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Practitioner Perspectives in Stakeholder Engagement: Toward a Grounded Theory

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Keywords

Stakeholder practitioner mindset

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Abstract

The authors offer a theory of stakeholder engagement. Stakeholder engagement ensures that the needs, concerns, and insights of all parties affected by an organisation are considered. This inclusive approach helps build trust, fosters collaboration, and enhances transparency, leading to better decision-making and more successful outcomes. While traditional stakeholder theory focuses on organisation-level engagement, there is limited research on how practitioners personally engage with stakeholders. Using constructivist grounded theory, three senior stakeholder engagement practitioners from leading South African mining companies were interviewed over 10 months, with focus groups conducted in each company. Analysis revealed a substantive theory with two key themes: "Directing the Theatre of Engagement" (the practitioner's assertive role) and "Showing Up" (the practitioner's mindset). This theory informs the recruitment, training, and development of engagement practitioners and helps executives appreciate this skill set, enabling organisations to engage more effectively with diverse stakeholders.

Note: This paper arose from a doctoral study undertaken by Dr Forson. Dr Viljoen was his supervisor.

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1. Introduction

Stakeholder theory has become prominent in business ethics and organisational management since its introduction by R. Edward Freeman in the 1980s. Stakeholder theorists argue that a firm should create value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders, and they address morals and values in managing an organisation. But they keep the analysis at the level of the organisation and do not consider the person who must undertake the activities of engagement. A theoretical framework for understanding the human processes of stakeholder engagement is presented in this article.

Freeman's 1984 book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* is often cited as the foundation of stakeholder theory at organisational level. Freeman (1984) and Donaldson and Preston (1995) identified four distinct but mutually supportive aspects of the theory: descriptive, instrumental, normative and managerial. Mitchell et al. (1997) derived a typology of stakeholders based on the attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency. Friedman and Miles (2002) introduced compatible/incompatible interests and necessary or contingent connections as additional attributes for examining stakeholder relationships.

Research on stakeholder theory continues. Recent research has examined the connections between stakeholder management and the achievement of corporate goals (Adepoju et al., 2023; Cantele et al., 2024; Rendtorff, 2020; Vracheva & Mason, 2015). Other studies have explored the implications of contentious relationships between stakeholders and organisations (Gaito, 2023; Ganson et al., 2022; Kujala et al., 2022; Weibel et al., 2022). Stakeholder theory has also been applied to various contexts, such as sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and international business (Newburry & Rose, 2023; Rendtorff, 2020; Song et al., 2025). It remains a key consideration in business ethics and organisational management, with ongoing research exploring its application, implications, and future directions (Kaptein, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2022; Taylor & Rosca, 2024). However, little research has been undertaken on the experience of the person who undertakes the engagement. Hence this study, which was undertaken to understand the experience of the practitioner during the engagement process and to create a grounded theory to explain the stakeholder engagement practitioner's experience of engagement events.

2. Literature Review

The literature review is structured as follows. Some general comments are made about the background of stakeholder theory. Thereafter the main types of stakeholder engagement are summarised. Then the emerging role of stakeholder engagement, as distinct from stakeholder theory is covered, with insights

on how stakeholder engagement can be understood. The literature review concludes with a pulling together of the gap in theory that this study seeks to address.

R. Edward Freeman (Freeman, 1984) overturned agency theory as the dominant model for understanding a firm. Agency theory holds that the firm operates for the benefit of the shareholders and that the firm is run on their behalf by professional managers (Mitnick, 1973). Agency theory was immortalised in Milton Friedman's comment that "the business of business is business" (Friedman, 1970). Friedman's comment reflects his belief that the primary responsibility of a business is to maximise profits for its shareholders. According to Friedman, corporate executives act as agents for the owners of the business (the shareholders), and their main duty is to conduct the business in accordance with the owners' wishes to generate as much profit as possible. Stakeholder theory, by contrast, arose from the nexus between decision-making and risk-taking within a firm, and its analysis is at the level of the firm. Stakeholder theory is an attempt to understand how the interests of those who make decisions can be aligned with the interests of those who bear the consequences of those decisions (Vishwanathan, 2016).

