10 Tips to Improve Stakeholder Engagement

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When you have active and engaged stakeholders, you'll be more effective and efficient as a business analyst.

And lack of stakeholder engagement will slow down your requirements process, cause you to miss requirements, and ultimately has the potential to sabotage your success.

As a business analyst, it's your responsibility to do what you can to ensure stakeholders are engaged. This looks like stakeholders showing up for your meetings, participating actively in the conversation, and taking ownership of providing answers to critical questions and, ultimately, the content of the requirements.

Here are 10 tips to improve stakeholder engagement and ensure your requirements process moves as efficiently as possible.

#1 - Clarify Roles

As part of kicking off a new project, or involving any new stakeholders, it's important to clarify roles. Describe your role as the business analyst - to discover and analyze the problem to be solved, draft and validate requirements documentation, facilitate discussions, and ensure the technical team has the details to implement the solution.

And then clarify that while you are the requirements *author* you aren't the *owner*. You are heavily reliant on input from your stakeholders to ensure they get what they most need and want from the project.

Be specific about what information and types of approvals you are expecting from each stakeholder so they are clear on what's expected of them.

#2 - Invite Only Necessary Attendees

When it comes time to schedule meetings, invite only necessary attendees.

You might be tempted to cast a wide net just in case someone wants to pop in and listen to the conversation. Here's the thing about that - when they are listening in, but not engaged, it establishes the expectation that it's OK for people to be unengaged in your meetings. Then the stakeholders you really DO need engaged might show up in a similar way.

Ideally, find a different way to keep "optional" stakeholders updated and informed. If you must invite them, be really clear when discussing roles that they are optional and their rules of engagement might be different - or, better yet, set the same expectation for active engagement as you do of everyone else.

#3 - Start and End Your Meetings on Time

Be the person in your organization that always starts meetings on time. This encourages a culture of showing up on time, starting right away, and making the most of everyone's time.

After a few meetings, people will stop showing up late, because they know they will miss something if they do.

Out of respect for everyone's time, end your meetings on time too.

In our resource [Effective Conversations Template Collection], you receive scripts for exactly what to do if a meeting runs over time or if an important stakeholder declines your meeting. This collection is full of real life work examples with a roadmap to help you navigate them well.

#4 - Make Your Meetings Working Meetings

Working meetings means you are getting actual work done, and moving the requirements process forward. People want to be present so they are part of making the decisions and have a chance to provide input.

This could look like:

- ✓ Discovering new information related to a business process or software feature.
- ✓ Answering specific questions about a requirements deliverable.
- ✓ Validating that a requirements deliverable represents the business needs.

The best way to make your meetings working meetings is to have a clear agenda that's tied to the progress of the project, sending out deliverables in advance for review, and facilitating conversations to work through each agenda item one at a time.

#5 - Ask Powerful Questions

People LOVE to answer questions. Our brains are hard-wired for it.

Ask lots of questions. Ask "why" 20 different ways. Ask questions about the details of the requirements. Use your analysis models to discover gaps and you can find the questions that no one else is asking.

Quick caveat - be sure to also watch for signs, such as distraction and overwhelm, that indicate you need to take a break with your questions or that people feel you aren't listening to them. Which leads us to #6.

#6 - Be an *Active* Listener

Most business analysts are great listeners. But some still like to talk way too much and show how much they know, or otherwise demonstrate their competence through showing how they've figured things out. While it's important to celebrate your insights on occasion, stakeholders will start to disengage if you talk too much.

But more than just listening, be sure you are listening *actively*. This means using body language like nodding your head. But it also means paraphrasing back what you think you heard, and clarifying that you understood them. It also means asking follow-up questions to clarify information and terminology, but not asking questions that were already answered earlier in the conversation.

Active listening also means that you clarify what you don't understand. A rookie business analyst mistake is to pretend to understand and then hope you'll figure it out later when reviewing your notes or listening to a recording. More than likely you'll have to come back with those questions later, and it will feel like you are back-tracking.

Another great example of a script you'll find in our Effective Conversations Template Collection is what to do if a stakeholder accuses you of not understanding the terminology or opening up big issues, as well as, what to do when a stakeholder doesn't have all the answers to your questions.

#7 - Celebrate the Impact of Stakeholder Input

Stakeholders are going to be more engaged when they feel like their input is having a positive impact on the project, so let them know what you'll be doing as a result of a conversation, or how the details they provided really clarified the requirements.

A simple way to do this is at the opening of a meeting. Share what you were able to draft or update based on the input they provided during the previous session. That gives them a sense of forward progress and engages them in the discussion at hand. It's also a great recap to help you avoid back-tracking and rehashing what was already discussed.

#8 - Assign Specific Action Items

Stakeholders are not omniscient. They won't always have all the answers ready at hand. When it's clear they need to look into something or run something by someone or even just need a bit of time to think a decision through, assign an action item.

I like to send my action items out with my meeting notes, and then review any high priority action items at the beginning of each meeting. If there is a clear deadline when you need the decision or information, be sure to let them know that as well.

#9 - Be Clear When Lack of Understanding is Holding Up the Process

A lot of times people don’t understand that just showing up to a meeting isn’t enough. They don’t realize that their lack of input or procrastination over a decision is actually holding up the requirements process.

Be clear about the critical path of your project and also about the dependencies, so they understand the impact of delays. When appropriate, offer to help them think through their decision, support their research, or co-facilitate a conversation with a stakeholder to help move things forward. A little support can go a long way.

#10 - Leverage Trusted Templates to Handle Challenging Situations

Finally, no matter how great you are at engaging your stakeholders, difficult situations will come up.

- Stakeholders won’t justify changes or cannot answer your questions.
- Stakeholders decline your meetings, or don’t show up.
- A meeting runs over time, or you realize you have the wrong stakeholders.

In these cases and more, being prepared with talking points can be incredibly helpful. As can stepping into the energy of HOW to say what needs to be said in a challenging moment. For support, consider the Effective Conversations Template Collection. The collection provides a roadmap for you to navigate the various challenging situations you may find yourself in as a business analyst the right way.

You’ll receive 20 conversation scripts and videos so you can navigate difficult conversations with ease.

Click here to invest in the Effective Conversations Template Collection

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*"The Effective Conversations collection has **increased my confidence** to work through a stakeholder issue. While it's natural to 'take it personal'... IT'S NOT PERSONAL. The collection helped me articulate the problem, meet face-to-face with the stakeholder to test understanding and establish boundaries, resulting in a **closer stakeholder relationship**."*

- Euphemia Z

*I use these templates in my professional career for many communications with team members and with senior management. They provide me with the **confidence that my message is clearly communicated and it is taken seriously and respected.***

- Beverly Sudbury, ACBA