Engaging Stakeholders for **RESEARCH IMPACT**

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What is stakeholder engagement?

Stakeholder engagement in research is the process of working together with stakeholders for a common goal. Stakeholders are individuals or organizations who have an interest in your research project, or who affect or are affected by its outcomes. Stakeholders include those who are both supportive of your research and those who may be less supportive or even critical of it.[1]

> "
> *Engaging stakeholders is an iterative process of soliciting the knowledge, experience, judgment and values of individuals selected to represent interests in an issue, to create a shared understanding and make relevant, transparent and effective decisions."*[2]

Importantly, stakeholder engagement is more than communication and dissemination. It is an ongoing dialogue that requires sympathetic, analytical, and adaptive behaviors that show respect to the audience.[3] Engaging stakeholders in research ensures that you deliver useful and usable knowledge. It allows you to develop a deeper understanding of the world that stakeholders operate in and solutions that fit their needs.

The type of stakeholders that you engage, and the purpose, timing, and methods of engagement, will vary depending on your research focus and knowledge translation (KT) goals.

TYPES OF STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders come from groups and organizations, such as funders, donors, community members, advocacy organizations, patients, trade associations, businesses, policymakers, policy advocates working in the nongovernmental sector, and product developers.[3,4] A stakeholder may serve multiple roles and bring several perspectives to a project (e.g., research participant, end user, co-production partner).

PURPOSE OF ENGAGEMENT

The reasons for engagement will vary depending on your project focus. Common reasons for engaging stakeholders include setting priorities, shaping the research questions, designing or implementing studies, funding programs, assessing applications, communicating findings, and moving the results into practice.[5,6]

Importantly, stakeholder engagement can bring knowledge and expertise from different experiences and perspectives to your research, provide data and resources, build shared understanding, and make information from your research relevant for effective decision making.[2,7]

LEVEL AND TIMING OF ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder engagement is an ongoing and iterative process of identification and involvement that requires a significant time commitment.[8] Collaboration toward a shared goal is crucial to effective stakeholder engagement in your research, as is ongoing communication throughout the engagement process.

The level of engagement in a project can be ad hoc or formal, but ultimately there are three stages: project development, project duration from beginning to

the end, and what happens to the project findings and outputs after they are developed, what has been called "end-of-grant KT."[9]

Engagement in project development can include co-creation of research questions and methods. This stage takes the most time and effort, and in some cases it can take up to 6 months to build relationships, develop trust, and understand stakeholder wants and needs.[10]

It is important to maintain previously established stakeholder relationships throughout the project duration. This can include involvement of stakeholders in data collection, project management, online collaboration, or training.[7,10] Remember to discuss expectations with your stakeholders to understand what they want from the collaboration and how they would like to collaborate, including the method and frequency.

In "end-of-grant KT," research findings are disseminated and, in some cases, implemented in practice and in subsequent research projects. Stakeholder engagement is vital in this stage. Stakeholders can play a key role in publishing research findings in formats beyond journals, helping to tailor messages to specific audiences. They can facilitate the use of findings for decision making and practice application. Stakeholders can influence further research in their role advising other projects in how best to use knowledge from prior results, informing how knowledge is used.[11]

METHOD OF ENGAGEMENT

How you engage stakeholders will depend on your purpose, KT goals, and the strengths of your stakeholders. Engagement methods range from dissemination-focused methods, such as information sessions or briefings, websites, newsletters, posters, and media, to methods that encourage dialogue, including social media, workshops, focus groups, working parties, and advisory boards.[12] Research shows that face-to-face interaction is the most successful engagement method in establishing common goals and influencing project buy-in.[7]

❓ Why is stakeholder engagement crucial in KT theory and application?

KT helps you get the right information to the right person at the right time and in a format they can use. In particular, integrated KT is a collaborative way of doing research and includes engaging with all involved and impacted stakeholders throughout the process,[13] such as end users, research participants, and co-production partners. Early and consistent stakeholder involvement facilitates relationship building and trust, provides contextual understanding, and delivers useful findings.

DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

When developing research projects and research evidence for uptake, "the intangibles of trust, rapport and even friendship can be more potent than logic and more compelling than evidence."[14] Indeed, robust relationships are strong predictors of successful research outcomes,[13] uptake, and impact.[15] Evidence shows that building genuine, positive, and purposeful partnerships, along with collaborations and interactions between researchers, decision makers, and other stakeholders, leads to successful KT.[14,16,17,18]

UNDERSTANDING THE USER ENVIRONMENT AND CONTEXT

The delivery of meaningful, relevant, and useful evidence to stakeholders requires an understanding of the user environment, the context in which knowledge is to be delivered. Context refers to the physical and operational environment of the stakeholder organization, organizational decision-making processes, structures of power or authority, and available resources.[11]

The emphasis and importance of KT lie in transforming research evidence to fit within the context of the relevant organizational or policy process.[14,19] The relationships and connections with stakeholders provide a clearer understanding of the context in which the knowledge is aiming to operate.[16]

One major reason that KT models and frameworks include stakeholder engagement is to guide the big questions that enhance how researchers and those they seek to influence understand and appreciate the context and potential impact of the work. This means moving beyond individual perspectives or disciplines.[11,14] By taking stock of the way new knowledge interacts and competes with existing knowledge, through contextual understanding, you can both influence decision making and deliver relevant and timely solutions to the users of that knowledge.[14,20]

PROVISION AND DELIVERY OF USEFUL AND USABLE FINDINGS

Solutions happen through the combination of different knowledge forms and sources of information. Research knowledge is one of many forms and sources of knowledge. Other knowledge forms and sources are practice knowledge held by practitioners, experiential knowledge held by communities, organizational knowledge held by service system professionals, and policy knowledge held by policymakers.[21]

A barrier to evidence-informed decision making is the gap between the needs of end users and the evidence presented.[22] Engagement overcomes this barrier by giving you insights into how different groups like to receive information and the different avenues that can be used to share it. The greater the understanding of this, the better the chance of the research evidence achieving its desired impact.[14] KT processes and strategies must involve tailoring the knowledge and its dissemination timing, setting, and format for each stakeholder. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach.[16,23]

? How has stakeholder engagement been used in practice to improve a research project?

Dr. Toni Saia is a member of the expert review panel for the Center on Knowledge Translation for Disability and Rehabilitation Research. Dr. Saia describes herself as a disabled woman, activist, professor, and researcher.

Dr. Saia has demonstrated that research must be collaborative and relevant to the wants and perspectives of those who are involved and on whom it has an impact, for it to effect change. Her research on the physical barriers that people with disabilities face at restaurants within a local community engaged local stakeholders, including people with disabilities, community members, donors, policy advocates, university staff, and business owners. The stakeholders provided crucial insights into barriers, priorities, and potential solutions.

Stakeholders shared their expertise and perspectives, with the goal of improving physical access for people with disabilities to existing restaurants. Stakeholders were engaged through accessibility audits, informal discussions, focus groups, social media, and individual interviews delivered online and in person.

The researchers' and stakeholders' shared goal, and the leveraging of their expertise and perspectives, elevated the project from research to widespread change. Restaurants in the study introduced changes, including curb cuts, increased signage for accessible entrances, accessible seating, braille menus, and automatic doors.

These important changes were made possible through mobilizing the expertise and perspectives of diverse stakeholders with a shared goal and demonstrated that stakeholder engagement is essential in producing meaningful and solution-focused research.

Endnotes

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