2. 1 Main types of theory

Donaldson and Preston (1995) identify four main types of stakeholder theory. Each offers distinct perspectives on how organisations identify, prioritise, and manage relationships with their stakeholders, thereby shaping both ethical considerations and strategic decision-making. The *descriptive approach* explains how managers and organisations behave and perceive their roles with stakeholders, providing insight into real-world practices. The *instrumental approach* focuses on the outcomes of stakeholder management, emphasizing how engaging stakeholders can lead to improved organisational performance and long-term success. The *normative approach* introduces ethical principles, addressing what managers *ought* to do in terms of responsibilities toward stakeholders based on moral obligations. The *managerial approach* focuses on guiding and shaping managerial behaviour. It provides actionable principles and frameworks that help managers make decisions that balance stakeholder interests and align with both normative ethics and instrumental benefits. Recognising these types helps managers balance competing interests, develop tailored engagement strategies, and navigate complex trade-offs to create value not only for shareholders but for all stakeholders involved. Furthermore, understanding these theories supports the integration of ethical, social, and governance considerations into corporate strategy, fostering legitimacy and sustainable success in today's interconnected business environment. Donaldson and Preston (1995) are tantalisingly silent on the details of the attitudes, structures and practices within the engagement context**.** Donaldson and Preston's structuring of existing theory

categorise engagement theory in terms of extrinsic attributes. It does not regard the intrinsic human process playing out during an engagement.

The intrinsic human process in stakeholder engagement encompasses the foundational, human-centred dimensions that underpin how individuals and groups interact, establish relationships, and collaboratively create value within engagement contexts. Central to this process is the recognition of stakeholders as individuals possessing distinct values, aspirations, emotions, and capabilities, thereby moving beyond purely transactional or compliance-oriented interactions. The process highlights the importance of relational and collaborative dynamics that cultivate trust, empathy, and mutual learning among participants. Furthermore, it acknowledges the significance of identity formation both within and across stakeholder groups, which shapes cooperation and overall engagement. Ultimately, the intrinsic human process in stakeholder engagement prioritises value creation that extends beyond economic considerations to include well-being, as well as social and environmental benefits (Kujala et al., 2022; Osobajo et al., 2021; Rinaldi, 2020; Valentinov & Roth, 2024).

Some research has addressed aspects of the human process inside stakeholder engagement. Pellegrini and Lovati (2025) highlight that stakeholder engagement encompasses varying levels of involvement—from consultation and collaboration to stakeholder-directed initiatives—and necessitates a deep understanding of stakeholders' diverse skills and attributes. This engagement process is inherently relational and iterative, characterised by ongoing communication, co-creation, and mutual adaptation, which together reflect the complexity of human interactions and cognitive engagement during collaboration. Complementing this perspective, (Kennedy et al., 2025) identified trust, connectedness, and user empowerment as fundamental psychological components of stakeholder engagement, particularly within digital mental health contexts. Their study links effective engagement to the fulfilment of basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—thereby underscoring the centrality of intrinsic motivation and human connection in fostering meaningful and successful stakeholder involvement. None of these frameworks explains what happens inside the process of engagement, particularly from the point of view, and lived experience of the practitioner.

2.2 The emerging role of stakeholder engagement

In contemporary operational contexts, stakeholders have increasingly exerted significant influence over both the functioning of firms and their conceptualisation of societal roles. Brown and Flynn (2006) assert that attentiveness to and responsiveness toward stakeholder inputs enhance the quality of business decisions, although they do not elaborate on the specific processes involved in listening and acting. Building on this, Kern et al. (2007) demonstrate that organisations which engage in transparent

communication and proactively address conflicts within stakeholder networks tend to achieve superior outcomes. They highlight the critical importance of effectively managing the "license to operate" (Kern et al., 2007). Similarly, Blackburn et al. (2018) emphasize that stakeholder engagement is as vital as securing a licence to continue business operations. They further note that society legitimises the role of stakeholders, who in turn can either facilitate or impede organisational effectiveness (Blackburn et al., 2018).

