

4 Quick Steps to

# Stakeholder Support



## You've Made a Great Decision

# Here's why:

There's a common misconception among project managers: many believe that building **trust and alignment** with stakeholders is a time-consuming process that requires numerous meetings over weeks or months. But here's the truth: there's a faster and more immediate way to bring stakeholders into alignment on projects.

A regimen of deliberate and focused listening and feedback helps you do that.

When a project manager is able to closely listen, accurately reflect what the stakeholder has said, and engage with thoughtful follow-up questions about the implications, it has several profound effects on the stakeholder's attitude toward the project manager:

- **Increases Trust:** Trust is crucial in professional settings like project management, where stakeholders want to know that their input is valued. When someone listens closely and reflects the message accurately, the speaker is more likely to feel that their concerns and ideas are **being taken seriously**. Using alignment listening, the speaker feels heard and understood, which **fosters trust**.
- **Reduces Defensiveness:** Reflective listening can reduce defensiveness in the stakeholder. By confirming their message and asking for clarification, the project manager demonstrates empathy rather than jumping to conclusions or judgments. This can ease tension and create a more constructive atmosphere for discussion, even when the topics are contentious.
- **Strengthens Relationship:** The combination of increased trust and reduced defensiveness helps create a **stronger personal connection** between the stakeholder and project manager. The stakeholder often feels that the project manager is genuinely interested in their point of view, which can enhance the relationship. This connection makes future interactions **smoother** and **more collaborative**.

- And here's the best part: Because alignment listening **strengthens your relationship** with your stakeholder, they **see you more as a partner**, become more **prone to collaboration** and more open to deeper exploration. And that means, you're more likely to **identify and manage project risks and benefits that will have a big impact** on the organization – and that's your key to increased status and potential promotion.

For more on the power of deliberate listening, see for example, Bodie, G.D. (2011), *Active Listening Research (International Journal of Listening)* and other communication studies.

## Why I recommend this approach

I first came across this version of active listening when I was training staff at a major hospital to handle interactions with challenging patients and their families. I was working with regular ward staff as well as staff in the ER, security, inpatient psych and chaplains. We were iterating models of interacting to find a combination that would work with patients and families who were upset, distraught, were difficult to understand or from another culture, or threatened violence.

The discovery that was most surprising was that the quickest and most effective way to handle upset patients and families was not to confront them but rather to listen and to give them clear feedback that we were hearing them and understood them.

That was true whether they were in anguish because a family member was dying, or threatening to sue because they were afraid that they were getting neglected due to racial bias, or were threatening violence because they doubted the staff was taking their health seriously.

I took those insights to one of the largest high-tech companies in the world and found the same techniques effective with department managers and directors who were concerned others were stepping into their territory and threatening their status.

I worked the approach into my framework for large projects in general and found that it was valuable for **rapidly creating clarity and commitment** with stakeholders in a great variety of positions.

## About the Author

I received an MBA in Marketing from the Tepper School at Carnegie Mellon University and have over 15 years' experience managing projects in change, technology, and learning.



The methods I'm recommending have been proven in high-stakes environments, from global tech companies to research institutions, and international foundations.

I've been recognized for my ability to manage important stakeholders.

My journey from frustration to expertise in creating communications models uniquely positions me to guide you to success.

The way Tim engages with his team and clients is inspiring. He was key to guiding the SME team beyond a standard approach.

Tammy Foss  
Director | Learning and Development Programs,  
MediaPRO

Tim was great to work with. He has the ability to look beyond the obvious issues confronting him and his customers to understand and then address the underlying/root causes so that a long-lasting solution can be put in place.

Dave Chase  
Global Industry Director – Healthcare, Microsoft

Tim's intelligence, perspective, ability to forge productive work relationships, and genuine interest in others made him a stand-out colleague.

Brian K. McCarthy  
General Manager, Sales & Marketing, Microsoft

Tim is a highly aware and thoughtful individual. His focus on a needs analysis and the overall objective of a project is critical to ensuring success.

Jeanette Rogers  
Director, Instructional Design and Learning,  
Kalles Group for Bill & Melinda Gates  
Foundation

# How it Works

There's been a lot of research since I first started working with this model. What you'll see below is a refined and focused framework that emerged from that research.

## 01: Ask About Something Relevant to the Project

Ask a relevant question. Then, listen carefully for the stakeholder's response. Keep your attention on their answer. Don't refute or dispute.



