

# **Sweet Stakeholder Love**

**POWERFUL INSIGHTS AND TACTICS  
TO DEAL WITH STAKEHOLDER ISSUES BETTER AND  
ACHIEVE MORE SUCCESS AT WORK**

**S I G I O S A G I E**

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“I have never read a book which has resonated so much with my role and career!”

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Free Excerpt

of

# **Sweet Stakeholder Love**

**Powerful Insights and Tactics to Deal with Stakeholder Issues Better and  
Achieve More Success at Work**

by

**Sigi Osagie**

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## Author's Note

Everybody has issues with “stakeholders”.

Perhaps the only exception is the mad scientist locked away in his laboratory, working in isolation on experiments to discover the next breakthrough in time travel or how to tame the sun and the moon.

But even he will eventually have to deal with some stakeholders when he comes to commercialise his invention.

Even almighty CEOs, who seem all-dominant and supremely in command without having to pander to anyone else, have issues with varied stakeholders inside and outside the organisation – for starters, their board colleagues, the investors or owners of the business and, quite likely, the bank. They must be savvy with these stakeholders to remain in the job for any length of time.

Hard-charging professionals are frequently astounded by the massive improvements in their effectiveness and work success that come from savvy stakeholder management. I was too.

I got my first executive job, as a global director in a FTSE 250 multinational, some years after arriving in the UK as a near barefoot and penniless immigrant. It was a fourteen-year adventure filled with lots of struggle, hard slog and learning. One of the most crucial things I learned on that journey was the importance of cultivating sound stakeholder relationships. Whether I was setting up a new function somewhere in Europe or driving a change programme in Asia or America, engaging people shrewdly and winning them over to my work agenda has always been a critical requirement for my success.

Your own success at work is just as much tied to your stakeholder relationships. As is your overall well-being; because most of us are spending more and more time at work than with our families and loved ones. When we have turbulent stakeholder

relationships at work, with the inherent and sometimes unspoken conflicts they bring, the resulting tensions and negative emotions often carry over into our private lives and affect us adversely – sometimes in ways we may not see.

Conversely, the positive vibes that come from healthy stakeholder relationships help us enjoy work much more and they ooze into our life outside work. Then things just feel great. It makes life easier and sweeter. Hitting that sweet spot is essential for our work performance and gaining fulfilment from the work itself.

We often mean different things when we talk about “stakeholders”. Sometimes we’re referring to the various colleagues or co-workers we interact with at work, which may include our direct bosses and immediate team members. Other times we’re referring specifically to people who impact and are impacted by the work we do. Either way, maintaining positive relationships with these folks is a vital element of finding our groove and orchestrating brilliant success at work. And what you’ll learn from this book will help you immensely in that regard.

You will gain powerful insights and approaches to help you up your game and become more savvy with managing your stakeholders.

Since we spend so much of our lifetimes at work, our experiences with stakeholders typically form key aspects of our life stories. The experiences themselves are stories, whether they’re good ones or bad ones. And stories are central to our existence as human beings. We’re creating stories of all sorts all the time – stories of ourselves as parents, spouses, lovers, daughters, sons, friends, and as professionals in the workplace.

We’re continuously writing and telling our individual stories by our thoughts, feelings and actions, including our interactions with stakeholders. And the stories we tell ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, shape our lives.

We’re all storytellers; it’s how we make sense of the world around us. Psychological studies and brain-mind research show that telling, reading or listening to stories is one of the most compelling and impactful ways to stimulate our brains. It

arouses our senses in ways that amplify our perception and learning tremendously. That's why I chose to share what I've learned through this story, which is based on true events.

It's a story of frustration, angst and despondence, the negative emotions that blighted my work life and hampered my progress.

Yet it's also a tale of triumph, of remarkable learning and growth that evolved from several stakeholder challenges, probably similar to the stakeholder issues you face today.

Quite often, when faced with such challenges it's easy to fall prey to feelings of vulnerability. But you're never truly powerless in such situations – there's so much you can do to change things and create productive stakeholder relationships for yourself.

This book is packed with practical ideas, guidance and tactics to help you deal with your stakeholders more effectively. It will engage, inform and inspire you to boost your stakeholder management skills, and thus gain greater success and fulfilment at work.

