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Want To Know How To Get Funding For Your Project? We Talked To Stakeholders. Here's What We Discovered.

By Marg Rogers

Designing a research project that [engages well with stakeholders](#) is held up as the gold star when applying for funding. And we all know how competitive it is to get funding, so getting it right is key.





If we don't engage well with stakeholders, we risk having a project that doesn't meet the needs of the people, organisations or communities we are trying to serve. Also, the success of a project [is often measured](#) by how well the project team have engaged with stakeholders. So, how do we engage in a meaningful way?

Our [research project](#) has been exploring a variety of ways to engage with different groups of stakeholders in our 3-year online community education project. Our [research team](#) is learning a lot about stakeholder engagement along the way and adapting our methods. We are keen to share what we have learnt.

Who did we engage with stakeholders?

We [surveyed parents](#) from defence families, educators and family workers to ask them what should be included in our funded project and what types of resources they thought would work best. We also engaged with [experts in the field](#), such as Legacy staff and volunteers, psychology and social work academics, experienced educators and veteran parents.

What is stakeholder engagement?

Stakeholder engagement is sometimes called community engagement. It is a [continuous collaboration](#) with [people](#):

1. who will be affected by the project, or
2. who are close to the project (geographically or through shared interests).

How do you work with stakeholders?

The [key to the success](#) of a project is how well the project team can identify and gather all the different interests of the stakeholders and manage through them.

Who are our stakeholders?

Knowing who your stakeholders are is a key starting point for engaging effectively. [Stakeholders can be](#):

- the end users of the program (in [our project](#), children from military families and their educators, parents and family workers), and
- those interested in governance (our [steering committee](#))
- those with influence (organisations such as Legacy and the Defence Community Organisation)
- those who provide resources ([our funders](#): The Ian Potter Foundation and the University of New England)



What's a good framework for stakeholder engagement?

