



Managing Key Stakeholders

A View from Impact Factory

Robin Chandler and Jo Ellen Grzyb

Impact Factory Copyright ©2023

Managing Relationships

Unless you are isolated, or living on an island populated only by yourself, you will interact with people every day of your life. Therefore, you are continually creating and developing relationships with the people you know and meet.

Mostly, this is done without conscious thought; but whether it's a partner, child, parent, friend or the greengrocer, these relationships don't just happen on their own. You gain knowledge, experience and understanding on different levels about the people in your life, and that affects the way you deal with them. In other words, as a human being, you get pretty experienced in managing the relationships around you.

In the workplace, however, managing relationships takes on a new and different importance. Think of the myriad relationships that may happen in a day: you may deal with peers, superiors, subordinates, business partners, clients, customers and suppliers. You do have to give them more thought; you're given responsibilities and objectives. You may even go on special courses to help. On top of this there will be expectations from colleagues about your abilities to manage others up and down the corporate ladder both inside and outside the company.

Why do these relationships have to be managed anyway? It seems so calculated or premeditated. Why can't they just happen and evolve in their own way? You do your job, they do theirs, and somehow you meet in the middle. Sadly, it doesn't work that way. Managing people effectively does mean a bit of calculation, premeditation and work on your part.

The reason this is so is because relationships cannot be allowed to get static: to work well, they must continually develop and grow. A good working relationship is a dynamic one. This is the way they avoid becoming stale and falling into predictable patterns, which is when mistakes are made. But also, 'managing' relationships means that you become alert to and aware of changing needs, of difficulties that arise or of issues that need resolving. You become proactive.

Key Stakeholders

This seems to be a current buzz-phrase with a lot of our clients, so we may as well look at just who these key stakeholders are.

Some of our clients feel that key stakeholders are people who have influence over what happens to you; others say it's the people who hold the budget, the ones who make the final decisions, the ones who are affected by your decisions, the people who have to implement decisions, the people who are going to buy the product/service, and so on.

Not everyone is in complete agreement with just who these folk are. Which, of course, can make managing them really hard.

At Impact Factory we believe that everyone you have anything to do with, either internally or externally, is a key stakeholder. But that's everyone! What about priorities? Aren't there some people who are just more important than others?

Well, obviously there are some people who are more important than others, and obviously, we all have to set priorities.

However, we do feel rather passionately, that if everyone is accorded the same degree of care and consideration in how they are 'managed', if everyone is regarded as key, then ultimately your working life is going to be a whole lot easier, with a whole legion of champions who feel good about dealing with you.

When things go right

When people are in well-managed relationships they feel aligned, committed, on board and motivated. Their needs and wants are being considered; their quirks and individual ways of working are being accommodated; their contributions are being acknowledged. Communication *seems* to work effortlessly (Not so! Effort is always needed when dealing with others, but it can look incredibly easy when it has become a natural part of a person's style).

People who manage well already communicate at a very high level, because it is only through outstanding communication that the best relationships get developed. If you think about it, you will have had experiences of being 'handled' so well that you didn't really know it was happening at the time. You will have left the meeting, hung up the phone, walked off an exhibition stand or come out of a one-to-one feeling well taken care of, listened to with attentiveness and responded to with consideration.

We all go back to the people and places who make an effort, extend themselves and create some kind of connection with us. When we have been well managed the relationship grows. Because loyalty and trust are built, dealing with those people is something we look forward to and appreciate.

In turn, when you manage people well they will want to come back; they will want to deal with you or your company. They will know that if they present you with a difficulty they're not going to get a blank stare, you won't get defensive or respond with, "Well, it's not really my problem."

You can't mitigate against all difficulties, but you can certainly ensure that those difficulties have a far better chance of getting resolved. We'll be looking at some of the things you can do a bit later on. But first let's look at some of the pitfalls.

When things go wrong

There are any number of things that can knock a working relationship out of kilter or off-balance. There may be times when you feel that the other person has the upper hand or has to be accommodated more than you would like. You may feel on the receiving end of blame when things go wrong, or that the other person has been around longer and knows more than you.

There may be difficult history or stored resentments that you know nothing about, which, however, still affect how the other person sees you or your company. You may simply be doing things differently from your predecessor and other people haven't adjusted to that yet. You could both be 'speaking the same language' but using different terms of reference; you could be making incorrect assumptions about each other or simply misunderstanding what the other person is saying.

