Advanced

Stakeholder Management for Policy and Program Delivery

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Work in policy and program delivery and want to do better stakeholder management or engagement?

I've worked in stakeholder engagement for many years, advising numerous government and industry groups on stakeholder processes. And now, as the founder and CEO of Simply Stakeholders, my platforms are used by governments and businesses all over the world, across multiple sectors. This includes a number of clients who are working on policy development processes, or developing, designing, or delivering policies and large scale programs, including grants, health programs, and service delivery programs.

One thing we've noticed is that our clients in this sector often share similar challenges in stakeholder management.

We've put this resource together to **shine the light on some of those challenges** and **how to better apply stakeholder management practices** in order **to successfully deliver policies and programs — and evaluate their success**. Inside, you'll find insights, ideas, and resources that you can take away and implement in your practice.

Allison Hendricks - CEO, Simply Stakeholders.

What's Inside:

Policy and Program Development: A Challenging Sector For Engagement

Policy & Program Development: A Challenging Sector For Engagement
Stakeholder engagement and stakeholder management can be challenging no matter your sector, but I've found that there are some unique challenges in the policy and program development space. Challenges that make it harder not only to be successful but to define what success looks like.

Six challenges that particularly stand out to me include:

1. Long vs Short-Term Impacts:

Typically, one of the ways you'd measure the success of something is by looking at its impacts and outcomes. But the problem with large-scale courses and programs is that their impacts may not be apparent for some time (and some of those impacts may also be unintended). So, when and how do you judge whether the policy was successful or not? And how do you account for unintended consequences and their impact on the program's success?

2. More Complex Submissions:

This type of work attracts a lot of submissions — often very complex ones. The challenge is in figuring out how to analyze the information and make it usable. Agencies simply don't have the time to manually through the data and make meaning from it, let alone provide a meaningful response to stakeholders.

3. Politicised Environment With Vested Interests:

Policy and program development are almost always done in a highly politicized environment with strong, vested, polarized interests. This makes it particularly hard to do good stakeholder engagement.

Case Study: A Large-Scale Strategic Plan – The Magic Number That Was Key to Success

A government agency was running a large-scale strategic plan across an entire state, which required them to look at what the priorities should be, moving forward. This attracted a lot of very detailed feedback and submissions, and with so many people (and a lot of funding at stake), there were a lot of vested interests in this strategic plan.

Early in the process, when they had a draft plan in place and were beginning to engage with stakeholders, the agency reached out to my team so they could start using our software.

One of the first things we noticed was that they had a feedback form questionnaire they'd been distributing to people. Because they wanted to encourage participation, people were not required to put any identifying information in, such as their location.

We immediately suggested that they ask people for a postcode. There were a few reasons for this:

- People could stay anonymous (since a postcode does not identify the respondent)
- They would still get a huge volume of submissions and feedback
- They could slice the data by region, political/electoral district, local authority, or local council area
- They could see the priorities or concerns for specific regions

This postcode ended up being the magic number that was key to success.

It was really fortunate that my team got involved early in the process while they could still update and re-issue the submission forms to collect the postcode data. They ended up getting thousands of usable responses.

And this data became important for the policy itself, the planning process to determine the priorities and actions, and also for the decision makers to see comments for their specific region.

Our software's qualitative analysis capabilities meant they were also able to slice the data by different functional areas. For example, they could generate reports on the top 20 comments on topics like the environment, policing, and other areas of business or government. And these comments could go directly to the relevant decision makers.

These comments were also valuable later on when the agency went to implement the plan because they needed to work in partnership with local councils, authorities, and other agencies. For instance, during the first meeting with the local council, they could show them the feedback that came directly from their community — and people at that meeting would often see their own comments being used to implement the policy.

This was a huge win for the agency to build relationships and trust with the local authorities they were partnering with — and add legitimacy to their process, actions, and the policy itself.

4. Limits on What Can Be Influenced:

In a traditional stakeholder management or engagement process, one of the ways we evaluate the success of the process is to ask:

- How much were stakeholders able to influence?
- Did the consultation shape or improve the project?
- How did it change things?