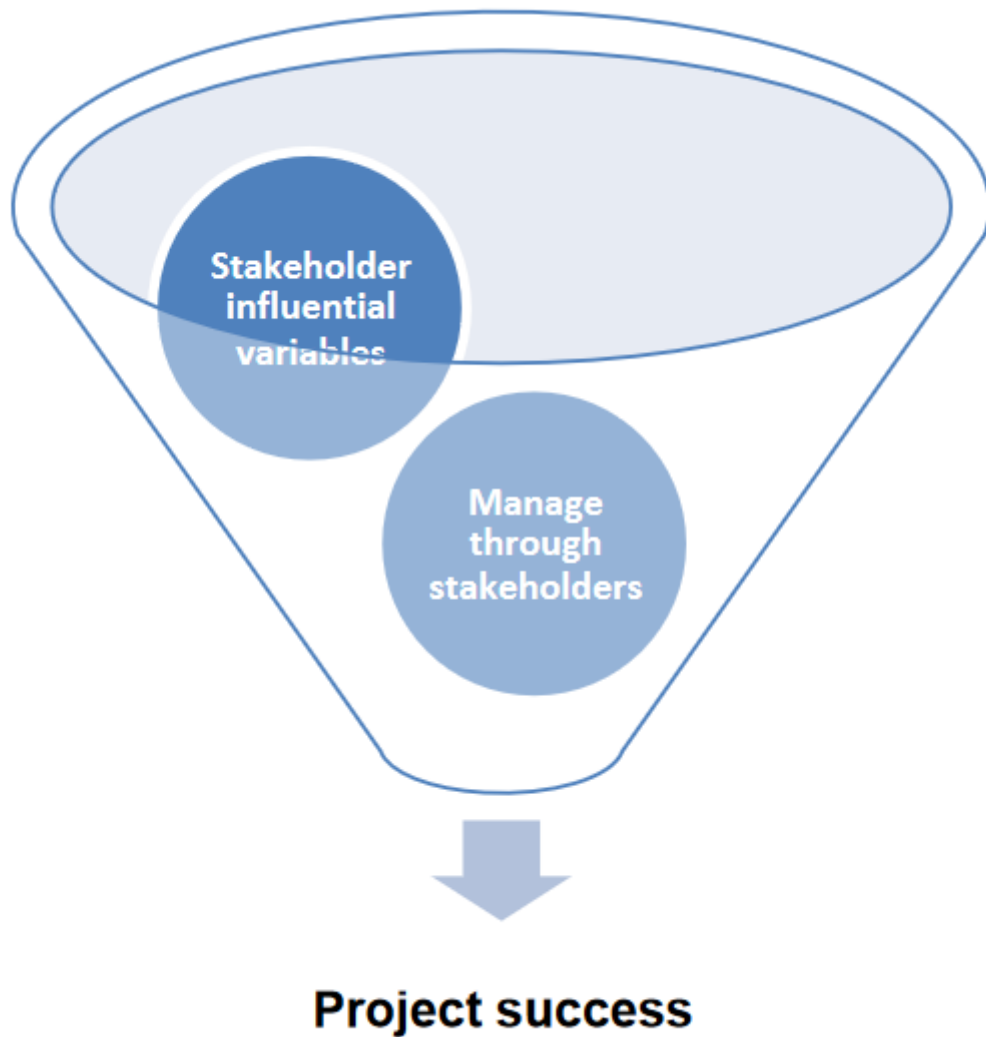


Figure1: Stakeholder conceptual framework for ECDP (from [Rogers et. al., 2021](#))

It helps our research team to use this [framework for engagement](#). We aim to:

1. communicate effectively and often (using a variety of methods)
2. consult with stakeholders early in the project (start when planning the project)
3. identify stakeholders' limitations (What will hold them back? How can we help them to interact?)
4. have a plan for engagement (the research team should discuss and plan)
5. work on our relationships (take an active interest in stakeholders and let them know how much you value their input and support)

How do we engage well?

Engaging well with stakeholders will look different for every project. In our Early Childhood Defence Programs (ECDP) project, we have focussed on the areas shown in this diagram.



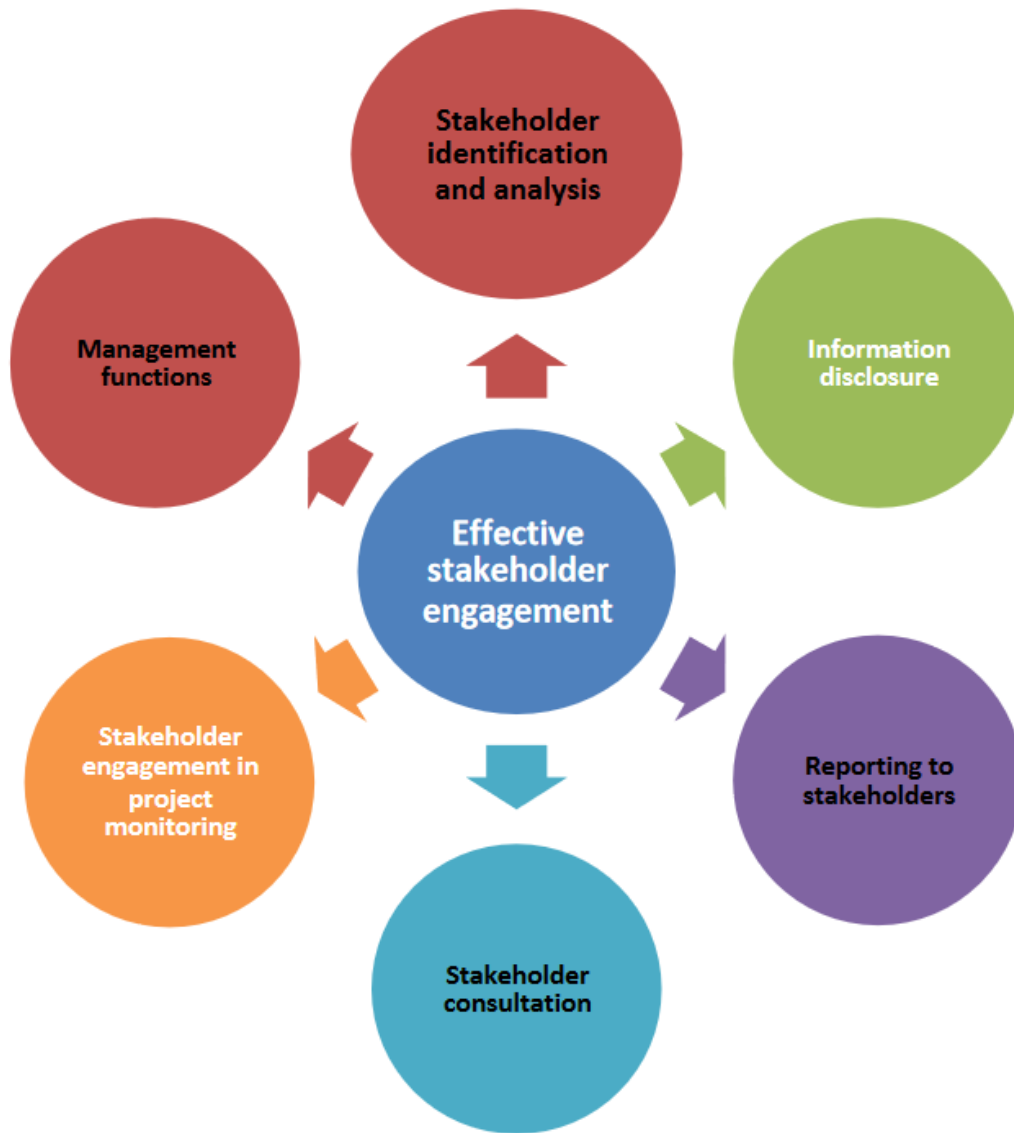
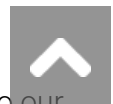