It's not a textbook or academic treatise filled with technical mumbo-jumbo, copious research findings or theoretical concepts. It's a book based on real-life experiences with stakeholders in the workplace, underpinned by proven principles and techniques – approaches which you yourself can apply to hit that sweet spot with your stakeholders at work.



## **Learning from a Master**

## Chapter 1

I sat at my desk fuming. I can well imagine that my colleagues in the open-plan office could actually see the steam coming out of my ears. I was clearly too incensed to concentrate on the task I was meant to be working on; that was even more galling – the task, or what led up to it, was the very source of my anger and frustration.

I gave up on the task in the end and picked up the phone instead. I rang Ralph's secretary and asked to see him, telling her it was urgent and important.

She said she'd let him know and call me back with a time for the appointment I wanted.

I continued to stew in my emotions while awaiting the call-back. It didn't help that my mind kept replaying the events of that morning which had created my predicament. In my mind's eye, I was fully justified in being angry and frustrated with Ralph. How could he have done that!

When I'd joined C-MEG Corporation a year or so earlier, I had been over the moon. While coming to the tail end of my part-time MBA studies, I had devoted a significant amount of time and effort to thinking through and deciding my career direction. I saw the MBA as a launch pad that I could leverage to move my career in any number of directions. And I wanted to get it right. I even invested some serious moolah in the services of a career coach.

The job with C-MEG was exactly what I had decided I wanted to do next: an internal business consultancy role in a blue-chip multinational company. You couldn't get more blue-chip than C-MEG Corporation, a multibillion-pound behemoth of a conglomerate with interests in several sectors and tentacles stretching to all corners of the globe.

I was lucky in some senses (then again, they do say luck is opportunity meeting preparation) – C-MEG had decided to set up an internal business consultancy unit,

running process improvement projects and large-scale organisational change programmes, at about the same time I was going through my career deliberations. My timing couldn't have been more fortuitous, as if the gods were smiling down on me.

But there was nothing fortuitous or divine about my meeting earlier that morning. Exasperation was all that came of it.

As often happens with many large corporate businesses, C-MEG had recently been through yet another reorganisation. This time it was massive. The whole group had been completely restructured into three global divisions. For a corporation with about 100,000 employees worldwide, the ramifications of the ensuing restructuring were like seismic shifts that shook the entire global organisation. And Ralph Patrick was bang in the centre of one of those ramifications.

Ralph had been appointed as Executive Vice President (EVP) of Global Procurement and Supply Chain Management (PSCM) for the newly formed Electromechanical Division. But he was an emperor with no empire. The thirteen or so businesses brought together to form the "Electromech" division were as disparate as they come, each with its own distinct PSCM operations and organisation. Ralph knew he had to fix it.

I was the fix-it guy. As Ralph's assigned internal business consultant, I led the transformation project to integrate and harmonise these disjointed PSCM operations into one consolidated divisional infrastructure.

Well, as anyone who has led large change programmes will tell you, where there's change, there's usually pain. And when it's in a big business, the pain can sometimes be so senseless and frustrating as to make you feel like jumping out of a tenth-floor window and slitting your throat on the way down. As I would come to discover.

I had been running the Electromech Global PSCM project for a while and was enjoying it immensely. I had brought on board the structured change management

disciplines we used on all our business improvement projects, and it was proving truly beneficial.

Ralph had agreed with me that the project Steering Group must include three other EVPs whose functional areas would be significantly impacted by the change. These people were my most important stakeholders, second only to Ralph himself, who I saw as my prime stakeholder. Richard Tilman, Giuseppe “Peppe” Mancini and Matthew Gresham all seemed very likeable. We all got together fortnightly at our prescheduled Steering Group meetings, where I updated them on the project progress and got their feedback and guidance.

In the ego-filled world of large corporate organisations, working with EVPs, or reporting to one, is like working with God’s own lieutenants. These guys are often just a step or two below the main board on the greasy pole we call an organisational structure. Most mere mortals can’t even get to speak to these demigods on the phone, never mind have face-to-face meetings with them. And here was yours truly mixing with them regularly. I thought I was going up in the world. Until that fateful meeting when my bubble was burst.

