I’VE ALWAYS LIKED Suzanne Robertson and James Robertson’s notion of trawling for requirements. It suggests there’s real work to be done to discover, analyze, and document stakeholders’ needs as requirements or user stories. One of the earliest steps in the process involves identifying the types of stakeholders whom the delivered system will impact—and then finding specific people to fill each role. Ideally, each of these stakeholders should be CRACK (collaborative, representative, accountable, committed, and knowledgeable). If only that were always the case!

In reality, business analysts and requirements engineers often deal with a smorgasbord of stakeholders—with not only different degrees of CRACKness but also different personalities, motivations, and skill sets. I’ve experienced this firsthand on several occasions. In one particular project, three stakeholders stood out from the crowd.

Tom (I’ve changed the names throughout) was my most ornery stakeholder. He was ultimately responsible for the organizational unit for which we were delivering the product. From his position of authority he brooked no debate—leading to an incorrect requirement that came back to haunt my team for months to come. Bill, the company owner, had clear goals for the new product but didn’t engage in requirements elicitation. He seemed unaware, or unconcerned, about the dysfunctional stakeholder interactions and emerged only occasionally to see a demo of the new system. Charlene only reticently contributed to requirements gathering. Fearful that the new product would eliminate her position, she evasively responded to requests for information and contributed no unsolicited ideas. Fortunately, several motivated, collaborative, and knowledgeable stakeholders contributed information and ideas consistently throughout the project. Because of them, we were able to deliver an almost on-time, within-budget product.

Working with diverse stakeholders is a fact of life for any requirements engineer. And learning to bring out the best in each of them is an art acquired over time. Many bloggers and academics have suggested how to think about stakeholders—to increase our awareness of their diversity and offer ways to draw out their best performance.
A quick Google search reveals numerous cutey stakeholder profiles. We find relaters, expressers, analyzers, and drivers on Alex Chu's blog; Talking Tom, Missing Mindy, Emailing Emma, Grumpy Grant, and Big Idea Bart on the Project Manage This blog; and firefighters, superheroes, data demons, process policemen, and brick walls on the Product and Process Innovation blog.

I’ll leave it to you to follow the links if you’re interested—or to imagine for yourself what kind of stakeholders each of these might actually represent. However, I’ll avoid the temptation to create still more caricatures; instead, I’ll focus on stakeholder interaction techniques I’ve found effective for solving three common problems.

My Way or the Highway

Stakeholders might have different opinions about requirements and their priorities. For example, a manager might argue that data should be stored and managed remotely across different parts of the organization and retrieved only as needed. An architect might counterargue that a distributed design will lead to performance issues and produce unacceptable latency. There really is no right or wrong in this debate—simply tradeoffs to explore.

However, at times individual stakeholders will approach the requirements process aiming to win at any cost. Such stakeholders rarely announce publicly their plan to promote their own favored features over those of their coworkers, and it might take a while to realize the social dynamics at play.

Requirements engineers and business analysts might be reluctant to confront such stakeholders; however, not doing so is detrimental to the project. The best solution is to approach the situation calmly and objectively. One particularly useful technique is the EasyWinWin requirements process, which gives all stakeholders a voice in identifying and resolving tradeoffs. It’s effective because it leads stakeholders systematically through identifying factual information, exploring the problem from multiple perspectives, and making a gallant effort to achieve consensus.

Although we want all stakeholders to speak up and let their opinion be known, an argumentative, non-collaborative stakeholder probably won’t be an asset to the project. That person should, if possible, be removed from the critical path.

The Voiceless Stakeholder

Some organizations, or even entire cultures, are quite hierarchical, with strong power structures at play. In such environments, stakeholders might feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions, especially if the opinions conflict with those of higher management. The problem is exacerbated if a manager has a domineering personality or if politics are involved and a group of stakeholders is deliberately excluded.

A rather old, but seminal example of stakeholder exclusion is the case of the London Ambulance Service (LAS). At that time, the new LAS system represented cutting-edge technology that would accept emergency calls and dispatch ambulances across London. The first few days following the system launch were dismal, with numerous dispatch failures and patients left stranded. Besides project and technical problems, one cause is thought to have been disgruntled ambulance drivers whose voices hadn’t been heard during requirements elicitation. So, the new ambulance dispatch and routing algorithms had drivers transporting patients in areas with which they were unfamiliar, meaning that they could end up far from their home base at the end of each shift. Unsurprisingly, the drivers rebelled against the new demands the system introduced to their workload.

A similar thing can happen on a far smaller, and more individual, scale. For example, upper-level managers who expect to have the last word, even though they might not actually understand the details of tasks to be performed, might hinder the discovery of important requirements.

As requirements engineers, we need to give everyone a voice, possibly by letting stakeholders contribute and discuss requirements anonymously. Although I wouldn’t generally advocate this approach because I prefer open, collegial discussion, I certainly would consider it if I noticed that stakeholders were reti-
cent to contribute ideas or to articulate opposing opinions. Some tools support anonymous contributions, and certainly requirements engineers can anonymize interview results. Furthermore, we can educate all project stakeholders about the importance of engaging, and listening to, a diverse set of stakeholders.

Not Just One Onsite Customer
In the past decade, the notion of the “onsite customer” has become popular in agile circles. Promoted by Kent Beck as a key Extreme Programming practice, the idea is that having a single CRACK customer at the team’s beck and call will lead to a better understanding of the requirements. This is a very bad idea for numerous reasons.

First, let me point out that the famous C3 (Chrysler Comprehensive Compensation) project, around which many of the impactful ideas and practices of agile development emerged, was ultimately cancelled. To understand why this happened, we first need to recognize two important roles in the C3 project:

- The gold owner funded the project.
- The goal donor served as the onsite customer and defined requirements in the form of user stories.

As might often be the case, in C3 the owner and donor had different goals for the project. This communication breakdown apparently started a chain of events that contributed to the project’s cancellation.

Projects shouldn’t funnel all the requirements through a single customer representative. It’s highly unlikely that one person can represent diverse opinions or fully expose the

I’d like to close on a more positive note. We acknowledge our stakeholders’ value by recognizing them as unique individuals and collaborating with them to discover and unravel requirements knowledge. In this way, we can identify problems as they emerge—maintaining awareness of how individuals might positively or negatively impact requirements elicitation’s social dimensions. Even a difficult stakeholder can sometimes be transformed into a high performer if we adjust our communication style to match his or her skills and personality and draw on our toolkit of elicitation techniques—including interviews, surveys, ethnographic studies, and creative brainstorming activities—to find a good fit. Every project is unique, and the smorgasbord of stakeholders who possess requirements knowledge makes it even more so.

References

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