Investigating the use of the stakeholder notion in project management literature, a meta-analysis

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Abstract

In project management it is commonly accepted that the interests of stakeholders need to be dealt with to support the success of a project. By doing a meta-analysis of project management literature it is investigated how the stakeholder notion is used in this literature. Forty two publications are assessed against the purpose of this notion, the stakeholder definition and how the identification of stakeholders is addressed. The analysis shows that only a minority of the publications provides a clear definition and addresses the identification of stakeholders. We argue that a role perspective on the stakeholders issue fits the project context and therefore could fill this gap in the project management literature. After comparing the stakeholder approach with project role classifications from the literature, we conclude that a role-based stakeholder identification method is a promising approach for identifying stakeholders in projects.
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1. Introduction

In the project management literature it is common knowledge that to make a project a success, the interests of the *key* stakeholders or even of *all* stakeholders should be taken into account (e.g. [1–3]). We start with an example that illustrates the importance of identifying the stakeholders, but also the importance of understanding the role a stakeholder may play. This example is the prelude to specifying the goal of this article.

A few years ago, a middle-sized city in the north of the Netherlands intended to modernise its city harbour. A large project was started and numerous stakeholders were heard. The core of the project was the construction of a bicycle bridge. This bridge should connect the old city centre with a new quarter in the vicinity of the city harbour. However, this part of the project was unexpectedly delayed by a protest action of the occupants of some houseboats which possessed a mooring place in the harbour (they blocked the entrance of the city harbour by moving their boats). The project management (coming from the firm the project was commissioned to) was completely taken by surprise. The protesters claimed that they were not heard, although the city council assumed they were represented according to the procedures of public involvement and that the matter was discussed with a number of neighbouring people. Furthermore, the city council assumed that these stakeholders were just powerless bystanders, whereas it turned out that they had the means to influence at least the process, but in the end also the outcome of the project.

This example shows at least two things. First of all, the city council did not recognize this particular stakeholder of the project. They considered the houseboat occupants as an integral part of the neighbouring people. Second, even if the city council would have identified these specific neighbours as a separate group with its own wishes and demands, they presumably still would have misjudged the role these stakeholders could play. Of course, it will remain a question whether the delay could have been prevented. However, it is likely that if the city council (and acting

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project manager) had acknowledged this group as a party affected by the project, or as a party able to constrain the project, at least they would not have been taken aback by the blockade.

The example indeed shows what is common knowledge in the literature: the importance of dealing with stakeholder interests for project management. It is therefore no surprise that the authors of several articles published in the *International Journal of Project Management* (IJPM) and in the *Project Management Journal* (PMJ) address the issue of stakeholder participation or in any other way use the stakeholder notion.

This article reports the findings of a meta-analysis of these publications. We show the lack of attention paid to conceptualising the stakeholder notion in the context of projects as well as to make the notion operational for this context. Our main point is that if a clear stakeholder definition is lacking, it is not possible to determine whether the relevant stakeholders have been identified and, consequently, whether a stakeholder analysis (e.g. in preparation to a project) has been accomplished in a satisfactory way. The example shows that this could jeopardise a project.

The article is structured as follows. First we discuss stakeholder notions, stakeholder definitions and stakeholder classifications stemming from stakeholder theory. In the meta-analysis on publications in project literature, we then show that neither these, nor other stakeholder definitions are used much in the project literature. In discussing this outcome, we consider a combination of project roles and an identification method encompassing a role based stakeholder classification model as a promising prospect for stakeholder management in projects.

2. Some key insights from stakeholder theory

Before we go into the stakeholder notions used in the project literature, we will first discuss the stakeholder literature. In this literature, several stakeholder definitions and classifications are developed which we expect to be useful too in the context of project management. In the meta-analysis of the publications from the project literature, we use these definitions as a starting point of our analysis. In doing so we hope to be able to place the stakeholder notion as used in the project literature in some perspective.

Freeman's definition stating that "...a stakeholder in an organisation is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives..." [4, p. 46] takes a "landmark" position in stakeholder theory [5–8]. In the literature, this definition is usually cited as a starting point to give a more narrow view on stakeholders, in which finer-grained categorisations than "can affect" and "affected" are described. Just a few examples of these categorisations are stakeholders who have "potential for collaboration" and stakeholders who have "potential for threatening" [9], "fiduciary and non-fiduciary" stakeholders [10], "primary and secondary" stakeholders [6], "voluntary and involuntary" stakeholders

(Clarkson, cited in [11]), or "actively and passively involved" stakeholders [12].

The literature's prevailing stakeholder classification model is the salience model of Mitchell et al. [11]. Salience is described as the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims; Mitchell et al. try to answer the question of how managers choose their stakeholders and how they prioritise among competing stakeholder claims. Managers, they argue, perceive the various stakeholder groups differently; managers give a high priority to a stakeholder if they believe that this stakeholder has a *legitimate* claim, which calls for immediate action (i.e. *urgent*), and possesses the *power* to influence the organisation's activities. The stakeholder who is believed to possess these three attributes, (i.e. legitimacy, urgency and power) is called a definitive stakeholder. Likewise, a classification of seven stakeholder groups is developed, depending on the presence of one, two or three attributes in varying combinations. The salience classification is a theoretical framework that explains why (and when) managers pay attention to certain stakeholders. Note that it is in the eyes of the manager who are considered stakeholders, a feature of the salience model often overlooked (e.g. [13]). The framework provides, in terms of Mitchell et al. [11, p. 868], insights for understanding how stakeholders can gain or lose salience to the managers of an organisation and who are, for that reason, able to influence the organisation's activities.

In evaluating various classification models for the purpose of stakeholder identification in the context of innovation projects, Vos and Achterkamp [12] come to two conclusions. First of all, since a classification model is considered a starting point for stakeholder identification, it needs to fit the situation for which it is to be used. They make a case for a role-based stakeholder model that closely depicts the activities within this context. Such a model should structure the different stakeholder groups; only then their identification can start by answering the question of "Which specific stakeholders fit within a specific category?" (i.e., naming the persons and parties that fill a certain stakeholder category). However, the identification of stakeholders is easier said than done, even if one uses a sound stakeholder classification model. Therefore, the second conclusion is that such a model can only be efficacious in practice if it is supported by an additional identification procedure.

Vos and Achterkamp applied this argumentation in developing a stakeholder identification method consisting of a classification model including corresponding identification questions and a procedure for using this model in innovation projects. The classification model, which is adapted from Ulrich [14,15], specifies four roles that stakeholders play in an innovation setting: *client*, *decision maker*, *designer,* and *passively involved* [12,16]. The clients, decision makers and designers together are called the *actively involved*. Of course, this classification echos Freeman's definition, with the actively involved as the "can affect"-stakeholders and the passively involved as the "affected" parties.