Expanding the theoretical framework, Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2022) propose that stakeholder theory offers valuable insights for developing a comprehensive theory of value creation, one that acknowledges both the economic and moral dimensions inherent in inter-organisational relationships. In the research domain, O'Brien et al. (2022) find that involving stakeholders enriches research outcomes by contributing unique perspectives and experiential knowledge that complement academic expertise. Meanwhile, Johnson-Cramer et al. (2022, p. 2) critically question the ongoing relevance of stakeholder theory, interrogating its contribution to business and societal advancement. They conclude that further inquiry is necessary to delineate the scope and limits of managerial agency, advocating for a deeper understanding of managers' roles in stakeholder relations. This plea for further inquiry aligns precisely with the central focus of the present study.

2.3 Understanding stakeholder engagement

Barquet et al. (2022) devised a set of criteria (which they labelled as relevance, inclusion, learning, effectiveness and credibility) that captures dimensions that they considered relevant for understanding stakeholder engagement. Maak (2007) investigated the relationship between responsible leadership, stakeholder engagement and social capital in a review of extant literature. Maak noted that if a business is to be sustainable, it must address the needs of multiple stakeholders and provide benefits to stakeholders (Beske et al., 2020; Falcão et al., 2021; Zadek, 2006). None of these authors consider engagement in the context of the person who must undertake and manage the engaging.

To sum up, many authors view stakeholder engagement as a transactional process (Beske et al., 2020; Falcão et al., 2021). They reduce stakeholder engagement to a simplistic formula: engage, and benefits will be obtained. But they do not explain what sort of engagement is needed, and by whom, to produce those benefits. Neither do they explore what engagement is in practice. The analysis remains at the level of the organisation.

2.4 The gap in theory

The authors above (Beske et al., 2020; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Falcão et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2022; Zadek, 2006) make valid and important contributions, but nowhere do they describe and explain what happens in the human process of engagement. The initial, theoretical gap identified in the pre-literature review investigation for this study is: there is no theory to explain the lived experience of stakeholder engagement from the perspective of the lead practitioner who is undertaking the engagement. This study provides new, deeper, insight into how to engage with stakeholders, and by extension, with the other (Other, as defined by Powell & Menendian, 2018; and Vaahensalo, 2021). The results of the study will be of use to stakeholder engagement practitioners, C-suite executives and researchers in the field of stakeholder engagement. Understanding what happens when a stakeholder engagement practitioner engages with stakeholders is not only beneficial in a narrow commercial or industrial sense. It has ramifications for improving outcomes whenever anyone engages with someone different from themselves.

My interest in stakeholder engagement began in the mid-2000s during a complex assignment for a large utility company, which sparked a rewarding career involving various clients and work with AccountAbility, the organisation behind the AA1000 Stakeholder Engagement Standards (AccountAbility, 2015). Through extensive client experience with existing stakeholder engagement methods, I discovered that current research primarily focuses on describing engagement structures and categorising approaches but lacks insight into the internal, psychological processes practitioners experience to engage effectively. This gap became the foundation for this study which was undertaken to understand the experience of the practitioner during the engagement process and to create a grounded theory to explain the stakeholder engagement practitioner's experience of engagement events.

3. Research Methods

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) is a qualitative research methodology focused on generating new theories inductively from data, particularly about complex social processes, rather than testing pre-existing theories. It emphasizes understanding social phenomena through participants' experiences and the meanings they construct in interaction with the researcher. Constructivist grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2022; Charmaz, 2014, 2017, 2020; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018) was selected as the research method; it is particularly well-suited for investigating the lived experiences of stakeholder engagement practitioners, as it prioritised subjective perspectives and the collaborative construction of meaning. The choice of CGT was especially significant given the limited pre-existing theory and literature available in this area, which underscores

the need for an inductive, interpretive approach to theory development grounded in empirical data (Birks & Mills, 2022; Charmaz, 2020; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

3.1 Data sources

The sources of data were as follows:

Primary participants: The senior stakeholder engagement executives, at or immediately below board level. These persons are responsible for creating and overseeing the stakeholder engagement strategy. They were the prime source of information. Their data were gathered through three individual interviews spread over a ten-month period.

Secondary participants : They were the specialists at the mines and shafts responsible for community engagement. These participants were included to provide additional depth to the analysis. These data were captured in a single focus group held in each organisation.

