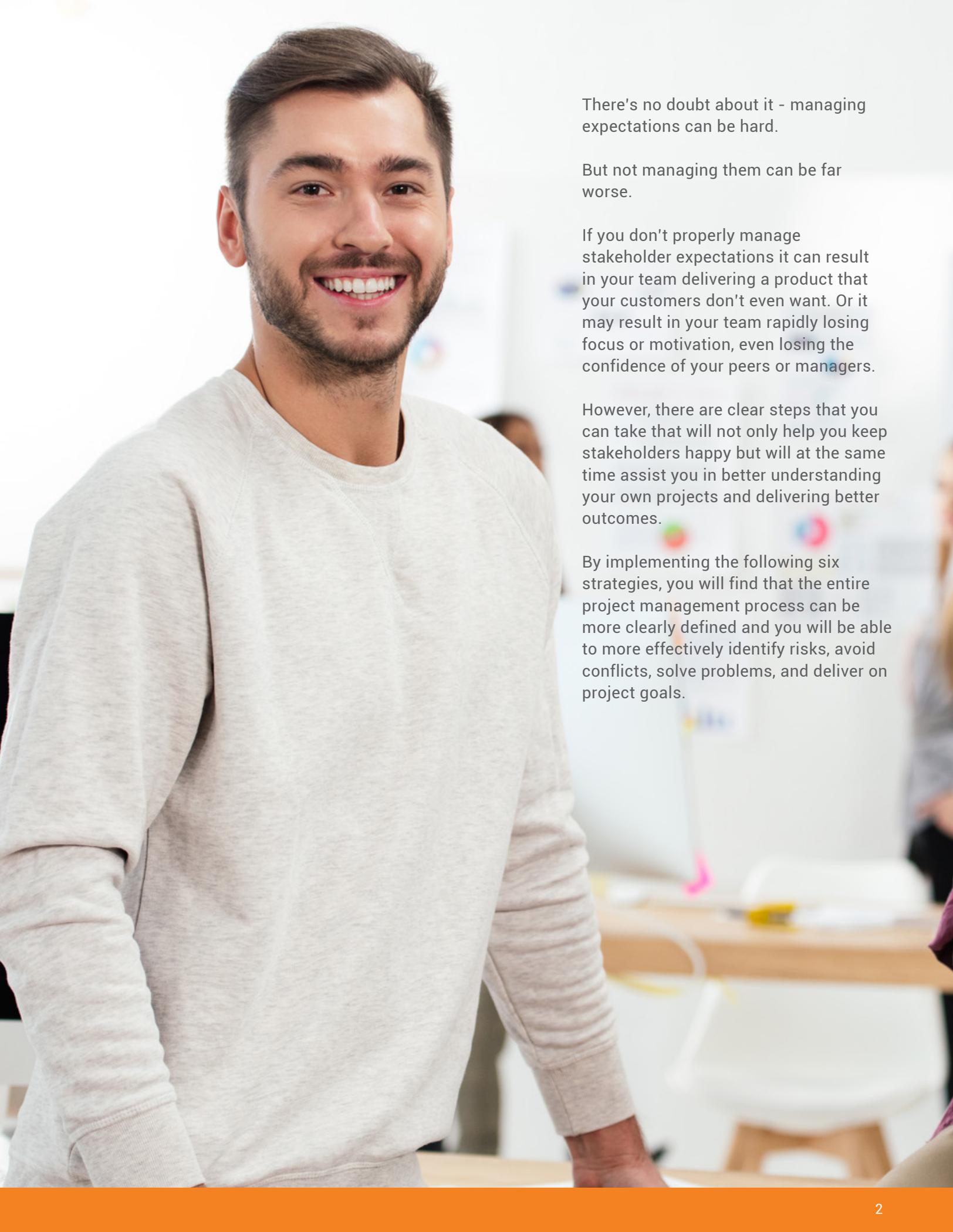




The IT Professional's Guide To Managing Stakeholder Expectations

FINITE



There's no doubt about it - managing expectations can be hard.

But not managing them can be far worse.

If you don't properly manage stakeholder expectations it can result in your team delivering a product that your customers don't even want. Or it may result in your team rapidly losing focus or motivation, even losing the confidence of your peers or managers.

However, there are clear steps that you can take that will not only help you keep stakeholders happy but will at the same time assist you in better understanding your own projects and delivering better outcomes.

By implementing the following six strategies, you will find that the entire project management process can be more clearly defined and you will be able to more effectively identify risks, avoid conflicts, solve problems, and deliver on project goals.

Know yourself and the project

Surprisingly, teams taking the time to determine the potential value of an initiative before the project starts is rare.

Project managers need to take measures to ensure that the desired outcome, as well as its value to the organisation, is defined and can be easily communicated. Establishing a clear outcome helps ensure that you and the project will not be measured against a moving target.

As a technology leader overseeing a project, you need to make sure that you have put together a project plan that will be agreed upon by all stakeholders at the very beginning. You also need to be very clear on where you stand in relation to the rest of the project team and what your role will and will not cover. Every project needs a boss, so in the case that it's not you, you need to know who you will ultimately be reporting to.