But because policy and program development happens in such a highly politicized environment, there's often a very limited range of things that can be influenced. And sometimes change as a result of stakeholder involvement won't necessarily be viewed as a success. For example, a change might be made at the last minute to appease someone with vested interests — and perhaps that change isn't properly thought out and could lead to a range of unintended consequences.

This means that changing your policy based on stakeholder feedback may not be a valid measure of success.

5. Requirements for Engagement Via Online/ Hybrid Processes:

In today's environment, so much stakeholder engagement has to be done online. This further complicates the policy development process because people need to be digitally literate to understand the information and participate meaningfully. You have to consider what capacity building you need to first do for meaningful participation, and account for the potential "missing voices".

6. Knowing What to Measure for Success:

Perhaps the biggest challenge overall is knowing what you need to measure to know whether your policy or program development process was successful.

Most discussions about good policies or programs tend to focus on either the political legitimacy of the program (if people liked it, it was a success) or its programmatic performance. But they don't often look at the process of developing the policy and implementing it.

This means that there is:

- Minimal evaluation going on
- Very little discussion about successes or failures
- A lack of benchmarks for success

Of course, it's no secret that I think stakeholder engagement in general tends to lack benchmarks and industry standards, but this sector does a particularly poor job of it. So, let's look at how we might start to solve that problem.

What Makes a Program or Policy Delivery Successful?

I recently came across a definition of a successful policy that I really liked inside the book, Successful Public Policy (Joannah Luetjens, Michael Mintrom, and Paul 't Hart, 2019). Here's a paraphrased version:

Defining a Successful Policy

A policy is a complete success to the extent that demonstrably creates widely valued social outcomes. It does this through design, decision-making, and delivery processes that enhance both its problem-solving capacity and its political legitimacy. And it also sustains this performance for a considerable period even in the face of changing circumstances.

What I like about this definition is that it talks about:

- **What the policy actually delivers** – Valued social outcomes
- **Process-driven improvement** – Including decision-making, design and delivery processes
- **Long-term sustainability** – That it can continue to perform well long time and weather the storms of changing circumstances

Policy Success Assessment Map

So, how do you take all this information on what a successful policy looks like and make it something you can apply to your stakeholder consultation practice?

These same authors who penned Successful Public Policy also created a really useful framework called the Policy Success Assessment Map. What I like about this is that instead of looking at the process and numbers (how many people participated and what the engagement was like), it looks at whether the actual policies deliver value, and what metrics we could track to evaluate that. For instance, metrics like:

- The strategic direction the policy is offering
- The level of adoption and acceptance by a wide range of stakeholders
- Whether it was implementable
- The short and long-term outcomes
- The intended and unintended consequences
- The fairness of the policy itself from a social justice and equity perspective

I've slightly modified this framework based on my own interpretation to include some more specific measures for each of the four success pillars:

Programmatic Assessment:

- [ ] Action is purposeful and valued
- [ ] The policy is underpinned by a public value proposition
- [ ] Evidence shows considerable movement towards achieving the policy's intended outcomes and/or other social benefits
- [ ] Costs/benefits are distributed equitably within society

Process Assessment:

- [ ] Practices are thoughtful and fair
- [ ] Relevant values and interests are considered
- [ ] Hierarchy of goals and objectives are considered
- [ ] Capacities necessary for effective implementation are considered
- [ ] The policy development and/or delivery is just and fair, according to stakeholders

Political Assessment:

- [ ] Stakeholders and members of the public view the policy as legitimate
- [ ] The policy's value proposition and current results are broadly and deeply supported by the political party/parties
- [ ] Association with the policy enhances political capital
- [ ] Association with the policy enhances the reputation of relevant public agencies

Endurance Assessment

- [ ] The policy's value proposition has longevity
- [ ] On-the-ground and programmatic features are flexibly adapted to changing circumstances and in relation to performance feedback
- [ ] The policy's programmatic, process, and political performance level is maintained, long-term
- [ ] The policy confers legitimacy on the broader political system

Based on the original map by Joannah Luetjens, Michael Mintrom, and Paul 't Hart (2019).

As you can see, the assessment has four pillars to look at the policy or program. So, let's explore each of these in turn.

Success Measure #1 – The Policy:

This measure is all about assessing the program itself. It looks for whether there's a public value proposition at the heart of the policy — and that there's been a considerable movement toward achieving the intended outcomes. Plus, other potential benefits to society, as well. It also assesses whether the costs and benefits associated with the program were distributed equitably within society.

