Who are Your Stakeholders?

The story of the Anglo-French supersonic airliner Concorde is one of high technology and stakeholders. Without a doubt, the technology was exceptional: its only competitor as a commercial supersonic passenger plane, the Soviet Tupolev Tu-144, which flew only 55 scheduled passenger flights before safety concerns caused the operator to use it solely for cargo.

Concorde was the result of political decisions in France and the UK to collaborate, motivated partly by the high commercial cost of development and partly by the desire to improve political harmony and agreement. The naming clearly reflected that and, out of a spirit of concord, the British even chose to adopt the French spelling.

So, it was Concorde until the UK Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, perceived some minor disrespect from the French President, Charles de Gaulle, and changed the UK name of the plane to Concord, the British spelling. This was later reversed again by Tony Benn, a minister in a later government, to mark the first public appearance of the plane in France in 1967, declaring that the extra ‘e’ stood for ‘Excellence, England, Europe and Entente [Cordiale]’. A Scots correspondent complained that he spoke of “E” for England, but part of it is made in Scotland’, to which Benn masterfully replied that it was also “E” for “Écosse” [the French name for Scotland].
So far, the story of Concorde appears to be one of largely successful political stakeholder engagement. Certainly its construction was a huge technical success. So why was Concorde a commercial failure, with planes being sold only to two airlines: the largest in Britain and France? The answer is largely in the failure to consider a set of vital stakeholders: the countries over whose airspace Concorde would need to fly. Fears about the impact of the sonic boom that the plane made in supersonic flight meant that many countries, such as India, forbade supersonic flight through their airspace. This resulted in too few international routes being available for supersonic flight.

Some have gone further and have argued, with merit, that the principal stakeholder engagement problem was the failure to secure long-haul routes over mainland USA, closing off many lucrative markets. It is quite possible that much US opposition flowed from a ‘not invented here’ attitude to the plane, given that two competing US designs were abandoned in 1971.

Ultimately, failure to properly engage with the USA may have denied the plane access to the routes which could have made it a profitable aircraft for many airlines. If one of the big US aircraft manufacturers had been invited to collaborate with the British and the French, the story might have been different, but the problem started when Concorde became primarily a political venture.

What do you want to achieve?

Concorde was, ultimately, a commercial venture that needed access to commercially important long-haul routes. Knowing what you want – and need – to achieve is the vital context for stakeholder identification. So start by asking yourself: ‘What is our purpose in engaging with stakeholders?’

The answer to this question creates your stakeholder engagement goal, which needs to be aligned with the deeper goals of the project, programme or change you are working to deliver. These, in turn, will align with your organisation’s purpose – or mission as it is often called.