



# Organizations in Action

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## MAXIMIZING RESULTS THROUGH STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

Over the last few years, organizations in the government, non-profit, and international sectors have come under significant pressure to demonstrate tangible results for the resources that are invested in their programs. These organizations are searching for ways to make sure that their programs are effective and have a lasting impact. One way is through stakeholder involvement. TRG's own experience, as well as that of many others, has shown this single factor to be often the most important determinant of program success. Certainly, most organizations now pay at least some attention to the concept. Yet, very little agreement exists relative to what such involvement really means or to when it is needed and how to achieve it. In this short article, we discuss the rationale of stakeholder involvement and provide some general guidelines.

### What Does Stakeholder Involvement Entail?

At TRG we define stakeholder involvement as the active participation of all key affected/benefiting parties in the design and implementation of a particular program. Moving beyond most "outreach" or "public-awareness" efforts, a program with true stakeholder involvement will be significantly shaped or influenced by the very people the program intends to serve.

If it is to be genuine and sustainable, stakeholder involvement requires an authentic commitment to the concept; an investment of time, energy, and resources; and a set of sophisticated skills. It implies the flexibility both to respond to recommendations developed through interactions with interested parties and to make changes based upon such recommendations. It also sometimes means that program planning and implementation will take longer and be more complicated than might be expected from a purely operational perspective.

Planning for stakeholder involvement is particularly important for those programs or initiatives whose long-term success requires stakeholder support and action. Such programs would include community development programs, policy reform and implementation, public-private partnerships, industry-wide initiatives, environmental programs, and public and international health activities, to name but a few.

### Why Pursue Something so Rigorous?

When such time and care must be devoted to the stakeholder-involvement process, some program people might question the benefit-to-effort ratio. Why, they may ask, should we add another complication to an already complicated project? Based upon our own experience, we find at least four reasons to pursue the process despite the extra demands upon time and resources:

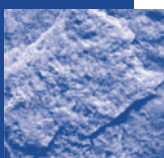
**Better results.** All the program types mentioned in the previous section share at least one goal: that a program's benefits will endure long after the program itself concludes. Moreover, such programs as environmental initiatives or public health programs are trying to influence a vast number of people to change their behavior. It then follows that the greatest opportunities for success lie in broad agreement among stakeholders on the "vision" or objective, in clarity and support for how the objective will be achieved, and in a sense of shared ownership in the process.

**Ease of implementation.** Getting and maintaining stakeholder agreement helps all project phases because those closest to the work are involved throughout. Assessments and diagnoses, design, and implementation are all smarter and better informed as a result of that involvement.

**Better decision making.** With true stakeholder involvement, the mechanisms and relationships are in place for project staff to access a broad range of perspectives at key decision points over the life of the project. This leads to better decisions, supports a sense of shared ownership, and decreases the risk that one person's bias might unduly influence outcomes.

**Long-term impact: Fewer serious mistakes.** A program's long-term impact will be of immediate concern when stakeholders are involved, since it is they who will live with the end results. A program that involves stakeholders only superficially will operate with an incomplete understanding of the factors influencing the program's success. Under such circumstances, it is very easy to make (and consistently repeat) mistakes that can severely limit project impact and sustainability.

"The active engagement of stakeholders is often the most important factor to a program's long-term results."



## STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOPS

Stakeholder workshops differ significantly from formal meetings, seminars, and conferences, which are often limited mainly to one-way communication: knowledgeable speakers addressing an audience of listeners, with some question-and-answer discussion. If the goal is to provide information, such an approach is fine; it is not, however, effective for gathering ideas and input from larger audiences.

By contrast, stakeholder workshops promote two-way interaction and communication. They rely upon breakout and plenary group discussions and provide a “learning arena” for participants to *practice* openness and transparency, discover areas of agreement, share disagreements, and solve problems. The expected outcomes of this approach are “group” products — recommendations, agreements, and action plans. To produce these results, workshops need to be carefully designed and facilitated. Stakeholder workshops are a useful way to help stimulate thought and to encourage the analysis of different approaches toward specific goals, assess the merits of successful programs elsewhere within the local context, and make adaptations where appropriate.