The stakeholder engagement sections of the participating companies' annual integrated reports for the previous three years were extracted. While this seemed like a good idea at the time of designing the study, in practice the content of the annual integrated reports was summarised and sanitised versions of the data gleaned from the primary and secondary participants. The annual integrated report analysis contributed nothing that was not provided in greater detail by the primary and secondary participants. With hindsight, this seemed rather obvious and is a source of personal learning.

3.3 Participant recruitment

The purpose of the study was to understand the world of top stakeholder engagement practitioners in the mining industry in South Africa. The mining industry was chosen for this purpose as it has a long history of focused investment in stakeholder engagement, arising out of South Africa's fractured past. The companies selected for this study were globally recognised mining companies, listed on one or more stock exchanges. The stakeholder engagement functions in these companies were strongly resourced, and their stakeholder engagement achievements were in the public domain. The mining companies were selectively chosen based on their stature in the mining and investor community and my insider knowledge of the industry. I had no prior commercial relationship with any of the participant organisations and thus avoided a conflict of interest.

I adopted the ethical considerations proposed by Saunders et al. (2019), who offer comprehensive ethical research guidelines that emphasize protecting participants' rights and ensuring the integrity and

credibility of research. These key ethical principles include obtaining informed consent where participants are fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, their right to decline or withdraw without penalty, and any conditions influencing participation. Furthermore, Saunders et al. (2019) require researchers to respect participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, allowing them control over the information they share and ensuring data protection through methods such as coding and prompt destruction of identifying information. The Regenesys Business School ethical clearance policy (Regenesys, 2015) prioritises integrity, transparency, and respect for participants by requiring informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and protection from harm. It aligns with legal frameworks like South Africa's PoPI Act (Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013) to safeguard personal information and enforces academic honesty through its plagiarism policy. This was duly followed for this study. I observed anonymity and respected the privacy of the participants and their organisations. The participants were fully informed of the scope and purpose of the study. Captured data were identified in a labelling system that did not identify the respondent or the company where it was obtained. Respondents voluntarily agreed to participate, and informed consent was obtained.

3.4 Data generation and collection

Both primary and secondary participants preferred online interviews due to their remote work situations.

3.4.1 Primary participants

The three primary participants contributed data as follows. Three comprehensive, open-ended, and unstructured interviews were conducted with each stakeholder engagement executive. These interviews allowed for extensive exploration of the practitioners' experiences and perspectives, and each session typically lasted approximately ninety minutes. The data collection timeline was distributed across various critical phases of the corporate cycle, including the periods of strategic planning, year-end activities, roadshow season, and wage negotiations. This temporal dispersion of interviews allowed capture of the dynamic nature of stakeholder engagement practices as they unfolded in different organisational contexts and operational stages, thereby providing a rich, nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

A note on sample size is important here. The purpose of the study was to critically understand how experienced, competent stakeholder engagement executives experienced engagement. It was not a generic study on how stakeholder engagement executives experience engagement. In these circumstances a small sample size is justified (Vander Linden, & Palmieri, 2023; Morse, 2015). The three highly experienced executives selected for this study were at the top of their profession and were

regarded so by their peers and the industry. Three intensive interviews were held with each exudative, the data emerging in final tranche of interviews indicated that saturation had been reached.

3.4.2 Secondary participants

Data from the secondary participants was gathered through online meeting platforms in the same manner as the primary participants. The focus group participants were selected by the stakeholder engagement executive in each participating organisation. The interview format was the same as that for the primary participants, and the data were analysed according to the same method.

3.4.3 Annual integrated reports

The stakeholder engagement sections of the companies' annual integrated reports for the previous three years were analysed and coded in the same way as the interview transcriptions. The online interviews were prepared for coding as follows. The MSTeams™ transcription application was used to capture the interview in a Word™ document. MSTeams™ also provided a video recording of the conversation. Sometime the transcription did not accurately reflect the meaning of the speaker (the software may interpret a pause in a sentence as two sentences and thus obscure the original meaning) To clean up the document, I reviewed the video recording while adjusting the text to reflect the import of the speaker.

The goal was to capture participants' experiences of, and perspectives on, engagement. The opening question was "What is it like to engage with stakeholders?" The interviewees were experienced and accomplished practitioners, and so needed no encouragement. The same question was asked in different ways, but always with a focus on the human experience of dealing with stakeholders (Charmaz, 2012; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Low & Hyslop-Margison, 2021).