## 02. Summarize What You Heard

Reflect what you've heard. For example, you might say, "So, if I understand, your concern is that the project's timeline might be at risk due to X."



## 03. Ask if You Got It Right

This is simply an explicit ask that you understand, such as "Is that right?"



## 04. Ask for Implications

Ask for additional details or clarification, other concerns or additional perspectives that might affect the project. For example, "How is this likely to impact our timeline or budget?"



# In Action

I was managing a training project for a global manufacturer. We were training operators to run equipment on a new automated manufacturing line that the company framed as the most advanced in the world. A key stakeholder, an engineer who served as the sign-off authority for the training, had disappeared and the project had come to a halt.

The goal was to re-engage the engineer. I'll give you the discussion as it played out and then break it down into the steps in the model.

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**Project manager:** Hey, I haven't heard from you in a few days. Is there something up?

**Stakeholder:** Yeah, I'm stepping away from the project.

**Project manager:** Oh, gosh. Was that your decision? Or has someone else gotten involved?

**Stakeholder:** Oh, that's all me. The project isn't being managed right.

**Project manager:** Wow, that's a concern. What's come up for you?

**Stakeholder:** Look, you have two training teams working on the same project. That can cause major problems for us. That won't work. I'm not going ahead with that.

**Project manager:** So, your concern is that there are two training teams working side-by-side on the project.

**Stakeholder:** Yeah, well, side-by-side can be a big problem. You know side-by-side doesn't necessarily mean in sync.

**Project manager:** So, it's not just having two training teams, it's the chance that they may get out of sync.

**Project manager:** Am I understanding the problem correctly?

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**Stakeholder:** We're coming up on a government audit. If I have two training teams on this project and you two aren't in sync. We can fail that audit.

**Project manager:** OK, so we don't just need to be in sync. We need to be able to demonstrate that in a formal audit. Is that right?

**Stakeholder:** We do, yes.

**Project manager:** And what happens if we don't pass the audit? What's at stake?

**Stakeholder:** Look, this isn't just about the training project. The whole manufacturing line can be halted. The training is a small part. It can't put the line at risk.

**Project manager:** Oh, I see. So, passing the audit is critical for the entire manufacturing line. What do we need to show in order to pass the audit?

**Stakeholder:** That we are working toward one set of goals. Nobody's freelancing or improvising.

**Project manager:** OK, one set of goals. So, we can take one team off the project. Or what if we identified a common set of goals both teams are aligned to. Would that satisfy the audit?

**Stakeholder:** Yeah, if we can show you're both working against the same goals and what your progress is, that would pass.

**Project manager:** Ok, one common set of goals. And if I can put that together, would you feel comfortable re-engaging the project?

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OK, let's take that step by step and see how alignment listening worked.



# Break It Down



## Step 1: Ask About Something Relevant to the Project

Ask a relevant question. Then, listen carefully for the stakeholder's response. Keep your attention on their answer. Don't refute or dispute.

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**Stakeholder:** Oh, that's all me. The project isn't being managed right.

**Project manager:** Wow, that's a concern. What's come up for you?

**Stakeholder:** Look, you have two training teams working on the same project. That can cause major problems for us. That won't work. I'm not going ahead with that.

**Project manager:** So, your concern is that there are two training teams working side-by-side on the project.

**Stakeholder:** Yeah, well, side-by-side can be a big problem. You know side-by-side doesn't necessarily mean in sync.

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Note: This is basic listening, not complex, and not adversarial. The project manager listened and clarified. The project manager didn't:

- Look backward or lay blame.
- Tell the stakeholder their choice caused confusion.
- Make any case for the stakeholder to re-engage.
- Tell the stakeholder how harmful their actions were to the progress of the project.



## Step 2. Summarize What You Heard

Reflect what you've heard. For example, you might say, "What I'm hearing you saying is, you're concerned that the project's timeline might be at risk due to X."



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**Project manager:** So, it's not just having two training teams, it's the chance that they may get out of sync.

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Note: You're trying to a) state the issue clearly, and b) get the stakeholder's agreement that you've identified the issue or their stance.

## Step 3. Ask if You Got It Right

This is simply an explicit ask that you understand, such as "Is that right?"



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**Project manager:** Am I understanding the problem correctly?

**Stakeholder:** We're coming up on a government audit. If I have two training teams on this project and you two aren't in sync. We can fail that audit.

**Project manager:** OK, so we don't just need to be in sync. We need to be able to demonstrate that in a formal audit. Is that right?