Impact Factory has some clients who actually have to 'live' in their client's premises, which means that cultural differences can be a major factor in these relationships. Sometimes these differences are acknowledged and taken into account when people work together. However, more often than not, they remain unacknowledged or even ignored. This will lead not only to misunderstandings, but also to frustrations, resentments and additional stress.

Now, two things usually happen when things start to go wrong, or if you've inherited a situation that's already fraught with difficulties. The first is that you start to feel unskilled, unsure of the ground you're standing on and your confidence begins to drain away. That's a natural response: when your skills are working well you'll feel motivated and capable; and when something comes along that knocks you back, it feels a lot harder to get back on track.

The second is that if you are in any way relating to other people, there is *always* the desire for them to change or do things differently to make your life better. Everyone has had the experience of ending a phone conversation or leaving a meeting thinking how much better the discussion would have gone 'if only' the other person had been more co-operative or understood more fully where you were coming from.

However, when you are managing your relationships, there is no 'if only' about it: the only person you can be sure of changing is you, no matter how much you might wish otherwise. What can make things even more tricky is that the other person may really be difficult; well and truly difficult: a bully, perhaps, or someone who just doesn't listen or someone who's under so much pressure they hand their stress on to you. It seems so logical to imagine that things really would improve if only the other person could see the situation the way you see it. However much you may wish it, it just doesn't work that way.

Now this certainly doesn't mean that things are hopeless or beyond repair, it's just that sometimes it can feel that way. One of the frustrations that many people experience is that they can't control what other people do or say. Things happen that we don't want to happen or things don't happen that we wish would. It's so frustrating! The stark truth is we none of us can be in total control.

We can, however, be in *charge*, which is different. OK. So what's the difference between being in control and being in charge?

When you attempt to be in control, you are trying to get other people to conform to your picture of the way things should be. When that doesn't happen you can feel powerless and then often blame the other person for not meeting your standards or expectations.

Being in charge differs in that it means you both see and accept a situation for what it really is, not what you wish it to be. Acceptance doesn't mean resignation, however. What it does mean is that once you understand the reality, you can then begin to work with, work around, compensate and otherwise accommodate the difficulties.

The feeling of being in charge happens when you have several things you know you can do or try in order to recover when something goes amiss. The feeling of being in control is when you have absolute certainty that people will do exactly what you want them to do. You know, that just doesn't happen in the real world, where people continually do the unexpected. Control is exhausting.

The more you develop the capacity to change what you do to create a different response in the other person, the more you are managing your relationships.

So, what do we mean by changing what you do?

The first thing you need to do is to review the current situation and ask yourself some relevant questions so you can determine just what is going on. This will certainly get you focused on the nature of the relationship.

You should look at the person whom you are talking to or meeting with in the context of their history within the company and with you. Where do you think they might be coming from? In other words, what's on their agenda? Could there be a hidden agenda or a subtext you need to be alert to (there generally is)? What are any outstanding issues that need to be resolved before you can move on?

Next, you should look at your attitudes and expectations of the other person. Are you able to see their point of view? Are you sympathetic to their difficulties? Are you responding to them with what you *think* they need or what you *know* they need?

What's the context? Is this a person who relies on you because they always know you'll be responsive to their needs; or are they someone who's so used to being let down by circumstances, seemingly out of your control, that they *expect* disappointment?

Perhaps it's a colleague who always expects your help and chooses not to notice that you're snowed under yourself. Or perhaps it's someone who doesn't acknowledge your promotion prospects and never supports your applications. Is it a colleague from whom you would like extra guidance, but you're too intimidated to ask?

In looking at your side, what skills do you bring to these meetings? What do you want from the relationship and what's your bottom line? What are you willing to 'give away' and what, if any, aces do you have up your sleeve? Do you and/or they have a good idea of the big picture?

Once you've assessed what's really going on, *then* you can start to manage the situation either by initiating changes to the relationship or, just as important, reinforcing what's already working well.

OK. So what sort of changes? How is this done most effectively?

Since, as a culture, we're used to seeing what's wrong we really are quite proficient at cataloguing our own deficiencies. What if we turned a few of them on their heads?

Change the way you perceive your situation

Version One:

"I'm only a 25 year old woman with hardly any experience. I have to work with men at least twice my age who are used to dealing with peers and I feel intimidated and out of my depth. I feel I've lost before I've begun."

Version Two:

"I'm a 25 year old woman with a fresh perspective and fortunately I offer a point of view unclouded by history or past expectations. I have the enthusiasm that these kind of projects need and I can make it easier for people who haven't worked with young women before because I can understand where they might be uncomfortable."