Ralph and the other three EVPs had proved extremely valuable, both collectively and as individuals. Each one of them had brought something worthwhile to the project. And together they had done exactly what a steering group should do: steered the project and helped me clear major obstacles whenever progress was hindered.

I liked the dynamics between us all – they often joked with me or teased me about something or other, and the camaraderie amongst the four of them seemed great.

That lovely chemistry aided us in reaching agreement on several issues. One of those was my insistence up front that they refrain from telling me what to do; rather, they must let me get on with the job but challenge my approach whenever necessary to ensure robustness. For instance, rather than trying to tell me how the integrated PSCM

infrastructure and operating model should be configured, they must let me carry out a full, rigorous analysis and assessment to reach the optimal recommended solution.

I had indeed gone through a very detailed analysis of the existing situation in all aspects of PSCM across the new division. With the help of my small team of business analysts, I had fully mapped out various operational processes, how strategic decisions were made, the functional teams in each business unit, the IT systems in use, etc. I had even used some external benchmarking to sanity-check our efforts, in addition to having numerous discussions with many stakeholders in different geographies and functional areas to understand their needs and priorities.

It was a painstaking exercise, not made any easier by the recurrent attempts by a few stakeholders to distort the picture of the existing situation, and thus influence my judgement.

It was all quite mind-boggling.

But then again, creating an integrated PSCM function for a two-billion-pound global division was never going to be a walk in the park.

I had presented my “As-is” findings at a previous Steering Group meeting several weeks ago. Today’s meeting, earlier this morning, was when I presented my recommendations on the “To-be” model. All through the project I made sure I stayed aligned to Ralph – as the Project Sponsor I wanted him to always be fully up to speed with important issues. One of those was my recommendations for the integrated structure.

A few days before the Steering Group meeting I talked Ralph through my recommendations. I knew that the resulting carve-outs of several functional areas, related job changes and possible redundancies across the division would be a hard sell for the folks impacted, and possibly some divisional executives. So I wanted to ensure my Project Sponsor was also my number-one cheerleader.

Ralph had agreed with my thinking and approach, and he sanctioned the recommended organisational structure and business case. So when I walked into the

Steering Group meeting that morning, the last person I expected to oppose my recommendations was Ralph.

## Chapter 2

In hindsight, with several years' experience as a senior executive and change leader now behind me, I can see that I was quite naïve. I hadn't yet fully grasped the intricate and sometimes bewildering ways large organisations function.

You'd think that as someone who had completed an MBA not that far back I would have been well versed in such matters. It's probably not an unreasonable expectation; I had even done a module on my MBA course titled "Understanding Organisations". But academic learning in a faculty of business studies at any university can be very different from experiential learning in the Faculty of Hard Knocks at the University of Life.

Walking into that meeting with the expectation of "Steering Group Approval" as a foregone conclusion shows how inexperienced I was at such matters.

I knew PSCM like the back of my hand. I'd always prided myself on proactively managing my career to give me exposure to all functions across the end-to-end supply chain management spectrum; in fact, that was why I had been assigned to Ralph as his project lead. But my subsequent experience has shown me that success at work is less about technical knowledge than it is about mastering the "soft" issues, like interpersonal relationships, organisational dynamics, engaging and winning stakeholders over, and so on.

My ordeal in that Steering Group meeting proved it.

Despite my best attempts and approaching my "sell" from several different angles, I was unable to win over two of the EVPs. Peppe and Richard were both strongly opposed to my recommended structure for the integrated PSCM organisation. Matthew seemed rather unperturbed; he had enthusiastically agreed with my recommendations when I had outlined them moments before, but now didn't respond to Peppe's and Richard's opposition – he didn't try to disagree with them or argue for my proposal.

But the person who stole the show was Ralph. Unlike Matthew, he didn't just sit there seemingly neutral but actively agreed with Peppe and Richard.

*Sacré bleu!* Ralph had blindsided me!

How could he? Why was he doing this? What was he up to? ...

These thoughts raced through my mind as I sat there dumbfounded, my brain refusing to take in what my eyes and ears were perceiving.

Ralph and I had gone through this very same presentation only a few days ago. He had asked one or two questions, which I'd addressed to his satisfaction. And he had emphatically confirmed at the end of our meeting that as the Project Sponsor he endorsed my recommendations. And now, here he was agreeing with Richard and Peppe that my recommended structure wasn't appropriate.

