then make these techniques your own.