**Stakeholder:** Yeah, we do.

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Note: Again, you're a) making sure that you understand the issue, and b) letting your stakeholder know explicitly that you are listening to them and hearing their concern.

## Step 4. Ask for Implications

Ask for additional details or clarification, other concerns or additional perspectives that might affect the project. For example, "How is this likely to impact our timeline or budget?"



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- Project manager:** And what happens if we don't pass the audit? What's at stake?
- Stakeholder:** Look, this isn't just about the training project. The whole manufacturing line can be halted. The training is a small part. It can't put the line at risk.
- Project manager:** Oh, I see. So, passing the audit is critical for the entire manufacturing line. What do we need to show in order to pass the audit?
- Stakeholder:** That we are working toward one set of goals. Nobody's freelancing or improvising.
- Project manager:** OK, one set of goals. So, we can take one team off the project. Or what if we identified a common set of goals both teams are aligned to. Would that satisfy the audit?
- Stakeholder:** Yeah, if we can show you're both working against the same goals and what your progress is, that would pass.
- Project manager:** Ok, one common set of goals. And if I can put that together, would you feel comfortable re-engaging the project?
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Note: The implications are often the important part of the demand. By asking and reflecting – not arguing or demanding - we uncovered the core issue and a couple of different solutions.

That was critical for moving this project forward. In fact, I met with the head of the other training team and determined that there was an independent process - the build plan - that both teams could use to align training. So, the project got back on track and was well-documented in case of audit.

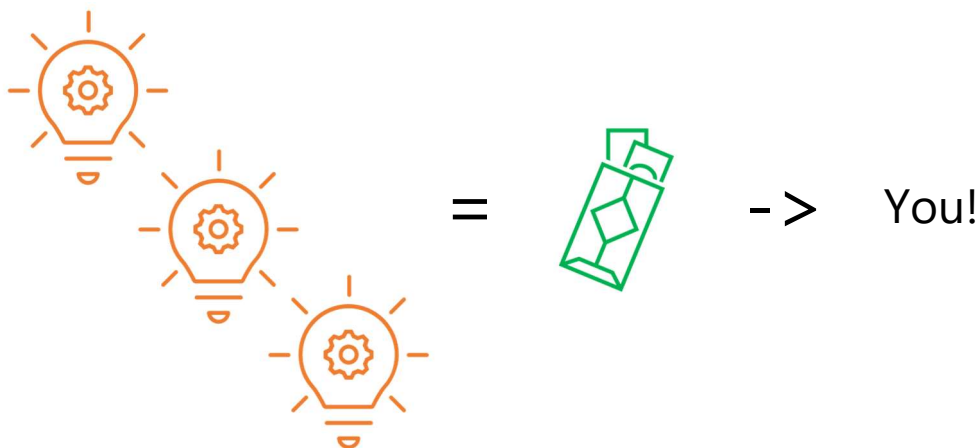
The engineer re-engaged with the project. That's good. And the benefits don't stop there.

The engineer was very comfortable working with, surfacing issues, and working through solutions for the remainder of the project.

You'll find, as a result of adopting this simple but rigorous framework, that your stakeholders:

- **Feel more comfortable bringing up issues** because they know you can raise and respond to concerns without inciting conflict.
- **Trust you more** because they've seen you dig into their concerns, create real clarity, and look for solutions.
- **Feel more aligned** with you and with the project's goals, because they've worked through them explicitly with you. That will in turn lead to fewer conflicts and smoother progress.
- **Respect your leadership** for being someone who takes the time to get things right.

And those **sentiments** will increase your stakeholders' perception of the **value** you bring.





# Congratulations!

You got this! You now have a framework for listening to a stakeholder powerfully, in a way that quickly increases trust, respect, and cooperation.

You've created a great base for:

- Communicating complex information clearly and effectively.
- Providing stakeholders with the insights they need to make informed decisions.
- Demonstrating your understanding of the project and its challenges.
- Enhancing your professional credibility and reputation.

## What's Next for You?

Of course, this is just the beginning of the journey.

Next on your road to transforming yourself into a project leader, you'll want to:

- **Negotiate** with stakeholders so you can keep them engaged in the project
- **Define** their wins and friction, so you can deliver what they'll see as real value.
- **Manage** conflict on your points of risk, so losses don't get dumped on you.

Want expert advice for doing that?

- **Drop me an email** at [info@swaysmarts.com](mailto:info@swaysmarts.com)
- Let me know **what you need most** or **what would amaze you**.
- I'll put your on my list for **75% off** the Master Class!