Version One:

“Our department is always getting the blame because we don’t get the backup we need from other divisions. As soon as someone starts in on us we have to defend ourselves and we inevitably end up apologising. Other people always have the upper hand and we never feel we’re on a level playing field.”

Version Two:

“When people criticise us for mistakes they sometimes have a good point. Our expertise is valuable, so if we respond to their complaints and show that we take their concerns seriously, then we will know in more detail what will reassure them. We can pre-empt difficulties by keeping them informed of what’s going on at our end.”

A change of attitude makes a big difference

Turning beliefs on their head creates a change of attitude. Suddenly what looked like bad news, becomes good news, and presents you with an opportunity to do something different. Not every deficiency can be turned into a strength, but there’s no way you can positively influence other people if all you can see are difficulties with no way out. Difficulties sap, opportunities feed and can be grasped.

By changing your own attitude, you change the way you perceive the situation. That, in turn, changes the way others perceive you. In a way you are managing your relationship with yourself as much as with other people. The external circumstances may not have changed (yet), but a shift in attitude and approach will create a better chance of them doing so.

Here’s an Attitude exercise we often run, which you can try out with some willing colleagues.

One of you will be the one practising changing your attitude to see what affect that has on the rest of the group. Their job is to be sitting around talking too loudly, gossiping and distracting the one person who is trying to get some work done.

For the first round have that person choose three widely different ‘attitudes’ such as:

arrogant	attacking	bullying	calm
charming	curious	demanding	efficient
enthusiastic	indirect (never getting to the point)	justifying	whingeing
nervous	pleading	sympathetic	

They will then try to get the rest of the group to quiet down by using those three attitudes in turn (say a couple of minutes for each one).

Debrief, with the group giving feedback on what affect the different attitudes had. It doesn’t matter whether they can guess what the attitude was; what is important is that they relate how it felt to be on the receiving end.

There are no right or wrong attitudes. What happens is that a simple shift in attitude can have quite a profound affect on other people. Sometimes we get so fixed in what we want the other person/people to do, that we don’t see that a quick switch mid-way through can turn an unpleasant situation into one where everyone feels good.

We know from all our experience in the field that if you want to make a significant difference in the way you manage relationships, you need to feed the solution, not the problem.

A change in attitude does just that. Blame, excuses, defensiveness all feed the problem and keep the focus on what needs to be 'fixed'. It's back to the 'if only' scenario.

Some things that can help feed the solution

Changing how people see you. This can be achieved by negotiating and setting clear boundaries with them. Misunderstanding occurs when you have fuzzy boundaries or make assumptions that the other person must know what you're thinking and feeling. If you set appropriate boundaries everyone knows what the parameters of the relationship are. You come across as clear and direct and people know where they stand. Believe it or not, people like that.

Dealing with Assumptions. It's impossible not to make assumptions. We all know that. However, assumptions are one of those things that can really get in the way of good communication.

Here's a challenging exercise you can set up with two colleagues so you can see just what can happen with assumptions.

Prepare two separate briefs as follows:

Brief for A

Do not discuss this with your partner.

You have been trying to get a meeting with B, who is your line manager, for a week. B's PA keeps telling you that he/she is too busy to see you. Your problem is urgent and could affect a major project of the company's. You need to see B to get guidance on this difficulty.

You are finally able to meet with B.

Decide what your meeting is about and write down your assumptions before you go into the meeting.

Brief for B

Do not discuss this with your partner.

You have a meeting with A, one of your best employees (you are A's line-Manager), who actually works very well on his/her own.

Since A has asked for the meeting, you don't know what it's about until A arrives.

Write down your assumptions before the meeting.

Give each person a separate brief without mentioning that they are getting different ones. Then have them play out the meeting.

After the meeting, and before there's any discussion, have each person write any assumptions they felt during the meeting and any they now have after. Then debrief, having each person read out the assumptions they made before, during and after the meeting. By then they may well have got it that they each had a different brief, but if not, do point it out.

Some conclusions to draw after round one:

It's almost impossible not to react to situations solely from our own point of view and our assumptions will be based on those reactions.

We don't generally know what's going on for other people and yet we act as though we do.

Our assumptions feel real.

Round two. Have the pair replay the meeting; however this time each of them should pick two or three assumptions they made in round one and start the meeting mentioning those assumptions. See if the meeting feels any different or has a different conclusion.

Since it's impossible not to make assumptions, it is important to notice when they influence your thoughts and actions.

Seeing things from their point of view. This is essential. It's a key communication skill. If you see things solely from your vantage point you will only provide solutions from that perspective. What is more, you will spend fruitless amounts of time trying to get others to see what you see instead of the other way around.

