

EPISODE 9: SOLUTIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

- [CC] Hello and welcome to episode 9 of Engagement Matters. My name is Christina Canters and today I'm joined, as always, by Mr. John Williams.

In this episode we're talking all about solutions for stakeholders. How do we really understand stakeholder needs so that we can provide a truly effective solution? Now, for people who work with stakeholders, which is, I suppose, most people, well, everyone who listens to this podcast, this will be extraordinarily relevant. So, John can you kick this off and tell us why is it important that we learn how to understand our true stakeholder needs?

- [JW] In a previous podcast, we alluded to this but, just as a bit of a refresher, our stakeholders, whether they be our boss, whether they be our client, customer, project manager, end user, whoever it might be, they're looking to us as a service provider to provide them with solutions. That's what they want from us.

There's no such thing as a solution without a problem. If we don't understand the needs or problems of our stakeholders, we cannot fulfill their requirement of providing them with solutions.

So, the first step in any relationship with stakeholders, it's about listening, it's...we call it 'Learn then lead'...understand their requirements before you try and convince them on a solution.

- [CC] Fantastic. Now, you're talking about needs here, just so that we're really clear, when you say 'need', what do you mean by that? How do you define a true need?

- [JW] That's a good question. Often, if I talk to, in fact, you were talking about a situation earlier, Christina, when you were talking to one of your customers, they said their needs were three new podcasts. To me, that's their definition of the solution, not the true need. They believe that three podcasts will give them the solution they're requiring, but they haven't told you the needs.

Their need might be to connect with more customers, maybe to refresh some of their existing customers on the techniques that they've used in the past, it may be to involve a whole new demographic...If you as a service provider don't know which of those drivers they're aiming for, then the three podcasts that you do for them are likely to miss the target.

- [CC] 'Cause the podcast is simply one way that that could be achieved.

- [JW] Exactly.

- [CC] But they could do it through video, or they could do it through blogging, or they could do it through speaking, it's....there are different mechanisms for it.

- [JW] And once you provide those...once you understand those drivers, those true business drivers, you may well be able to propose a better solution for them that is gonna help them reach their outcomes rather than just follow the assumed solution that they've got to.

So, don't forget, they're coming to you for your expertise, your expertise is required as much to help diagnose the problem as it is to then solve the problem, but if you don't have the correct diagnosis, if you've let the layperson, the stakeholder, do the diagnosis on their own, if they have a false diagnosis, then when you've provided the solutions, you may well find you've provided the false solution and, even though you've done exactly what they asked you for, they're gonna blame you for getting it wrong. And it's fair enough, because you weren't diligent enough with the diagnosis.

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- [CC] So, for example, if I then go ahead and create three podcasts for someone without understanding the true driver, they wouldn't get their objectives met at the end of it, but then I'm saying 'Hey, but created a podcast for you.'

- [JW] Exactly, exactly that situation.

- [CC] But then they say 'No, but that's not what we wanted in the end.'

- [JW] So, when a stakeholder provides me with a set of requirements which are, in fact, their assumed solution, I like to dig down and understand the business drivers. So, my question in your circumstance would be 'Okay, so I understand you think that three podcasts would help you do X, Y and Z - what's the true driver behind this? What are you truly trying to achieve by doing those podcasts?'

And once I understand their true drivers, I may well agree with them that three podcasts are the right way to go, and be able to do three better podcasts for them, or I may be able to offer an even better solution, as you say, maybe video, maybe podcasts supplemented with something else....or maybe we can do it in two podcasts.

- [CC] But what if they don't tell you, like, what if you say 'What's the main driver behind this?' and they go 'We just want three podcasts.'

- [JW] Yeah. In that circumstance, in any circumstances where our stakeholder withholds information from us, it's an indication to me that you don't have true engagement with them. So, in our introductory discussions with new stakeholders, we've got two things that we need to be doing concurrently, and we need to do them pretty quickly. One of them is to understand their needs, that's the topic of this podcast. The other one, which is topic of the next podcast, is to build engagement.

If we have true engagement with our stakeholders, and I'm thinking of things like trust, I'm thinking of things like report, I'm thinking of things like a sense of value....if we have true engagement with our stakeholders, they will give us the opportunity to understand their needs, they will share their problems with us and they will open up and tell us the true problems.

- [CC] 'Cause sharing your problems....that can be quite scary for people and that's showing a fair level of vulnerability there...And they're not gonna share that with you if they don't trust you. You know? So that is...

- [JW] And often they run, when engaged with it if they don't like you. And certainly if they don't think you've got any contribution, any value to add, why would I waste time with you? So, any holding back on sharing with you their true needs would indicate to me that we haven't yet achieved sufficient level of engagement and we need to think about what part of that engagement we need to build stronger. We're gonna have a whole podcast on that, the next podcast, number 10.