Identify who the stakeholders are

There are often more stakeholders involved in a project than there might first seem. This may include the project sponsor, the client, shareholders, management, the project manager and the project team (developers, architects etc) but also other important roles too such as legal, contractors, subject matter experts, or sales and marketing staff.

Once you have identified who all your stakeholders are, you need to know what stake they hold. This includes at what point in the project timeline they need to be engaged and how their interests may intersect with those of the other stakeholders. Some will have a greater level of importance to the life of the project or a different degree of interest in the final outcome. But no matter each individual's role, all of your stakeholders is important. And managing all of the project's stakeholders effectively can make a big difference to the ultimate success or failure of the project.

Every stakeholder needs to be engaged early on in the project. Ideally, this will occur in the planning stage. This means that everyone is able to get a common understanding of the project's goals and contribute their input on likely timing and resource demands from the outset. This will also help to manage any later divergence between each stakeholder's vision and reality.



Set a clear scope for the project

Within every project there are the necessities (needed to make the project viable), the wants (the things that would be good to have but aren't needed for functionality) and the nice-to-haves (additional features that just add value).

You need to decide early on which features will or won't be included, based on the stated project goals and to meet the expectations of the stakeholders. The marketing department may want social media integration or a sales executive might ask for the ability to export to Salesforce but it is the job of the project manager to limit the project scope to only what is required to meet the project outcomes.

There will always be someone asking for additional features to be added but you need to be aware that feature creep can wreak havoc if not properly managed. Therefore, each potential feature needs to be rigorously considered for whether it's a necessity, want, or nice to have and whether it fits in the project timeline and budget. Sometimes it can be difficult but saying no to additional features can be one of the most important decisions that a project manager can make.

Remember that sometimes you just can't please everyone. If customer data indicates that a certain feature is rarely used then you may have to disappoint a stakeholder early on by not adding their preferred feature for the greater benefit of the project. Be honest and clear from the beginning. Make sure that the project scope is put in writing and communicated to all stakeholders from the outset so everyone understands what the scope is and what will and won't be included.

Actually manage expectations

Understanding the concerns of stakeholders is the starting point for managing their expectations. Primary concerns will differ significantly among stakeholders but can include budgeting, schedule, risk and feasibility, requirements traceability and progress, performance, reliability, consistency, trade-offs, compatibility with existing systems, software modifications, architecture evolution, etc.

Once you have assessed what the concerns are that each stakeholder has, you are able to map out to what extent you will be able to meet the expectations they will have. This allows you to anticipate problems or concerns and to move ahead with a clearer idea of potential risks and challenges. This includes identifying potential issues relative to other stakeholders. That way you can more easily confirm common expectations and resolve expectations that are in conflict.

There will be times when situations arise or events occur that can negatively affect the project scope or timeline. For example, the project manager needs to be careful that change orders don't slowly move a project away from its original purpose. You need to continually be managing stakeholders and checking to make sure that if changes will potentially detract from the defined objectives then stakeholders need to be made aware of it. When unforeseen events occur that will result in changes to the project schedule or outcomes, make sure that you keep stakeholders informed of the updated objectives.

You should also stay open to circumstances, suggestions, or changes that may help compress the project timeline or meet objectives more effectively. Remember, change isn't always bad, it just needs to be well managed. That's one of the benefits of working with a project team or a diverse group of stakeholders - people can always come up with new ideas or more innovative ways to approach things.

Communication, Communication, Communication

If the secret to success in real estate is location, then the secret to successfully managing stakeholder expectations is communication. Once the project is well underway, you will have spent many hours compiling notes, writing code, and managing any changes or overcoming obstacles. This is where communication with stakeholders becomes most crucial.

Maintaining a clear and strong line of communication with your stakeholders will ensure that important information can be passed on in a timely manner that avoids confusion or them hearing it second hand. Being honest and decisive here is the best policy.

It is also essential to do regular progress reports and be consistent with the time you catch up with relevant stakeholders. Map out a regular schedule for communicating with each stakeholder. Some people will need to be updated far more regularly than others but have a set communications plan and stick to it.

When reporting to stakeholders, it's important to remember that different stakeholders will have different levels of interest in terms of details. For example, executives won't be as interested in the project methodology as they are in the results. For each type of stakeholder, keep communication focused on progress and value. Wherever possible, be concise.

Under promise, over deliver

You might have heard people say that the best way to impress people is to under promise and over deliver. This applies to project delivery too. Don't make promises to stakeholders that you might not be able to deliver on and don't make vague assertions that you will try and include a stakeholder's wishes in the project if possible. Instead, be clear from the outset about what will and won't be included in the scope so that come project delivery time, no one will be disappointed or feel they were given false impressions.

If you do find yourself making promises, instead of making promises about factors that might be out of your control, promise each stakeholder that you will be accessible and approachable throughout the project. And that you will work with them every step of the way to work through any problems or issues that arise.

A final word

Good stakeholder management is essential because it forms the basis of effective project relationships.

This means not only identifying all your stakeholders but also understanding their particular communication needs at various points in the project. This includes seeking feedback on each stakeholder's needs early on in the project, maintaining communication throughout the project (including during ups and downs) to create a sound relationship, and understanding how their work and unique challenges both contribute to the ultimate project's success.



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