Stakeholder workshops for larger audiences can sometimes appear a little disordered in the way that people are moved in and out of working sessions. Yet, these workshops can be full of spirited discussion and can also generate many flipcharts of recommendations and action steps — flipcharts that also serve as a public and transparent record of the proceedings.

The effort, funds, and credibility expended for a highly participatory workshop bring about much more meaningful and memorable outcomes for participants, and contribute significantly more toward building consensus and momentum for change, than do presentation-filled seminars and conferences. Over the life of a program, stakeholder workshops should be used for a variety of purposes: establishing a shared vision, planning and monitoring, building awareness and setting expectations, focusing on critical issues, and evaluating impact.

## A Value-Driven Approach

A commitment to stakeholder involvement implies acceptance and application of specific values: openness and transparency, participation and empowerment, and continuous learning and adaptation. Being intentional about these values, talking about them often and with conviction, and putting them into practice go a long way toward creating a shared sense of ownership among stakeholders.

**Openness and transparency.** These exist when all interested parties can easily learn about the project — that is, who is involved, what the project is trying to accomplish, and how it will achieve those objectives. Openness and transparency help build trust, collegiality, and partnerships; trust can be very difficult to recover if there is any sense of hidden agendas or misinformation. Generally, stakeholders will remain engaged in a program only as long as long as they have access to complete information.

**Participation and empowerment.** Effective participation means that all key stakeholders understand the program’s goals and objectives, are engaged from the beginning of the planning process, and have opportunities to identify and resolve issues, contribute to decisions, and feel at least partially accountable for program results.

**Continuous learning and adaptation.** In any program of moderate duration or longer, it is important to foster an active learning environment. Such an environment can be created by providing opportunities for meaningful discussions and exchange of ideas. When projects listen to stakeholders and are willing to make adjustments along the way, they learn from their mistakes, adapt quickly, and improve results.

## Basic Design for a Three/Four-Hour Stakeholder Workshop

Introduction: Purpose and agenda (5 minutes)

Presentation to frame the issues and questions (20 minutes)

Working groups: Discussion of issues, and brainstorming possible solutions (45–60 minutes)

Working groups report: Flipchart presentations (60 minutes)

Summary of conclusions: What do the presentations tell us? (30 minutes)

Recommendations for next steps (20–30 minutes)



## INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS

### Creative and Skillful Facilitation

Rarely do programs operate within a context in which stakeholders hold identical perspectives and positions. Generally, some stakeholders will hesitate to share their concerns openly, particularly if they believe their views diverge from the majority position; likewise, there may be individuals or interest groups who dominate discussions. Given such a context, involving stakeholders successfully requires creative and able facilitation.

Skilled facilitators use a variety of techniques and approaches to establish an open and “safe” environment, encouraging the active and meaningful participation of all stakeholders. These facilitators also structure discussions to be focused and productive, generating valuable inputs to the program.

Facilitators can also work closely with program leadership to develop and broaden a stakeholder-involvement strategy. In most cases, the program director is a content expert who can benefit from an objective collaborator who will address the *process*: asking questions, clarifying desired outcomes, and identifying the best opportunities to involve stakeholders over the life of the project. When a facilitator assumes the role of neutral party — whose role is to manage the process of involving stakeholders — those with a vested interest, including both program implementers and stakeholders, can share their issues and concerns more openly and directly.

### Elements of the Process

Following are key elements of a stakeholder-involvement process. Although there is some degree of sequence to these activities, many of them will need to be repeated often over the life of the program.

### Identifying Stakeholders

When identifying stakeholders, it is important to think broadly about who has an interest or “stake” in the program. For example, a community development initiative should actively seek to engage citizens, community activists, local government officials, religious organizations, chambers of commerce, private businesses, schools, and other local organizations. Most of the time, if project people are familiar with a given sector or locality, it will be relatively easy to identify most of the key stakeholders. Far more important is the intent to do so and the willingness to follow through.

Remember that stakeholder identification is an iterative process. When considering individuals in

the early planning stages, or when the initial group has been convened, it is important to ask who else should be involved — who else has an interest in this process? A broad perspective should be the aim here, not simply identifying allies or people who would be naturally inclined to support the effort. At this point, the project is best served by encouraging debate and providing opportunities for concerns to be expressed.