- [CC] 'Cause that's a whole podcast series in itself, really, that topic of how to build engagement and how to do it with different personalities as well, yeah.

Now, what if you're dealing with, say, a group of stakeholders that all have a say in the project, and one of them tells you what they think their needs are, and then another one tells you completely different set of needs...what do you do if they can't agree on what their true needs are?

- [JW] Great question, great question. And unfortunately, it is more often the case when you're deal-

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ing with a leadership team or a management team...in my experience, it's more often the case that there is disagreement than the case where there is agreement. So, as good service providers, if we go into it expecting that this might be the issue, it will save disappointment later.

I think there's a lot of useful one-to-one fact gathering we can do, and understanding needs is about fact-gathering, it's about asking questions, it's about saying 'I've got two ears, and one mouth, I need to use them in that proportion, I need to get my stakeholder doing the talking and that means I need to be asking good questions and doing good listening.'

- [CC] We actually have a whole podcast about how to ask great questions and how to listen. I believe it's JHW.com.au/tools, where we share that, but I'll put a link to that in the show notes of this episode anyway, and the show notes will be at JHW.com.au/solutions.

- [JW] So, having met the stakeholders one-on-one and understood and diagnosed that there are differences in their requirements, some of them may be diametrically opposed and we may then like to think about how we can get some compromises and agree to move forward by, perhaps getting all of the stakeholders in the same room and working out where we have common ground, where we have some disagreement and how we might resolve that disagreement.

- [CC] Right. So, would you talk to each stakeholder individually first, before you do that?

- [JW] That's my preferred way of doing it, you don't always have that opportunity. It's not necessarily the most efficient way of doing it, but it can often be far more effective.

- [CC] Especially in the long run.

- [JW] Yeah. When you're going into that meeting, it's better to be prepared and there's no better way of building that preparation and meeting each of them one-on-one, understanding where the conflicts might be, and it often also gives you a chance to build engagement with them one-on-one before we've got whole bunch of them in the room, where building engagement is a lot more complicated.

- [CC] And if running these sorts of meetings is something that you can envision yourself doing, I highly recommend that you check out episode 1, if you haven't already, it's all about meeting planning and co-planning and how to get the most out of your meetings, so, definitely check out episode 1 if that's something that you plan to do in the future, running these important meetings.

- [JW] And I think we had also episode 6 on facilitation...

- [CC] Yes, for running those group meetings and getting answers from people. Okay, so we know how to deal with multiple stakeholders. What if they actually don't know what the end goal is or what the driver is?

- [JW] That often occurs as well, more often than you might think. Often they don't understand the technologies available that are developing in this space, so they're not fully across to some of the opportunities they've got so, some of these problems often, they just haven't thought it through, often it's not front of mind for them so, it's not unusual for stakeholders to, let's say, be inadequately prepared to answer that question 'What are your true needs?'

And here's a great opportunity for us as a service provider to help them through their thinking processes, to ask good questions, to ask insightful questions, to ask open questions, the what-if

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questions, how-what-where-when...by asking those questions, you're forcing the stakeholder to think this through and actually, when they get to their conclusion, they share, they reward you by acknowledging the contribution you've had in terms of helping them clarify what's in their mind.

It's a great way of building a stronger relationship with them and demonstrating the value that you as a stakeholder can bring, simply by asking questions.

- [CC] So, John, I've heard you often talk about this concept of 'Learning then leading'. Can you explain that?

- [JW] So, 'Learn then lead' is really important from two really key aspects.

As a logical thing, for those of us that like to think more logically, there is no such thing as a solution without a problem. So, if we as service providers are gonna do our jobs successfully, we have to understand their problems, because without it we cannot provide solutions.

Very simple, very logical and a good reason for learning before leading. For those of us that are little less logical and are driven more by the relationship and emotional side of things, there's an equally important thing - the stakeholder doesn't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

- [CC] Right.

- [JW] So, in this context, if you don't demonstrate to this stakeholder that you care about them getting the right solution, you're putting them first and foremost, above your own needs, then they don't want to deal with you. Now, as it turns out, our stakeholders pretty much, on a worldwide basis, they split about 50-50 down the logical versus emotional divide and a lot of them will be close enough to middle for both of those factors to be important for them.

So, some people don't care how much you know until they know that you truly do care, and others know damn well that you can't provide a solution unless you understand the needs. Either way, if you're not diligently learning first before you start to lead them on the solution, then you have missed the opportunity of truly solving their problems.