4. Data analysis

Open coding and analysis began immediately after the first interview. The coding process followed the guidelines proposed by Charmaz and Birks and Mills. I undertook line-by-line labelling of data with concise codes that captured the reported actions or processes. Following initial coding, the process advanced to focused coding where I examined the initial codes to identify significant topics or clusters. See Appendix 1 for an example of coding, and see Appendix 2 for an example of category development.

Throughout the coding process I actively acknowledged and reflected on my own preconceptions and prejudices. The use of memoing and reflexivity to document and critically assisted me in evaluating my evolving perspectives as the study progressed. Iterative data collection in subsequent interviews

and constant comparison with earlier data and codes allowed the findings to emerge from participant data rather than researcher assumptions, thus reducing the influence of bias.

These categories were then used to synthesise and explain larger segments of data, helping to develop more abstract categories that integrate multiple initial codes. This stage involved an iterative process of constant comparison back to the original data, the codes and the relevant memos. This enabled the categories to be grounded in the data to enable a theory or explanation to be generated. (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). See Appendix 3 for early versions of a depiction of the emerging theory.

Finally, theoretical coding integrated and refined the categories into a cohesive theoretical framework that explained the lived experience of stakeholder engagement. I undertook memo writing throughout the coding activities to capture my unfolding in sights pose questions and reflect on what was emerging from the data. One overarching theme described the way in which the practitioner must take control of the engagement processes. This was built on proto categories dealing with the personal characteristics of the practitioner, both the attitudinal demeanour of the practitioner as well as a bias towards action. Adjacent to this was requirements to master the skills techniques and processes of engagement, the types of behaviour most associated with engagement. and then there was a proto-category dealing with matters of principle, ethics and morality. In subsequent interviews, I addressed prior themes manifested during the coding and analytical process in greater detail as focused coding and categorisation progressed. Multiple interviews helped in developing deeper, trusting, personal relationships with each practitioner.

Memo writing was extensively used to make sense of what was appearing out of the review and analysis of the codes. Memos were the crucial intermediate step between data collection and writing the drafts of this paper (Charmaz, 2006). Memos helped to record my thinking about and refection upon the data and the emerging picture. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Charmaz (2006) considers memo writing as the fundamental process by which the researcher engages with the data. Charmaz (2006) offers clear guidelines for memo writing, and these were adopted for this study. Unique memos were written for codes, categories or observed patterns derived from data scrutiny. I sought reasoned empirical evidence to support the definitions of codes and categories, and the analytic claims made about them. The process involved comparing data and data; data and codes; codes and codes; codes and categories; categories and categories; and categories and captured insights in memos.

The use of raw data in the form of quotations in memos stimulated fresh inquiry. Gaps and inconsistencies in the analysis were identified and prompted further questions to ask in subsequent interviews with the executives. Diagrams, illustrating the relationships between categories, were used

for focused coding and to begin the process of theory building. The diagramming was particularly useful in understanding processes and experience. The memo technique assisted in gaining reflexive insight into the process. This prompted deeper interaction with the data and augmented theoretical sensitivity. Care was taken not to force the data.

The last round of interviews with the respondents involved collecting additional data to refine and expand upon the categories developed during coding, and to reach saturation. The last round of interviews failed to add new insights and interpretations to the codes and categories. The respondents were repeating content that had already been shared earlier. Theoretical sampling in this case with the same respondents confirmed and underscored relationships between the categories. In parallel, an iterative and reflexive process pulled the focused codes into broader groups of related themes or concepts, and then into categories that represent broader themes or concepts. This process identified patterns and relationships and allowed the me to develop a coherent structure that reflected the complexities in the data. (Birks & Mills, 2022, Charmaz, 2014, 2017, 2020, Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, Creswell & Poth, 2018)

This coherent structure was then used to synthesise the insights gained from coding and memo writing to construct a grounded theory. Storytelling, specifically the notion of the Theatre of Engagement, explained below, was a compelling part of interpreting and consolidating the findings, and producing a theory of stakeholder engagement. The constructed theory emerged from the data rather than being imposed by pre-existing frameworks.