To say I was baffled would be the understatement of the century. I was even more incensed by the bizarre alternative structure Richard and Peppe wanted: a divisional PSCM organisational structure with two heads.

I'm sure I failed in masking my exasperation as I asked how any organisation could function effectively with two chiefs. I tried to argue rationally that the resulting PSCM organisation was bound to end up being dysfunctional, as having two people at the top was the first sign of organisational ineffectiveness. But my arguments fell on deaf ears, including Ralph, who continued to agree with Peppe and Richard, much to my annoyance.

It was that annoyance and frustration that was chewing me up as I sat at my desk waiting for Ralph's secretary to ring me back.

I had left the Steering Group meeting grudgingly agreeing to change the proposed PSCM structure to what Peppe and Richard wanted, before it would be ratified by the Steering Group and thence the divisional board. But I knew it was complete rubbish – you can't have two captains of a ship and expect the organisation to operate smoothly and satisfactorily. It was idiotic. And I didn't want to be part of it; I



didn't want my name associated with the project that created what I knew would be a doomed organisational change.

At that point in my career, I was aware that some managers can sometimes be befuddled or incapacitated by events or a change of circumstances around them, especially when it involves significant decisions they must make. They become hesitant, indecisive or paralysed outright into inaction, like a rabbit caught in the headlights. They might try to disguise their dithering and ineptitude by shifting the focus to something else, like the bureaucracy of the decision-making process, asking for more and more information or fussing over meaningless trivia. I was aware of the need to help such managers make the right decisions as stakeholders.

But that wasn't the case this time.

In this situation it felt as if *I* was the one being "helped" down a predetermined decision path, a path paved with the foreboding of a grim fate, like being forced to drink from a poisoned chalice.

I was peeved at finding myself in a situation where I had been manoeuvred to agree to do something I strongly disagreed with, something I knew without a shadow of doubt was just wrong. I felt it so intensely it was as if every aspect of my moral compass was screaming, "This is wrong!" Yet I couldn't figure out why these supposedly experienced managers wanted to go down this road. They certainly hadn't justified their preference in any way that made sense. And trying to reason with them had been like trying to have a sensible discussion with lunatics in an asylum.

I felt manipulated. And I guess somewhere in the mishmash of emotions now buffeting me was a huge degree of self-annoyance that, during the discussion, I didn't have the dexterity to handle the three demigods without making myself seem quarrelsome or hostile – especially to stakeholders who were supposed to be on my side. I had felt like an amateur playing against a trio of Olympic gold medallists. And, of course, I'd been absolutely and totally outplayed.

But worst of all, one of those medallists was Ralph.

I was so vexed with him for what felt like a betrayal, more so because I couldn't understand why. I soon would, as my desk phone rang and I heard the man himself say, "Hi Sigi, it's Ralph."

That phone call turned out to be one of the key moments of my career journey.

\*

Ralph said he'd got my message and asked why I wanted to see him. I told him it was to do with the Steering Group meeting earlier that day, and that I felt we were at odds; it didn't make sense for the Project Leader and the Project Sponsor to be in conflict, so it was imperative we discussed things urgently.

I suspect that he sensed my feelings. He told me to meet him, "Downstairs in the car park in ten minutes."

I put the phone down, wondering why he wanted to meet me in the car park, of all places.

"Sigi, do you smoke?" were his words of greeting when I met him downstairs.

He invited me to join him for a drive and I agreed, even though I had no idea where to or why. My thoughts were soon interrupted by the wondrous feeling of luxury as I sank into the plush passenger seat of his Maserati Quattroporte. It was a magnificent-looking car that oozed opulence inside and out, and its conspicuous aesthetic aroused a tinge of envy in me. I remember thinking to myself as I looked around and took in the sumptuous interior: "Wow, is this how the big boys roll? I'd love to have a ride like this when I get to the top."

Ralph drove to a small shopping centre a few miles from C-MEG's campus base and parked in one of the vacant parking spaces. He reached across to the glove compartment, brought out a box of Romeo y Julieta cigars and lit one for himself while offering me another.

I accepted it with thanks. But I was soon almost regretting it as I spluttered with coughs after my first puff.

