

Earning trust in high-stakes consultation

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Right thinking

Our work on complex, high-stakes stakeholder engagement – spanning, for example, challenging pricing negotiations, governance and ownership changes and the rebooting of strained partnerships – has grown directly from our strategy practice. The disciplines are remarkably similar: making sense of conflicting information, navigating divergent interests and arriving at a well-founded answer that stakeholders can stand behind.

In this article, I outline 8 essential elements of high-quality stakeholder engagement, beginning with the foundational requirement for clarity, before examining other elements such as presenting comprehensive, factual information; convening safe, respectful and well-structured engagements; listening deeply; and making changes to the emerging outcome where they are viable and well-supported. Together, these principles form a practical blueprint for building trust and securing durable decisions in high-stakes environments.

At Right Lane Consulting, our work in high-stakes, complex stakeholder engagement has evolved organically from our strategy practice. Many of the strategic challenges our clients face are not technical puzzles alone; they hinge on the beliefs, expectations, concerns and aspirations of diverse and influential stakeholders. As a result, successful strategy processes increasingly require the skills of deft engagement.

The overlap between strategy and stakeholder engagement is substantial. Both disciplines demand the capacity to synthesise a mass of information into something coherent and compelling. Both require a deep understanding of who matters, where authority resides and

how to build a mandate. Both involve navigating divergent views and facilitating their resolution or productive coexistence. And both need careful orchestration, attention to detail, tone and an appreciation of the dynamics that shape how participants think, respond and interact.

From our experience, we have developed a point of view on what makes for successful, high-stakes engagement processes, particularly those involving complex system change, contested decisions or sensitive organisational reforms. Below, we outline 8 essential elements of high-quality stakeholder engagement, beginning with the foundational requirement for clarity.



1. Start with clarity: objectives, inputs, process and outputs

Before any stakeholder engagement begins, there must be absolute clarity about why each session is being held, what must be achieved, and how it contributes to the overall program of work. Ambiguity here is costly: it creates confusion, erodes accountability and leads to outputs that cannot be relied upon.

Each engagement should be explicit about:

- **Objectives** – What exactly is this session meant to achieve? What decisions or artefacts will the client need afterwards?
- **Inputs** – What information, analysis or perspectives will participants need beforehand? What provocations or data do we need to bring into the room?
- **Process** – What will happen in the session? Who will speak? How will discussion be structured? What mechanisms will be used to elicit feedback?
- **Outputs** – What will be produced as a result? How will we use the information gathered? What questions must be answered by the end of the session?

This level of clarity is essential to building trust. Stakeholders are far more willing to contribute meaningfully when they know how their input will be used and how it fits into the decision-making process.

Throughout, teams should relentlessly focus on the questions that need to be answered. High-stakes engagements generate large volumes of commentary and ideas; without a sharp set of guiding questions, it is easy to lose the thread.

2. Involve the right stakeholders and representatives

The foundation of effective engagement is ensuring the right people are in the room. Ideally, stakeholders should be represented by individuals who can genuinely speak for them; otherwise, teams often find themselves re-litigating discussions through downstream, ad hoc interactions.

We advise clients to think deliberately about representation: What roles must be covered – governance, operational, financial, technical? Is the chair, CEO or CFO required to secure legitimacy or enable real-time decision-making?

3. Provide comprehensive, factual information on proposed changes

As with strategy development, a compelling fact base is indispensable. Stakeholder engagement is undermined when it relies too heavily on narrative persuasion or rhetorical framing. People quickly sense when they are being 'sold to'.

We encourage clients to present a balanced, honest set of facts, including any important weaknesses, risks and tensions. A credible rationale for change emerges from transparency, not spin. Stakeholders are more open and constructive when they see that the process respects their intelligence.

4. Convene safe, respectful and well-structured engagements

Stakeholder engagement works best when it's grounded in respectful familiarity. Before you meet, learn a little about the people involved; quick profiles help and LinkedIn makes that easier than ever. In sessions of any size, make the effort to know and use participants' names, to remember and acknowledge their contributions and to show, through your words, posture, and attention, that you are present, listening and genuinely hearing them.

Key questions include:

- What are participants' views, pain points and sensitivities?
- What do they want from the engagement?
- Where might the client need to give ground?

Speakers should be well briefed; sessions should be designed around meaningful discussion rather than overly long presentations. Sometimes, pre-reading should replace slide decks so that in-room time focuses on dialogue. Every session should end with a clear 'we heard/ we will do' summary, followed by a prompt written record of the discussion.

5. Offer diverse ways for stakeholders to engage

Stakeholders differ in how they process information. Some think aloud in plenary discussions; others prefer small groups or one-on-one settings; others respond best to structured activities.

In a major public sector consultation we facilitated sessions that incorporated table conversations, breakouts, Q&A, panel



discussions, live surveys and structured reflection prompts. Bilateral sessions were also offered.

One particularly successful technique involves assigning stakeholder representatives a discussant role – similar to academic conferences – where they provide structured reflections after key presentations. Giving stakeholders a job often increases engagement and ownership.

6. Listen deeply and validate what you hear

Authentic listening is the currency of legitimate consultation. We aim to capture stakeholder comments verbatim, or near verbatim, wherever possible because quotes are more believable and more actionable than paraphrases.

Deep listening is partly innate and partly practised. It starts with the belief that only by listening hard do you earn the chance to capture what someone is saying in a form that truly resonates with them. Done well, it means processing quickly, recording faithfully, summarising sparingly, and keeping enough of their exact words. At its best, the participant reads what you've captured and thinks: 'Yes, that's exactly what I said and meant', or even, 'That's a clearer version of what I was trying to say.'

7. Adjust approach and make changes where viable

The quickest way to destroy trust is to run a consultation process with no intention of changing anything. Stakeholders can tell instantly.

Successful processes track every suggestion, question and concern; assess it; and report back transparently:

- Was the suggestion accepted?
- If so, what changed?
- If not, why not?

This clear accounting gives stakeholders confidence that their input mattered, even if not every idea is adopted.

8. Enable participation and provide clear line of sight to decision-making

Stakeholder engagement should not feel like a series of briefings. Sessions should be designed so stakeholders are speaking, questioning or working at least half the time. In some cases, we

involve stakeholders directly in shaping the agenda:

- What do they need from the session?
- What questions do they want addressed?

At the same time, stakeholders should have a consistent understanding of the end point:

- What decision will be made?
- Who will make it, and when?
- How does this consultation feed into that process?

This transparency reduces anxiety and speculation and helps to ensure discussions remain anchored to the real choices ahead.



When done well, high-stakes stakeholder engagement builds credibility, strengthens relationships, tests assumptions and often improves the substance of decisions. It requires clarity of purpose, thoughtful orchestration, balanced information, diverse participation methods, deep listening and the discipline to demonstrate how stakeholder input has shaped the outcome.

Above all, it requires an unwavering commitment to answering the questions that matter most to the client and to the stakeholders whose support is essential.



Note: This article on complex, high-stakes stakeholder consultation is based on reflections from one of Australia's most experienced workshop facilitators, shaped by hundreds of such interactions. It was drafted with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT, with all analysis, judgment and final editorial decisions made by the author.

Want to know more?

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