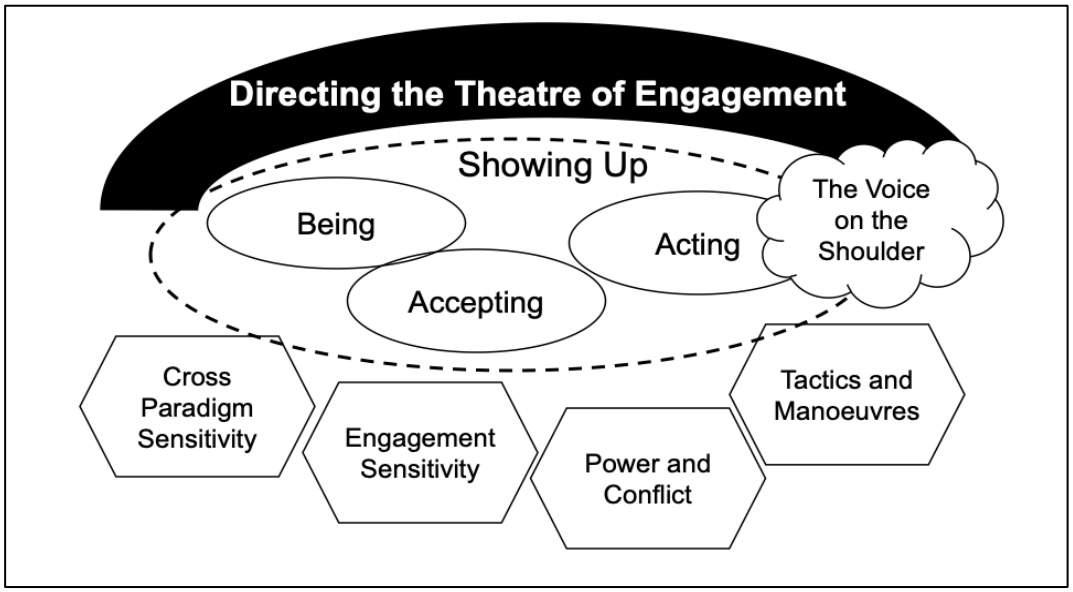
5. Findings

The findings of this study have been systematised into a tentative theory of stakeholder engagement. Figure 1 below provides the schema for unpacking this theory of stakeholder engagement. This theory emphasises the primacy of engagement as a basis for ensuring beneficial relationships with stakeholders.

The “what” of stakeholder engagement is addressed through a comprehensive approach that involves both the strategic design and the personal presence of the practitioner. At the core is the idea of *Directing the Theatre of Engagement*, where the practitioner is responsible for designing, driving, coordinating, and sustaining meaningful and beneficial engagement with stakeholders. This involves a proactive and intentional approach to shaping engagement efforts that align with organisational objectives and stakeholder needs. Directing implies assertive agency. Agency is the ability of a practitioner to take control of his or her own life and make decisions that align with his own goals and

values (Agency as defined in Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2021, p. 47). The practitioner must adeptly express him/herself in a direct but respectful manner, maintaining a clear intent and unwavering focus on delivering that message.

Figure 1: A theory of stakeholder engagement



Source: Author's own work

A theatre is a structure or space designed for live performances before an audience. It represents a cooperative performing art form where live performers recreate real or imagined events, typically on a stage, directly for spectators. The performers convey these experiences through a blend of gestures, speech, song, and varied expressive methods. Within this framework, a theatre of engagement refers to an intentionally created gathering that exists alongside, but separate from, everyday work life. In stakeholder engagement, this theatre isn't a physical venue but a shared communal space that must be built and nurtured—whether with respected traditional leaders in remote Limpopo or with sceptical asset managers in New York. It is inherently collaborative, requiring everyone involved—the performers, audience members, and those behind the scenes—to cooperate for the engagement to succeed. Above all, a theatre is fundamentally a realm of communication, drama, spectacle, and expressive interaction. Those who have experienced a rural community engagement suddenly erupting into harmonious joyous song will recognise it as a profoundly beautiful moment. This is why describing stakeholder interaction as "Directing the Theatre of Engagement" captures the essence so well. The practitioner must simultaneously take on the roles of actor, director, stagehand, and scriptwriter.