I had never smoked a cigar before. I learned to savour one over the next hour or so as Ralph and I sat talking in his car. He listened quietly to my complaints about his “betrayal” and the stupidity of the suggested alternative PSCM structure. He let me vent completely without interrupting.

Afterwards, when he spoke he did so candidly. He started out by telling me that he liked me. (We hadn’t known each other until I turned up at his office for our first meeting as his internal business consultant.) He said he liked the way I had run the project and was impressed with my general professionalism in everything he’d seen and heard of me. He went on to point out a number of positive traits he saw in me, recalling some real-life examples of my behaviour to illustrate his points.

It was all music to my ears, of course.

He asked me about my career ambitions, which I was happy to share with him, though my mind still couldn’t quite fathom what all this had to do with the reason we were there. He then told me that if I wanted to climb to the top in my career I would have to learn how to deal with organisational politics. He said that politics and all sorts of skulduggery were often intrinsic elements of the type of large-scale organisational restructuring C-MEG Corporation was going through.

“The higher up you climb, the more you’re likely to face these sorts of issues,” he continued. “You’ll find that some senior executives are occasionally driven by individual agendas and self-interests, not necessarily what’s best for the organisation. It’s more common than you might think, especially in big companies.”

He explained that as a senior executive himself, it was important for him to manage his peer-group relationships while navigating through this political landscape and delivering his business results. To do that successfully, earlier in his career he’d had to learn to orchestrate his moves deftly without burning bridges.

He said I needed to hone my ability to do the same; that developing my navigational prowess as such would be instrumental to my success, especially when operating at senior levels.

I instinctively understood what Ralph meant. Even then, way before I had risen to the ranks of demigods, I always tried to avoid making enemies amongst work colleagues, falling out with stakeholders or being on bad terms with them. Aside from the fact that it's unhealthy for the soul, you just never know what the future holds and if you'll cross paths with them again. Yet avoiding burned bridges of one's own creation and still achieving one's work objectives isn't always plain sailing.

Ralph himself agreed.

"But you'll only become an accomplished sailor by growing your familiarity with the seas and constantly refining your seamanship," he continued. The enigmatic smile on his face and his avuncular tone of voice made him seem like an old sea dog who had sailed through many storms. I imagined this organisational restructuring was just another one.

He moved on to talk about the other key characters pertinent to the PSCM project, particularly the Steering Group members. He explained what the *real* organisational structure in the division was, not the one on the organisational chart; the relationship dynamics and political intrigues involved in the change we were creating; and went on to clarify why Peppe and Richard had opposed my proposal – what they were really up to – and why he himself had adopted the stance he took in the Steering Group meeting that morning.

Apparently, it was all part of a dance. And I didn't even realise I was on the dance floor.

It was my first introduction to truly understanding the art of organisational politics and leveraging interpersonal dynamics. And I was learning from a true master.

As I would come to know later, Ralph had been at the top of the greasy pole for many years in several large companies, and had held senior leadership responsibilities across numerous countries around the globe. He remained not just a survivor but a true big beast. He certainly knew a thing or two.

## Chapter 3

Through Ralph's skilful guidance I became more adept at reading the organisational landscape and deciphering the machinations that frequently define the conduct of senior-level stakeholders.

Dealing with the myriad of manoeuvres and seemingly irrational behaviours amongst some senior managers often felt like swimming through shark-infested waters. It was one of the most stretching career growth experiences I've been through. There was brown-nosing, narcissism and chicanery aplenty, on top of the customary cover-your-back moves that are sometimes standard operating procedure for some individuals. A psychologist would have had a field day analysing it all. I had many perplexing days, for sure. There were many times I found myself wondering: "Why do I have to waste so much effort on this stuff that's got nothing to do with the real business issues?"

But that's a bit like asking why the sun shines, why the moon glows or why the rooster crows. Or pondering why there's so much poverty in a world with so many riches.

Ralph was right. My subsequent career experience corroborates the lowdown he gave me. Politics, self-interests, hidden agendas and overinflated egos are often part of the executive terrain in many organisations. And learning to steer your way through "this stuff", while nurturing interpersonal relationships and retaining focus on your work goals, is a fundamental requirement to manage senior-level stakeholders successfully. It's really more of an *investment* than a "waste", an investment in your work success.