Figure 2: Stakeholder engagement for the ECDP project (from Rogers et. al., 2021)

Types of engagement

There are many ways to engage well with stakeholders. The ECDP project uses a variety of methods, including:

- social media posts 1) [Facebook](#): linking project progress with current events (e.g. Children's Week, Anzac Day) 2) Twitter: highlighting academic publications related to the project
- [media engagement](#) (in publications that our stakeholders might read)
- surveys to get ideas for our programs and resources (targeting parents, educators and family workers)
- website (for [project information](#), [goals](#), [progress](#), [plans](#), events and [draft resources](#))
- stakeholder committee meetings (twice a year via video conference)
- liaison with funders and influences (for advice and ideas)
- funding reports (formal and informal)
- presentations (at research events and interagency meetings, then uploading these to our website)



- funding applications (with influencers for project extensions and future projects)
 - [competitions](#) (to engage with stakeholders and community contributions to the project)
-
- providing resources (for [children](#), [parents and family workers](#), [educators](#), those supporting children with [special needs](#), [academics and policy makers](#))

What are the benefits of opening the door?

The benefits of opening the door to stakeholders have been both predictable and surprising for the ECDP project.

Predictably we have gained:

- fresh ideas,
- ways to strengthen the project,
- better ways to solve problems,
- allies,
- new networks of support,
- advice
- refinement of our work
- a closer engagement with our end users, and
- new knowledge.

We were surprised to gain:

- a higher level of interest from stakeholders than predicted
- an increased sense of direction
- regular bursts of praise, appreciation and enthusiasm, leading to
- energy and project momentum.

What are the challenges?

Time and energy. Our research team is made up of academics and [academics are time poor](#). Academics work in a space that is [demanding more of their time](#) than ever before.

Due to a very limited project budget, we have chosen to use a very low-cost website and manage all social media engagement. This takes a lot of time and energy.





Figure 3: ECDP logo from our [website](#)

Engaging well with our stakeholders in all the ways we do takes stamina. Overall, we have found it to be well worth the effort. Our social media following is growing steadily, and this might help us recruit participants for our [control trials](#).

‘When you open up the door to let the wind in, the dust follows’ according to the Vietnamese proverb. We have found this to be true when we have had to deal with spam, bots and bizarre online comments. Luckily, this has been rare.

Our research team doesn’t think the ECDP project would ever be immune to irrelevance, but we think our efforts are helping us avoid meaningless outcomes. Making sure our [project stays relevant](#) to our stakeholders is a work in progress and one we really enjoy. We also believe it gives our project strength, direction and purpose.





Marg Rogers is a Lecturer in the Early Childhood Education and Care at the University of New England. Marg's current research interests are about programming and resourcing parents and educators to build resilience and understanding in 2-5-year-olds from Australian Defence Force (ADF) families, professionalism, and narratives.

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