Mapping a Stakeholder Network

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April, 2007

Why Map a Network?

A stakeholder network map is a tool for identifying who has an interest or ‘stake’ in an issue. Network maps can also be used to show the quality of relationships that exists between stakeholders.

Mapping helps us to see the whole system around an issue by making the network of existing relationships visible. It can also help us gain a better understanding of the quality of those relationships and the leverage points for building or strengthening the network over time.

The process of mapping and thoughtful reflection can be especially powerful in helping an internal planning team assess a situation and various options for engaging others. When people work together to create a map, it allows them to look at the issue and the players from many perspectives.

How to Develop A Map

1. Identify an issue, problem or opportunity that is important to your organization and requires the input and involvement of external stakeholders.

2. Make a list of individuals and groups who are connected to this issue. Ask others to help you expand the list, especially others who have a different perspective than your own.

Case: Logging Conflict

For more than a decade, MacMillan Bloedel (MB), one of Canada’s largest forest companies battled stakeholders over clear-cut logging in Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia. The map below shows the relationships between MB, the coalition of environmental groups (ENGO), government, First Nations, and the community. Using a co-creative process, these stakeholders have since developed innovative and widely supported forest management solutions.
3. Think about the issue from each of the different stakeholder perspectives. If needed, gather information from media clippings, reports, and informal conversations with allies who are familiar with the issue.

4. Reframe the issue from a stakeholder network (or broader systems) perspective. This is one of the most challenging and important steps. Ask yourself, “what is the common issue or central question that all of these stakeholders would find compelling?” This will eventually become the central focus of the network. Remember that you would not attend a meeting of other stakeholders unless you felt the issue related to you in some way. And, if you already have the answer, or can control the outcome without stakeholder input, then don’t convene a network!

5. Draw a map using the conventions below. Keep it simple and ensure that your organization is not in the middle. If it is, go back to step 4.

6. Share your initial draft map with stakeholders. Invite them to help you refine and extend the map.

7. Use the map to identify those who should be involved in the stakeholder network. As needed, use intermediary relationships to engage all key individuals and organizations.

Example: Family Network

The map below graphically represents a network that many of us will find familiar. It is a map of an extended family and friends who have come together to plan a wedding. Hopefully it isn’t a map of your extended family!

What does this map tell us? We can see that there is some friction between the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom.

The bride and her mother have a strong bond but she is more distant from her father. She is not close to her stepfather. The best man doesn’t seem to know anyone, and is quite isolated. Based on a quick look at this map, most people could anticipate areas of conflict and develop strategies for helping the family move forward with their wedding planning tasks.

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