A subset of *Directing the Theatre of Engagement* is the category of *Showing Up*, which speaks to the practitioner's readiness and capacity to engage effectively. This entails a deep understanding of self

and a commitment to authentic presence in stakeholder interactions. Staying within the metaphor of the theatre, it is helpful to refresh our understanding of method acting as a theatrical technique. Method acting encourages the actor to deliver sincere and expressive performances by fully inhabiting the role of the character (Schwartz, 2022). It is an emotion-oriented technique that emphasises understanding and experiencing a character's inner motivation and emotions, rather than just performing actions. Actors (or practitioners) use their physical, mental and emotional selves in the creation of a character, and stress individual authenticity and a reality deeply grounded in the given circumstances of the script. This is a crisp summation of the inner world of the practitioner, who has to stride the stage of engagement. There are three subcategories of *Showing Up*. *Being* refers to the self-knowledge, emotional maturity, and personal insight required to engage from a place of integrity and confidence. *Accepting* highlights the practitioner's recognition and acceptance of the inherent realities and constraints that come with engagement processes—acknowledging what can and cannot be changed. Finally, *Acting* captures the practitioner's role in clarifying the purpose of engagement and ensuring that the engagement processes deliver on their intended outcomes. This includes cultivating constructive relationships across a diverse range of stakeholders and, crucially, assertively leading the engagement process to ensure it remains focused, inclusive, and productive. The practitioner has to show up in the Theatre of Engagement with this frame of mind in order to achieve the required outcomes.

The Voice on the Shoulder: The category of *The Voice on the Shoulder* captures the dual ethical responsibility the practitioner holds in stakeholder engagement. On one hand, the practitioner must maintain a clear and nuanced understanding of the organisation's strategy, as well as how that strategy uniquely affects various stakeholders. This insight allows the practitioner to act in ways that support the organisation's interests, ensuring alignment with its goals while doing so in an ethical and responsible manner. On the other hand, the practitioner is also guided by *a* moral imperative—a strong internal ethical conviction that shapes their decisions and actions. This moral compass ensures that stakeholder engagement is not only strategically sound but also grounded in integrity, fairness, and accountability.

The *Directing the Theatre of Engagement* and the three-fold aspects of *Showing Up* (with the *Voice on the Shoulder*) categories describe the personal characteristics required of the practitioner to engage in engagement. The practitioner deploys these personal characteristics through four further categories dealing with the competencies required to do the work of engagement. The table below depicts the relationship between the components of the model.

Figure 2: Explaining the relationship between the components of the model

The categories below describe the frame of mind of a competent stakeholder engagement practitioner	The categories below are the competencies the practitioner uses, within the frame of mind alongside, to get the work of engagement done
Directing the Theatre of Engagement, Showing Up, (Being, Accepting and Acting), The Voice on the Shoulder	*Cross-paradigm sensitivity, personal engagement sensitivity, power and conflict, tactics and manoeuvres*

Source: Author's own work

The four competencies depicted in the lower part of Figure 1 is explained below:

Cross-paradigm sensitivity refers to the practitioner's ability to engage meaningfully with stakeholders from diverse social, ideological, cultural, and economic backgrounds. In doing so, the practitioner demonstrates a high degree of social and cultural sensitivity, enabling the development of authentic relationships and the facilitation of conversations that span multiple worldviews. This requires an openness to difference and a respectful awareness of the complex dynamics at play in stakeholder interactions.

At a general level, the practitioner acknowledges and accepts differing values, expectations, and expressions of identity, including those related to race and gender. They are attuned to the subtle nuances of the broader ecosystem in which they operate and respond with thoughtfulness and respect. Culturally, the practitioner is comfortable navigating a wide spectrum of cultural norms and practices, engaging with stakeholders in ways that reflect an understanding of their lived experiences. Ideologically, the practitioner is able to identify and appreciate the specific perspectives and belief systems of stakeholders, ensuring that these are considered in the engagement process. Additionally, the practitioner brings historical awareness to their work—empathising with the past and recognising the historical factors that shape present-day identities and dynamics within stakeholder groups. This includes an acceptance of the diversity and complexity that exists within any single group, allowing for more inclusive and informed engagement.

Personal engagement sensitivity refers to the practitioner's attunement to the lived experience, emotional state, and contextual reality of each stakeholder. This sensitivity allows for engagement that is not only responsive but also deeply respectful and adaptive to the nuances of each interaction.