Interestingly, my own investment yielded an additional return: learning to swim with the sharks without getting eaten forced me to become more aware of my "blind" behaviours – those mannerisms and traits we all have but are unaware of, though they

are apparent to others. Our blindness thus inhibits us from appreciating how these behaviours impact on people we interact with.

It can be so easy to become too focused on, or critical about, others' behaviours and forget that our own behaviours are key ingredients for successful stakeholder engagement. Research has revealed that we all have a matrix of behaviours – a mix of what is known and unknown, to us and to others. Understanding your own mix of behaviours is a key part of increasing your self-awareness. And self-awareness is one of the cornerstones of improving individual capability and performance, including our ability to manage relationships with others successfully.

This enhanced self-awareness couldn't have been more timely for me.

At that stage of my career, I was an ambitious Young Turk who didn't suffer fools gladly. I was prone to wear my heart on my sleeve and let my impatience get the better of me from time to time. Inevitably, I unwittingly fell into the trap of occasionally displaying behavioural tendencies which hindered my own effectiveness. This isn't the most productive route to workplace success. And it's definitely not advisable in shark-infested waters.

Shark experts stay alive in the water because they understand shark behaviour and continually expand their understanding. They imbibe the wisdom of St. Francis of Assisi, which Stephen R. Covey reminded us of more recently: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

Understanding the behaviours of senior-level stakeholders – some of whom are the biggest and baddest sharks – makes it less taxing to manage relationships with them. If you're clueless about a shark's behaviour or habits, you'll also be clueless about its next move; a chunk of your flesh could be in its jaws before you know it.

The fear of a possible shark bite didn't dampen my ambition. But it brought into sharp focus the requirement to expand my capabilities if I was to survive and thrive in shark-infested waters. I *really* had to learn how to handle senior players adroitly.

And I did. Sometimes, much to my dismay.

I learned so much more about workplace success than anything I'd known before, stuff that you'll find beneficial in your own dealings with sharks and other stakeholders.

For instance, I learned that the formal organisational chart – the one shown to you at your induction or plastered on the corporate intranet – may only ever tell you a little of how things are really “organised”, so basing your stakeholder management approach on it may not always yield progress.

The real organisational structure, often created and controlled by the sharks and other big fish, is an informal web of motives and relationships that dictates how things really progress, or don't. It's an ecosystem that can be rife with so many unspoken forces and minefields. For example, Shark A and Shark B who are sworn enemies, or may head competing fiefdoms, and consequently are always on the lookout to profit from opportunities for power grabs; Big Fish X who is a sponsor and protector of Stakeholder Z, and will thus block anything that threatens the position or advancement of her protégé; Stakeholders A, B and C who are entangled in a *ménage à trois* that is as gripping and addictive as nothing you can imagine, and is so all-consuming as to blot out any modicum of common sense they may have had before their sexual entanglement; Big Fish D and Shark C who are tight buddies outside work, play soccer together and will always guard each other's interests come rain or shine; Stakeholder X who has the hots for Stakeholder Y, and as a result will go along with anything Stakeholder Y supports no matter how stupid it is; or Big Fish C who is a virtuoso at stealing credit for other people's work, and will always seek avenues to practise his dirty craft in order to further his status in the organisation – he's probably seen you and your work on the horizon as another avenue, well before you even identified him as a stakeholder.

If you think these sorts of forces and other similar dynamics aren't at play in your own organisation to some degree, you may be grossly mistaken.

The real organisational structure is an important factor that strongly influences how sharks and other stakeholders respond to you and your work agenda.

And within that structure, more often than not, some of the most fruitful nodes of influence that can be easily neglected are the gatekeepers: the secretaries, personal assistants and executive assistants who act as aides, guardians and protectors. They usually have more sway in the ecosystem than many people realise, particularly because of their roles working so intimately with the sharks and other big fish. They tend to be in the know, and can frequently affect the perceptions and perspectives of their “protectee”.

Keeping the gatekeeper sweet, and perhaps even asking for their help or advice outright, can often reap lucrative rewards.

I also learned the importance of cultivating a dependable network of loyal colleagues and allies, and the value of developing a coalition of support for one’s work agenda, especially in the upper echelons of the organisation.