Success Measure #2 – The Process:

The second measure looks at the policy from a process point of view. A major focus for this assessment is looking at the level of consideration or deliberation that goes into policy development and stakeholder engagement. In other words, are lots of views considered before coming to an informed decision? Are different interests, values, goals, constraints, and capacities considered to ensure the process is fair to stakeholders?

Metrics you could look at to assess the process include:

- How many people were involved in the process?
- Where did the participants come from?
- Were participants representative of the various stakeholders?
- How many people commented and made submissions?
- Who participated and who didn't? Were there any missing voices?
- Are all the stakeholders involved in the process?
- What is the quality of the participation and submissions?
- Based on people's questions or comments, did we do adequate capacity building?
- When asked, did stakeholders state that the process was fair?

To do this effectively, you'll need to begin with stakeholder analysis and stakeholder mapping — as these processes will inform who your stakeholders are and who you need to communicate with.

Success Measure #3 – The Results:

The third measure is all about the results — in particular, is the policy politically successful and legitimate? Do people and organizations want to associate with it because it enhances their capital or reputation?

In terms of results, consider what you're looking for in the submissions to indicate your level of success. For example, it could be the number of submissions (higher or lower), the quality of submissions, or whether the feedback received was actionable.

Success Measure #4 – Endurance:

Finally, it's worth looking at the value created over a set period of time. To assess this, you can look for examples where the policy was able to adapt to changing circumstances, on-the-ground issues, and performance feedback. And you can assess the degree to which it has (thus far) been sustained and maintained over time, and even confers legitimacy on the broader political systems it sits within.

Case Study: A New (Controversial) Policy – Missing the Forest For The Trees

A government department was working on a very controversial new policy in the planning space. It was a complex and difficult project to even talk about, with a lot of vested interests. I find that nothing is more vested than when you're talking about planning and properties — especially in countries like Australia and the U.S.

The agency was not using our software, but they had around 5000 submissions. Part of their policy was that they would publish these submissions publicly on their website. This was to ensure transparency — particularly for those community groups that weren't confident that the government agency would analyze the feedback meaningfully and come to the right conclusions.

So, some of these groups decided to do their own analysis of the submissions and after contacting some academics, our product was recommended.

They used our software (applying our not-for-profit discount) to analyze the 5000+ submissions that were publicly available.

t was a classic David and Goliath situation. There was this government agency with enormous resources and a huge number of consultants going through the submissions. And then you've got a scrappy community group, run by volunteers who were not super tecdhnically savvy. And they were trying to do the same thing to test whether the government's evaluation was truly accurate.

The community group couldn't individually review all 5000 submissions, and they had different objectives. So our advice to them was to be strategic and know what they were looking for.

By analyzing the submissions, the community group had been able to identify that the legal academics, property council, industry groups, environmental groups, and others (who would typically have opposing positions) all agreed on three key things that were in the policy.

And then, the minister in charge of the government agency held a big media briefing to say:

- We've had heaps of submissions and a lot of them were complex and some where hundreds of pages long
- The team is still evaluating them but one thing is clear — nobody agrees on anything
- It's clear that everyone's got some issues, but not terrible issues
- So, we're probably going to just keep going with this draft policy

Of course, this was in direct contrast to what the community group had found. So, the next day, the leader of the group held their own media briefing to say:

- The minister is actually quite wrong — there's common agreement by normally opposing parties
- We have the data to prove it
- Here are clear quotes from Greenpeace, academics, and industry bodies

As a result, they easily won that argument and policy had to be abandoned. But from the government point of view, I think what happened was that they didn't have adequate tools to look for those areas of common ground, find the patterns in the data, and efficiently sift through the volume of submissions.

They couldn't see the forest (big picture patterns) because they were so focused on the trees (individual issues).

It shows the power of data and having the right frameworks to measure success and the right tools to organize and analyze the data so that you can get meaningful insights that help inform the policy process.

Breaking It Down:
How to Measure Key Deliverables

We've talked a bit about general results you can look for when measuring the success of your policy or program. But how can you come up with specific, measurable deliverables?

