

Getting Started: The Why and How of Stakeholder Engagement

Implementing a strategy that will ultimately lead to widespread deployment of renewable energy, reduced costs, and fundamental changes to the energy system has potentially significant implications for a wide range of communities, businesses, and institutions. It follows, therefore, that successfully implementing your strategy will require the support and actions of a broad and diverse set of stakeholders. Whether you are working on a strategy that will affect an institution, a community, a state or a region, you are more likely to be successful if you can build relationships with these stakeholders early and craft a strategy that includes and reflects their perspectives.

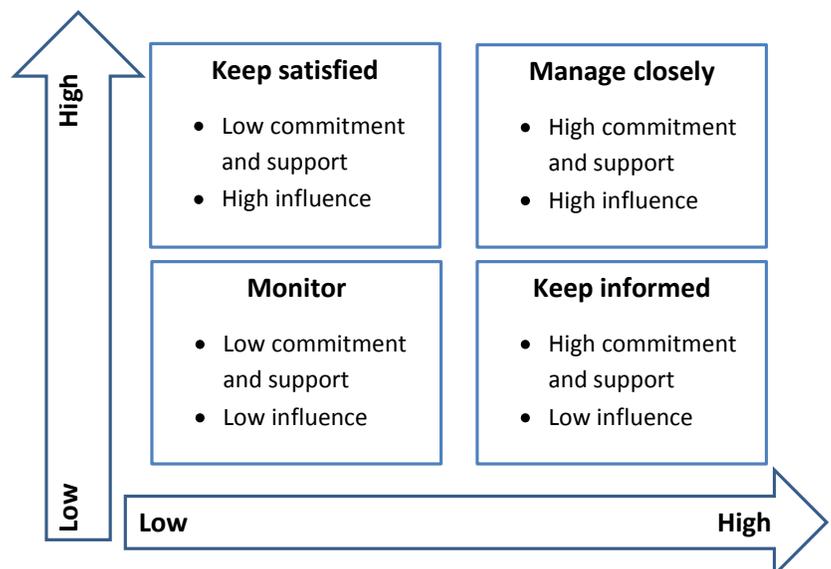
What Do We Mean By ‘Stakeholder’?

A stakeholder is someone who ‘has a stake’ in your solar strategy. This includes anyone who could potentially affect, or be affected by, your strategy. It also includes those who may not be directly affected by your strategy but who nevertheless have a strong interest in it (for example, for academic, philosophical, or political reasons).¹

Stakeholders can be individual people or groups of people: community members at large, subsets of the general population such as renters, homeowners, or landlords, committees or governing bodies of an institution, key decision makers at an institution or in a community, etc. If your solar strategy is regional, you may need to consider entire communities as distinct stakeholders.

Stakeholders can also be institutional. Examples of institutional stakeholders include government and regulatory bodies, nonprofit or community organizations, businesses, utilities, trade associations, and academic institutions. Virtually any activity or initiative that serves some community purpose will, by definition, have multiple stakeholders. Keep in mind that not all stakeholders may even be aware that your solar strategy affects them.

As you identify your stakeholders, you can analyze them using a quadrant tool like the one shown below to consider their influence, level of commitment and support, or other relevant factors. This will help you to prioritize your engagement efforts and see which groups will require the most effort.



¹ See discussions at: <http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/dinamic-content/media/CR%20Stakeholder.pdf> p 8 and <http://ctb.dept.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/identify-stakeholders/main>

What is 'Stakeholder Engagement'?

Although the terms 'outreach' and 'engagement' are frequently used interchangeably, they refer to two distinct (though closely related) activities. Outreach is a form of one-way communication with stakeholders. It involves reaching out to others to share information or a particular message.

Engagement is a form of two-way communication with stakeholders. It involves both information sharing, and the expectation that stakeholders, in turn, will offer some degree of feedback, discussion, or input about your strategy and how it interplays with their interests.

Stakeholder engagement is not a one-off activity but an ongoing one that should be thought of as one facet of the overall process of implementing your strategy. Like other components of the work, it will take different forms at different points in the process, and may need refreshing or adjusting in the face of new information. You will also want to engage with different stakeholders differently depending on their interests and how those interests affect, or are affected by, your work.

This is why careful identification and mapping of your stakeholders early in the process is so crucial. It lays the groundwork for more tailored, more efficient, and ultimately more effective ongoing relationships with stakeholders throughout the process.

Why Engage Stakeholders?