Here's an example. We recently worked with someone who runs an IT help desk for a large company. Whenever a crisis occurred and the computers crashed, the department head naturally wanted to know when it was going to be sorted out. Our man would deal with this, as *he* saw it. A demand. Our man *also* assumed (i.e.: made up) exactly how his head would react and then based his responses on those assumptions.

He would explain in minute detail exactly what needed to be done to fix the problem; who else needed to be called in; where the problem originated; what the ramifications were.

The department head would get angrier and angrier, becoming frustrated because he felt his colleague wasn't sensitive to his problems and was giving him the run around. He in turn was frustrated because the head wasn't sympathetic to all the things he had to do to fix the problem!

After some work with us, he began to look at how he was managing his angry boss, who was, of course, seeing the problem in a completely different way. The light dawned when he realised that all the head wanted was to be given a date and a time when the computers were going to be on-line again. He didn't need to know the why, what or how – just the when.

See, both 'sides' were talking about computers; both sides were talking about the same problem; but they were talking at cross-purposes. There's real skill here that's worth developing. It's about being able to give up your need to have others understand where you're coming from and look at the how the world seems from where they're sitting.

You will also see in that scenario how assumptions influenced how each of them felt. Sometimes, when there are such different ways of seeing the same thing, we can assume that the other person is actually taking the piss, or being deliberately obstructive.

Initiate solutions as problems arise. Don't hope they'll go away or wait till they get so big you can no longer avoid them (this usually entails a lot of other people getting involved in trying to sort out the mess). Even if your solutions don't always work – and they won't – you will have created a problem-solving environment.

Find out what they want. This seems so obvious and simple that it gets overlooked surprisingly often. It's easy to assume what other people want without checking it out. To compound things, we often give people what *we* want to give them (or think they should want), rather than what *they* actually need. By finding out what it is that will support them, you are demonstrating concern and attentiveness.

If you're able to give it to them, all the better. When that isn't possible, it's still better to ask and make the try than to stick with your assumptions, which may or may not be accurate.

Give more than they expect. Not necessarily *do* more. But keeping your relationships with other people dynamic means noticing what's going on with them and offering insight, ideas and support (if needed). It means recognising and acknowledging their contributions. In other words, by adding something they aren't expecting, you create or reinforce a positive impact. You're looking here at the relationship equivalent of loyalty points!

Here's a model we think works a treat in giving customers that little bit extra. It may be something you already do, but it's short, sweet, non-blaming and easy to respond to. For us it's about pre-empting something that could develop into a problem in the future or simply ensuring that something gets done.

I noticed that (and then describe the situation)

Wouldn't it be a good idea if we (here give a suggestion or even a solution)

So that or before (detail what your concerns are or what the intended results could be).

Let's give you an example of the difference between what you might be thinking inside your head and what using the model could sound like.

Inside your head: "Oh, for crying out loud! You book a whole bunch of training dates for your department and you don't really know what you want."

Model:

"I noticed that
you requested some training dates.

Wouldn't it be a good idea if we
reviewed your department's training needs

so that
we can ensure you get the best course possible?

The model can be used in any kind of situation where you neatly sum up the situation and provide a course of action all at the same time. To us, that's giving someone something they didn't expect.

Keep developing your communication skills. If you're good, get better; if you're better, get brilliant. Listening, responding, dealing with conflict, negotiating skills, learning to say 'no' and 'yes' when appropriate, are all important elements in communication. And the more effective your communication, the better managed your relationships will be.

One final point: sometimes there really is nothing you can do to alter a difficult situation or create a different response in another person. What you *can* do, however, is to feel a whole lot better in yourself for the trying.

As we said earlier, we do believe that everyone you deal with, whatever their position internally or externally, is a key stakeholder. They may have different degrees of importance, but each and every one of them needs to be managed in order to get the absolute best out of your working relationships.

It really isn't all that difficult to learn how to manage the relationships you have better. Mostly it's about feeling more secure and confident in your own capabilities, combined with really hearing what people want and need and trying to give it to them. It's about being clear and communicating in ways that people understand.

It does take training; and it needs to be training that identifies and builds your current strengths and capabilities, not something that tries to teach you incompatible skills or the 'right' way to manage.

Managing relationships well can be the most valuable skill you ever acquire. It is the key to getting the success you want.

If you are interested in talking to us further about our work on managing key stakeholders, please phone: 020 7226 1877 or e-mail: enquiries@impactfactory.com