I like to start with the policy objectives and turn that into deliverables you can actually track and measure. For example:

Objectives	Key Results
Social justice, fairness, better-connected communities	Increase participation rates by 10% in marginalized communitiesActive engagement with X% of community representatives
Increased trust	Quarterly reports published on the websiteIncrease engagement with X groupsStakeholders express confidence in policy and process
Implementation excellence	Quarterly plans reviewing performanceQuarterly reports on progress against milestones
Enhanced political capital andreputation	Number of references to policy and process in publications

You can do this with any objective, not just the examples above — after all, this is not a fully comprehensive list of indicators. Consider:

- How you could get more specific about [insert objective here] and break it down into smaller or more specific objectives
- What [insert objective here] looks like in real life
- How your process might include [insert objective here] or help to develop it
- How you could determine that you're positively contributing to [insert objective here]

Learn More About Stakeholder Engagement Evaluation

Want to explore other ways to evaluate your stakeholder or consultation process?

Check out our eBook, Evaluating Stakeholder Engagement and Public Consultation. This is a practical guide to monitoring and evaluation and covers popular frameworks, including my own Evaluation Framework.

Or watch our webinar recording, Evaluate Your Stakeholder Engagement, to hear more about evaluation frameworks for stakeholder engagement.

3 Practical Tips for Success

To wrap up this guide, I've got a few final tips to help you succeed.

1. Plan For Evaluation and Analysis:

This is often the missing piece, as too many people launch into the consultation process with no clear plan for evaluation. If you get a ton of data, you could miss the forest for the trees — it's not about quantity, but about having a plan in place for strategically dealing with the data. Make sure you know in advance how you're going to define success, and that your forms collect information that you can analyze to gain meaningful insights.

This is worth getting right because good, deliberate data is hard to argue with and will help you overcome most objections and roadblocks.

2. Get to the Point:

We see forms that are literally hundreds of questions long. But how can you expect people to even respond to that level of detail? It's actually disrespectful of people's time to even ask them to do that work... and then their submission may not even be used.

So, be strategic with your questions. Focus on the most important things and only ask questions if you're prepared to use the responses.

3. Get Better Submission Forms:

Set yourself up for success with high-quality submission forms. It’s one of the easiest changes you can make! Follow this checklist to improve your surveys and forms:

- [ ] Collects relevant demographic information (location, age, role, etc.)
- [ ] Gathers any information needed to make an informed response
- [ ] Short, accessible, and meaningful
- [ ] Doesn’t make people go back and forth to check references or external information
- [ ] Sets clear expectations (what’s inside, how long it will take, what impact it will have)
- [ ] Looks for areas of common ground, dissention, or willing tradeoffs
- [ ] Enables meaningful, actionable insights
- [ ] Gives people opportunities to comment on other issues (with an open-ended question

To sum it up, you must design a usable form that gives genuine, meaningful insights.

Useful Resources

Want to learn more about stakeholder management for policy and program delivery? Or ready to start putting these insights into action? Check out the following resources:

Webinar: Stakeholder Management For Policy and Program Delivery In this 50-minute webinar, we share practical tips and strategies for success in coordinating stakeholder engagement in your policy and program delivery projects. Watch the webinar replay.	**Popular Blogs** • How to Manage Stakeholder Expectations • Strategies for Successful Community Engagement in Government • Stakeholder Engagement in Government Organizations: Definitions, Barriers & Benefits • 5 Simple Steps To Getting Started With Stakeholder Data Management • How Public Involvement Can Benefit Your Sustainable Infrastructure Project • What to Look For When Investing in Community Engagement Software

Exploring Stakeholder Software?

As you have seen throughout this guide, without good analysis tools, it's extremely challenging to get any meaningful insights from your data. In fact, one of the reasons I started Simply Stakeholders was out of my own frustrations with the lack of decent tools to manage the large amount of data that comes from the engagement process. And now, many government and industry groups use our software to help manage stakeholders while planning, developing, and implementing new policies and programs.

So, if you're exploring stakeholder software to support your processes and team, take a look at Simply Stakeholders. Features include stakeholder mapping, analysis, reporting, notifications, issues management, forms, and so much more.

Contact the team at Simply Stakeholders to find out more or book a free demo.

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