Stakeholder engagement is widely viewed as an important element of successful strategy and project implementation throughout the business, government, and nonprofit worlds. The particular impetus for engaging stakeholders may vary according to context, but in general, experience suggests that well-executed stakeholder engagement can improve the quality and the sustainability of your outcomes. For one discussion of why this is so, see this article from the [Community Tool Box](#), a free online resource provided as a public service of the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas.²

The benefits of stakeholder engagement:

- **It puts more ideas on the table** than would be the case if the development and implementation of the effort were confined to a single organization or to a small group of like-minded people.
- **It includes varied perspectives.** By tapping into sources of data and information, it can create a clearer and more complete picture of the context and potential pitfalls and assets.
- **It gains buy-in and support** by making outside stakeholders an integral part of your effort. It becomes their effort, and they'll do their best to make it work.
- **It's fair to everyone.** All stakeholders can have a say in the development of an effort that may affect them.
- **It saves you from being blindsided by concerns you didn't know about.** If everyone has a seat at the table, concerns can be aired and resolved before they become stumbling blocks. Even if they can't be resolved, they won't come as surprises that derail the effort just when you thought everything was going well.

² See Chapter 7, Section 8 of the Community Tool Box: <http://ctb.dept.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/identify-stakeholders/main>. Accessed on July 23, 2015.

- **It strengthens your position if there's opposition.** Having all stakeholders on board makes a huge difference in terms of political and moral clout.
- **It strengthens relationships.** One common benefit of stakeholder engagement is the connections that it creates among diverse groups that might not otherwise interact.
- **It increases your credibility.** Attending to the concerns of all stakeholders establishes that you are fair, ethical, and transparent, and makes it more likely that others will work with you in other circumstances.
- **It increases your chances of success.** For all of the above reasons, identifying stakeholders and responding to their concerns makes it far more likely that your effort will have both the support it needs and the appropriate focus to be effective.

(Above list is adapted from the [Community Tool Box](#).)

How to Engage Stakeholders?

Designing, developing and implementing a good stakeholder engagement process that delivers on the benefits listed above is hard. It requires time and resources. Odds are you need to modify and adjust your process as you go.

TIP: Depending on the complexity of your project and your goals for stakeholder engagement, you may want to consider hiring a consultant with expertise in engagement. Such a consultant may be able to help you navigate complex issues like managing power dynamics between your stakeholders, using digital tools for interactive engagement, and evaluating the impact of your engagement process.

Several factors are going to influence the level of engagement you want and are able to get.

1. What you're trying to achieve- designing your engagement process starts with defining your goals.
2. Resources- undoubtedly your budget, timeline and staff resources are going to set limits on what you're able to do.
3. Stakeholder interest & capacity- just as you are limited in time and resources, so are your stakeholders. Make sure you design a plan that is realistic about their time, energy and willingness to engage.
4. Other requirements- in some cases, your stakeholder engagement process may need to be designed to meet the requirements of funders or the law. If this is the case for you, make sure you understand these requirements before starting to design your process.

The table below from the International Association for Public Participation provides a useful framework for thinking about how to tailor your engagement strategy to specific stakeholders and their roles. Not all stakeholders will require the same level of engagement. Different kinds of engagement may also be appropriate at different stages in the process.

IAP2'S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM

The IAP2 Federation has developed the Spectrum to help groups define the public's role in any public participation process. The IAP2 Spectrum is quickly becoming an international standard.



	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Are resources always the limiting factor?

Resources are often a constraint, but the good news is that there are an increasing number of low-cost tools of engagement available to organizations and communities. There are now tools that allow you to hold free virtual meetings, conduct free online surveys, and have free shared file space to support collaborating with partners and stakeholders. There are an increasing number of open access tools (see open access planning tools group).

What can I expect to experience?

Managing a stakeholder engagement process will likely be stressful. You likely selected a group of stakeholders who have diverse perspectives – if they all agree, perhaps you’ve done something wrong!

You can expect that your process may not unfold exactly as you plan from the outset.

It is more important to stay focused on the goals of your engagement process than on the process you’ve laid out. To meet those goals may require you to modify your approach, to engage additional stakeholders, or to create new mechanisms of engagement. We don’t suggest that you fully redesign your approach at every step in project, but making adjustments and modifying your process as the project unfolds and external conditions change is often necessary.

TO READ OTHER USEFUL TRICKS AND TIPS, SEE LINK.

To take the next steps toward designing your process, see **Planning Your Stakeholder Process**.