It will be important to differentiate between stakeholders and “clients.” At TRG we typically define clients as those who control the funding for a program [formal clients] or those who can control such factors as access to people or information enough to easily block or derail the program [informal clients]. Our own experience highlights the need for explicitly defined working relationships with clients, ensuring that they understand and agree to their specific role(s) in program implementation.

### Building a Shared Vision

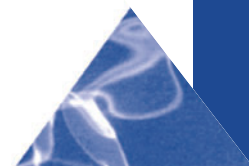
A shared vision, particularly in complex programs, provides a road map for focused action. When the desired final outcome is clear and compelling, it can inspire people to act energetically toward common goals. Yet a compelling shared *vision can be difficult* to achieve, even within a single organization.

Because stakeholders involved in any program have their own particular interests, there will always be a certain amount of disagreement. Given the opportunity to help develop a shared vision, however, people can not only contribute important ideas that reflect their interests, but also hear from others. The broad perspective created through this process, while essential for program implementers, is also a key element in building widespread support for a program or initiative.



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is an employee-owned training and organizational development consulting firm that works with clients to improve organizational performance. TRG helps clients to develop strong leaders, create high performance work teams, manage growth and change, and establish positive, productive work environments. TRG has worked throughout the U.S. and in more than 116 countries around the world.



Although building and maintaining a shared vision takes place over time, a *Stakeholder Vision Workshop* is a critical step best planned early on. At a minimum, workshop outcomes would generally include —

- A common understanding of needs and issues: the problem being addressed.
- A shared picture of what will be different after implementation: how it will “look” and “feel.”
- Identification of the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of key stakeholders and program implementers.
- Recommendations for program implementation.

*For more details, see the box on stakeholder workshops.*

### **Building Trust and Collegiality**

Besides building trust and collegiality between program implementers and stakeholders, it will be important to promote these same elements within the stakeholder community itself. In many cases, for example, the stakeholders will never have come together as a group and thus may have no habit or culture of substantive discussion or idea sharing across interest groups.

It is essential to provide frequent opportunities for this type of interchange. Because a single all-encompassing stakeholder meeting cannot possibly provide time for people to develop any type of relationship, it is useful to schedule periodic shorter meetings. Such meetings, focused upon narrow aspects of the program and scheduled conveniently for large numbers of stakeholders, can help build momentum and support for a program.

Making the meetings fun, enjoyable, and productive will require creativity and meeting-design skills. We often find that a pleasant location and some refreshments at least get people in the door. There is great value in bringing stakeholders together to share perspectives in an environment that supports openness and broad participation. In such an environment, trust and collegiality typically emerge.

In a conducive working environment, stakeholder groups can identify common interests and often create networks or working groups around specific issues or program elements. These relationships, leading to the groups’ mutual interest and sense of ownership, will prove extremely valuable when key decisions are to be made or priorities set.

### **Sustaining Involvement Over Time**

In addition to periodic stakeholder meetings and opportunities for direct engagement, programs are wise to develop and implement a communications

strategy for keeping stakeholders informed about key milestones and other developments. This strategy, which should be set up to disseminate information to stakeholders in ways most convenient to them, should include such mechanisms as a website, email groups, press releases, and newsletters. Depending upon project size, scope, and location, media programs and public-education activities could also be part of the communications effort. Used appropriately, these various communication methods will help stakeholders maintain interest and commitment.

### **Conclusion**

Based upon TRG’s own experience, we are convinced that active and effective engagement of stakeholders is vital to a program’s long-term results. Ultimately, the decision to involve stakeholders reflects as much a philosophy and approach to program implementation as a set of tasks or activities. The values of openness and transparency, participation and empowerment, and continuous learning and adaptation must be adopted authentically as the “way of doing business” for all phases and aspects of the program.

Clearly, involving stakeholders requires resources: energy, skills, time, and sustained effort. However, any time a program’s end results and impact will rest mainly in the hands of stakeholders, an approach that focuses upon those same stakeholders offers a far greater chance of success. As we have seen, such an approach does take time and effort. But it can pay huge dividends.

TRG has extensive experience designing and implementing stakeholder involvement strategies for public, non-profit, and international organizations. For detailed examples, please visit our website at [www.trg-inc.com](http://www.trg-inc.com).



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