And I learned how one can often generate so many unforeseen positive outcomes by being helpful to others – but this doesn’t mean you should become a doormat or a martyr; as the saying goes, you can’t set yourself on fire to keep other people warm.

You shouldn’t be helpful just because you want something back in return. There’s an element of decency about this, something that can easily be forgotten: to treat others as you would like to be treated – keeping in mind that not everyone necessarily wants to be treated in exactly the same way as you do. Yet you should also be aware that the unspoken rule of reciprocity makes it more likely that you will get something back in return, even if that “something” is simply a more cooperative attitude or more supportive behaviour. It’s somewhat like reaping the fruits of the goodwill that you sow, or what some might refer to as karma.

I learned, too, that flexibility is strength. Being able to fluidly adapt your approach helps you deal with a broader range of circumstances and individual



characters; a bit like the flexible trees that are more able to withstand the storms because they can bend and sway with the wind.

It's almost a sure thing that you *will* need to bend and sway with the various sorts of stakeholders you'll come across at different points in your career. Some of them will be Supporters, who "get it" and don't need much persuasion or "tender loving care", thus demanding relatively less of your energy. But some Supporters can sometimes be over-supportive. They may be so eager in their support that they'll want to run at a hundred miles per hour – possibly in the wrong direction – when you prefer to move at a less frenetic pace. Hence, you may need to shepherd their enthusiasm so they work in synchrony with you, your agenda and the way you roll, rather than zoom off at a tangent.

Other stakeholders might be Crowd-pleasers, who'll say all the right things and act like they're "with you" in meetings and in front of senior managers or key people, but then they'll go off and do something contrary to your requirements or agenda. Dealing with Crowd-pleasers can play havoc with your thoughts and emotions, and you may find yourself teetering between hope and despair over and over again. You may be able to convert some Crowd-pleasers into Supporters through concerted relationship-building and timely and meaningful deeds or results, especially if you *really* make the effort to "get in bed" with them.

Crowd-pleasers can be exasperating and energy-draining. But probably less so than the final type of stakeholders: the Detractors. If you don't have voodoo magic powers, then you may find yourself wishing for a whole nuclear power station to supply the energy you need to handle your Detractors. Because one Detractor typically requires more energy than it takes to handle a thousand prima donnas. Detractors will always try to fight against your agenda or attack you or your work. They need the greatest relationship-building efforts, requiring lots of nous, staying power, fortitude, self-belief, patience and that flexibility.

But you have to accept and expect that some Detractors may never be won over. Don't let that derail your efforts; just remind yourself that you can't win 'em all, and that's okay, but it shouldn't stop you from trying.

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It was my efforts at “trying” with the numerous Detractors, Crowd-pleasers and Supporters on the Electromech PSCM project that taught me a number of salient lessons about effective stakeholder management. For example, that it's usually more effective to step back and think through what's likely to be a more appropriate response or behaviour on your part, before taking action in a specific situation; that applying some give and take may be part of the dance to achieve optimal outcomes, so seeking compromise or finding common ground can sometimes be more advantageous than sticking rigidly to your position when there are disagreements; and that quite often, in conversations with senior-level stakeholders, there's more behind what they say or what they ask, so it's useful to consider what lies behind their words.

Words are tremendously powerful, whether they are expressed in the mind, spoken with the tongue, written with the pen or typed with a keyboard. Words carry energy that can bring joy or misery, can evoke laughter or tears, can lift people up or tear them down. Sweet words of love by lyricists and crooners like Barry White have led to the creation of many new little humans all over the world. And poisonous words of hate by tyrants and evil zealots have led to the destruction of millions of human lives through the ages. Because words transmit impact.

So it's crucial to watch your choice of words in stakeholder conversations. Try to communicate in plain language using terms your stakeholders will comprehend, rather than boring or irritating them with jargon – avoid using gobbledygook they might not understand or buzzwords that'll make their eyes glaze over.

And it's just as important to notice stakeholders' choice and use of words.

Some people use lots of words without really saying anything meaningful. Sometimes, it's because they like the sound of their own voice, or they want to look

good in front of others, or they want to show they're smarter than you, or they have nothing concrete to say but would rather not show it. Sometimes people are just nervous, tired, suffering the residual effects of alcohol or too much caffeine, or they may simply be over-talkative by nature and unable to curb their verbal diarrhoea.

