



# Community of Practice

## IT Project Management

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## Effective Governance (A three-part series)

### Part III: Amplify your stakeholder voices.

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Every project has stakeholders. Perhaps they are the users of a new system or the recipients of a new benefits package. However, a certain category of stakeholder is often underrepresented on steering bodies: the external stakeholder.

What is an external stakeholder? It could be a former state worker retired in Yakima. It could be a firearms dealer in Omak. It could be a person recovering at home from a work injury. These citizens are indeed customers and key stakeholders of state government – yet they rarely find their way onto a project steering body. Instead, organizational leaders attempt (in good faith) to represent them; in some rare cases, agencies have formed focus groups to gather stakeholder input. But what is adequate stakeholder representation and how can agencies turn up the volume on stakeholder voices?

### When to consider engaging an external stakeholder?

Agencies may want to consider the addition of an external stakeholder if the project output will be consumed by external parties (e.g., teachers, citizens, voters, firearms dealers, county workers, elected officials, etc.). Examples include:

- The vehicle licensing system that impacts all counties and vehicle owners across the state.
- An agency's modernization of its public-facing website.
- A new state service to centralize firearm background checks, impacting all firearm owners and dealers across the state.
- A new worker's compensation benefit solution.
- A new portal for families to apply to become foster parents.

Certainly, external stakeholder engagement may (and should) take many forms:

- A seat at the executive steering table. On the One Washington project, agency stakeholders comprise the majority of project executive steering committee membership, and that of a subgroup (the business transformation board – or BTB).
- A seat on an advisory board. Because the nature of external stakeholder engagement can be time-intensive, it can be effective to gather multiple stakeholders on an advisory board and contain their contributions to a focused hour every now and then.

- A seat at a focus group or listening session where feedback can be systematically captured and delivered to the project team. The Department of Health employs this strategy for its practice transformation hub.
- A user experience design review where external stakeholders can view prototypes or designs and provide input. On the Secretary of State's VoteWA elections modernization project, the project hired a user experience design firm to reach out to persons with disabilities to test a new voter portal.

## Finding the right stakeholder(s)

It can also be very challenging to identify one or two external stakeholders that could or would speak for an entire category of impacted individuals. Generally, the old maxim is true: if you've heard from one county you've heard from one county. Inviting members of the citizenry (as one example) to join a project steering committee requires orientation, education, time and a keen awareness of the sub-population represented by the external stakeholder (and, by extension, the sub-populations they do NOT represent). Plus, how does an agency find an external stakeholder with a willingness to both serve on the project and a willingness to share their unique perspective?

- Advertise (e.g., "Looking for members of the public to serve in a critical role to shape the future.").
- Send a survey to known stakeholders. In addition to survey questions agencies can ask if the survey respondent is willing to engage more deeply and substantially in project governance or solution design.
- Ask the customer service representatives. These employees know who the "frequent fliers" are, and who might be either disgruntled or very passionate about improving the status quo.
- Send an invitation to GovDelivery list members or update the recording on a customer support line (e.g., "We are looking for volunteers to provide input on a new agency service . . .").

Regardless of where these key representatives are located, ensure they have a vested interest in the project's success and can commit to meeting attendance and required preparation. Agency projects may benefit from an external stakeholder at the table for the entire project duration, or perhaps a focus group or two can adequately ensure stakeholder satisfaction. This is a subjective decision.

Consider the following best practices when looking to engage external stakeholders:

- **Consider whether there is room for external stakeholder participation.** Project managers and sponsors should think through whether there is a need for external stakeholder participation and how frequent that input should be received. If there is a need, don't shy away from it. Ask yourself: In what ways might these stakeholders amplify project successes – or help avoid messy issues? The benefits of external stakeholder involvement must be clear to all.
- **Be clear about what you want the external stakeholders to do** – and what they can't do. Tell them exactly who they are expected to represent (they may need to gather additional data from other impacted stakeholders to do so). The orientation and/or education of these steering members must be thoughtful, intentional and, above all, manage their expectations.

- **Communicate with external stakeholders.** Let community members know what value they are providing. Let people know which of their ideas or contributions were adopted – or not. And why. Leverage these stakeholders and turn them into champions, message distributors, testers or quality auditors.