“By integrating AI in the stakeholder engagement process, the PM can gain buy-in to the vision of the project, build authentic relationships with sponsors, project teams, and other impacted stakeholders, and create the desired future state with the business outcome.”

Using Appreciative Inquiry for Effective Project Outcomes

By Ganesh Kumaraswamy and Sam S. Mathi

Introduction

According to research from Project Management Institute (PMI), organizations waste an average of 9.9% of every dollar spent due to poor project performance. The top driver for projects meeting their goals is actively engaged executive sponsors and stakeholders (PMI, 2018). In our experience, project outcomes can be improved by integrating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with project management to enhance stakeholder engagement.

Project Management – Current Stakeholder Engagement Process

Standard practice for project management is to assign a Project Manager (PM) when a project is initiated. Consequent to understanding the objectives and vision of the project, a PM runs through the following stakeholder engagement steps (PMI, 2017).

» Stakeholder Identification. Identify and assemble a project team, sponsors, and stakeholders (internal and external) impacted by the initiative.

» Stakeholder Analysis. PM develops understanding of stakeholders’ interests and influence on the project and develops a stakeholder map.

» Stakeholder Engagement Planning. PM strategizes a plan to engage stakeholders based on their influence and level at which they impact the project. PMs provide details of the metrics to measure stakeholder engagement and define the communication strategy to keep the stakeholders involved.

» Stakeholder Engagement and Communications. Finally, PMs execute the stakeholder engagement plan and revise the plan as change occurs.

Challenges in Stakeholder Engagement

The stakeholder engagement steps listed above will identify, assemble, and manage information sharing among stakeholders in the project. However, are the stakeholders genuinely engaged with the project? Are the project teams truly engaged and aligned with vision and objectives? Will the team be self-organized, self-renewed in the wake of challenge, and adapt to change on the go?

We would argue no. A process that is owned, advanced, and driven only by PMs is inadequate because it fails to include stakeholders along the way.
Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement Using AI

Creating a high performing team requires teams to be self-driven, engaged, and empowered to lead the change. When faced with adversity, unplanned scope additions, challenges, or constraints, the team might struggle to achieve the project objectives.

By integrating AI in the stakeholder engagement process, the PM can gain buy-in to the vision of the project, build authentic relationships with sponsors, project teams, and other impacted stakeholders, and create the desired future state with the business outcome.

As AI is used in the stakeholder engagement process, the PM includes several internal and external stakeholder groups such as vendors, partners, suppliers, project teams, and sponsors. These groups participate in creating and driving the project with the PM, resulting in deeper engagement. Here is how we apply AI to improve stakeholder engagement.

1. **Discovery**: In alignment with stakeholder engagement steps discussed earlier, the Discovery and Dream elements of AI are integrated with stakeholder identification and analysis steps of the process.
   
   In the Discovery phase, project teams form subgroups based on their roles in the project such as functional or business groups or by stakeholder groups (internal sponsors and external vendors, customers) which enable the PMs to understand and analyze stakeholder expectations and inquire into their strengths through one-on-one discussions. The AI process enables individuals to reveal their stories and capture engaging moments.

2. **Dream**: During the Dream phase, the subgroups imagine their desired future. This intervention can be done one-on-one or as a focus group in the project kick-off or during the early stages of the project planning session. The outcome of the Discovery and Dream phases could be considered as an acceptance criterion for user sign off.

3. **Design**: With impetus from the Discovery and Dream phases, the project team along with the stakeholder subgroups, work on charting the plan to turn the Dream into actionable steps by integrating stakeholder Engagement Planning. The adoption of project actions and engagement will be high as the project stakeholders are engaged along with the project manager to create a shared vision.

4. **Destiny**: In the final step of integrating the execution of stakeholder engagement, the Destiny phase is ongoing and brings the team back to the Discovery phase. The Destiny phase delivers on the new images of the future and is sustained by nurturing a collective sense of purpose and a time of continuous learning, adjustment, and improvisation (Cooperrider, 2008).

Case Study: AI Integrated PM Cycle

A 75+ year old Fortune 500 company serving millions of customers throughout the United States had initiated a multi-year, multi-million-dollar program to modernize its 25-year-old information technology systems.

By integrating Appreciative Inquiry with project management, we believe teams will be aligned on shared vision, engaged in process, and motivated by outcomes. These teams are positioned to exceed expectations of the project by minimizing both risks and midcourse corrections, optimizing costs, and enhancing the value of the project deliverable.
to execute to achieve the outcomes desired by the internal and external stakeholders. Stakeholder input helped design actions to achieve results plus the acceptance criteria for successful project delivery.

The project managers captured the actions in their respective areas of responsibilities. Group conversations helped build relationships amongst internal and external stakeholders, and PMs. To manage the delivery of the project results, PMs engaged stakeholders in that conversation and captured actions related to their areas of responsibility.

**Destiny:** In this session, some of the significant recommendations like coordinating a release schedule with operations, required more effort and planning. The PMs aligned team members with stretch goals to lead the inter-project dependencies. The team developed a detailed communication plan to continuously engage stakeholders throughout the program.

**Impact:** By integrating AI and project management with a positive frame of stakeholder engagement at every level, collaboration enabled effective project delivery, solutions, and value to our business customers.

### Conclusion

By integrating Appreciative Inquiry with project management, we believe teams will be aligned on shared vision, engaged in process, and motivated by outcomes. These teams are positioned to exceed expectations of the project by minimizing both risks and midcourse corrections, optimizing costs, and enhancing the value of the project deliverable.

### References


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