Some folks use the act of talking to form their thoughts, shape their opinions or gain clarity on their views. Hence, they're quite likely to appreciate the time and space to get their words out in the way they want to.

Some use their words for personal attacks, and you can become ensnared in the drama that follows if you lose your composure or react with anger, perhaps by counterattacking them or becoming defensive or argumentative, which often exacerbates the situation and sidetracks you from your core purpose.

Others will use few or no words, keeping their thoughts and opinions to themselves, despite your efforts to engage them. They may be taciturn by nature. Or they may be the sort of political animal who's just watching, not wanting to "take sides" or "show their hand"; it could be because they're waiting to see which wind prevails and how the wind blows, then they'll jump on the bandwagon and be more forthcoming with their words.

And some stakeholders use specific words in very deliberate ways to help or to hinder. For example, to bring knowledge or simplicity as a positive contribution, or to create confusion or obfuscation for their own underhand reasons – reasons which may include intentionally concealing their unhelpful behaviours by weaving a camouflage with their words.

Trying to decode people's words requires sincere listening, giving them your full attention as if they're the centre of your world. It also requires listening with your ears, your heart, as well as your behaviour – for example, by maintaining good eye contact without being awkward, and using gestures, like a nod, or phrases like "Okay", "I get you" or "I agree" to reinforce what they're communicating. Voicing your agreement with specific statements a stakeholder makes, even if you disagree with their overall

stance or opinion, can sometimes convey solid reassurance that you indeed comprehend what's being relayed to you.

Listening candidly can be a great doorway to reading people better and sensing their true sentiments. We often forget that communication is a two-way street, and each of us has one mouth and two ears – maybe there's a reason for that ratio; perhaps the ratio signifies that we should speak half as much as we listen. An added payback is that a stakeholder who feels that they've been listened to will very likely give you good airtime for your own pitch. Whereas a stakeholder who feels otherwise is unlikely to be attentive to your gist. And there's no point telling your story if your audience isn't tuned in.

Probably more significant than anything else I learned was the importance of always being honest and impeccable, and maintaining one's personal standards and professional ethics.

Your own ethics will be the moral compass that will guide you as you navigate your way through your stakeholder landscape, especially the executive terrain. And you'll need that compass, because you'll probably face some situations that'll test your integrity and trustworthiness. That probability is an inherent facet of developing senior-level stakeholder relationships.

The ability to nurture positive relationships with senior-level stakeholders not only impacts our immediate workplace activities, it can also influence our long-term career development. Many senior-level stakeholders are decent people who want you to succeed and will put the wind in your sails. But you've got to know how to engage them with savvy.

Learning all of this stuff was a pivotal stepping stone on my career path. I couldn't have recognised and taken advantage of this opportunity without Ralph's support. His one-on-one guidance proved a godsend, not just on the remainder of the Electromech PSCM project but many years later too. I grew to respect his insights and counsel, especially as my own leadership career advanced at senior levels.

As I mentioned in one of my articles on talent and success, I learned a lot from my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and the leadership development programmes I went through at two employers, but I've learned a heck of a lot more about career success from my mentors. And when it comes to organisational relationships at senior levels, Ralph was the mentor from whom I learned the most – a fabulous mentor in every sense. He aided my leadership development in so many ways. Meeting him turned out to be one of the greatest blessings of my career journey, a blessing that evolved from what initially seemed like a stakeholder conflict ...

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## About the Author

Sigi Osagie helps organisations and individuals boost their workplace effectiveness to achieve their business and career goals.

He has led and implemented diverse organisational change and transformation projects across several sectors and continents, including organisational restructuring, process improvements, ERP deployments and Lean Six Sigma initiatives. His groundbreaking research on Management Effectiveness and Organisational Performance for his MBA informs much of his work.

Sigi arrived in the UK as a near barefoot and penniless immigrant; just fourteen years later he was a global director in a FTSE 250 multinational.

Today, he draws on insights from his atypical life journey and career success to inform and inspire others, through his work as a writer, speaker, business adviser and coach + mentor.

Learn more at: [SigiOsagie.com](https://SigiOsagie.com).