Central to this is observation—the practitioner carefully observes and assesses the stakeholder's language, behaviour, and demeanour, not just during the engagement itself, but also in the pre- and post-engagement phases. Attention is given to both overt messages and the more subtle, covert signals that may reveal underlying concerns or motivations. Alongside observation is the practice of *listening*, where the practitioner remains alert and responsive to the stakeholder's words and messaging, constantly evaluating how best to engage or reply in a way that honours the stakeholder's perspective. Interpretation plays a crucial role in making sense of what has been observed and heard. It involves adopting a higher-order perspective—one that considers the social and cultural nuances specific to the stakeholder's context. This interpretive lens helps the practitioner navigate complexity with greater empathy and insight.

Engagement often brings tension, making *emotional regulation* essential. The practitioner must remain composed, resisting reactive or defensive impulses, and manage their own emotional responses, particularly in moments of conflict or disagreement. This poise allows for a constructive and balanced interaction.

Finally, the practitioner may engage in subtle manipulation—not in a coercive sense, but in the thoughtful shaping of the engagement environment. This includes elements such as seating arrangements, the way introductions are made, the choice of venue, and the tone set by opening remarks. Each of these seemingly minor details can be strategically employed to create conditions that are conducive to trust, openness, and the desired outcome of the engagement process.

Power and conflict are inherent and inescapable dimensions of stakeholder engagement. The practitioner recognises that conflict is not only inevitable but also an integral part of the role. This appreciation of conflict allows the practitioner to approach it not as a disruption to be avoided, but as a dynamic to be understood and worked with constructively. Rather than being passive in the face of tension, the practitioner actively engages in the deployment of conflict—organising, managing, and using it strategically within the engagement process. Conflict, when approached with clarity and intention, can be harnessed to surface hidden issues, challenge assumptions, and deepen mutual understanding. This reinforces the drama inherent in the notion of *Directing the Theatre of Engagement.*

At the same time, the practitioner remains focused on building collaboration despite the presence of disagreement or opposition. They seek out opportunities for shared purpose and cooperation, using conflict as a catalyst for dialogue rather than division. This balanced approach enables the practitioner to navigate power dynamics with integrity and to transform conflict into a force for connection and progress.

Tactics and manoeuvres in stakeholder engagement refer to the practitioner's strategic and adaptive handling of complex, and often challenging, interactions. Recognising that disagreements and tensions are a natural part of the engagement process, the practitioner approaches these moments with clarity, skill, and emotional intelligence. Rather than avoiding conflict or striving for immediate consensus, the practitioner is willing to engage in open and honest conversations, even when they are difficult or uncomfortable.

This tactical approach involves managing expectations—not every interaction will yield a positive or productive outcome in the short term. The practitioner understands that stakeholder engagement is a long game, and that progress often unfolds over time. As such, they are prepared to accept imperfect or partial outcomes in the present, while remaining focused on building the trust, insight, and alignment needed to achieve more meaningful results in the future.

By manoeuvring thoughtfully through disagreements, the practitioner keeps the broader vision in sight. They know when to assert, when to yield, and how to adapt their approach to different personalities, power dynamics, and cultural contexts. This blend of strategic patience and practical action enables the practitioner to sustain engagement, even when experiencing turbulence, and to steadily guide the process toward deeper understanding and more sustainable outcomes.

Together, this summary describes what happens inside stakeholder engagement. In conclusion, these various characteristics can only be fully understood if they are contemplated within the dynamics of directing the theatre of engagement.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

The theory described above provides a nuanced insight into the role, behaviour, and personal value-basis of a successful stakeholder engagement practitioner.

6.1 Discussion

Directing the Theatre of Engagement describes a role which requires self-reliant and independent thought and action, but still with alignment to corporate values and purpose. Unlike other business functions, the stakeholder engagement practitioner must work independently and directly with stakeholders, in parallel with other organisational roles. This is what makes the role unique and underappreciated. The category of Showing Up and its attendant sub-categories provide a perceptive insight into the type of person best suited for stakeholder engagement. To fulfil their roles, practitioners must objectively position themselves between management and stakeholders, suspending their own emotions and personal responses to read and respond to the situation in the context of corporate goals. This requires a voluntary suspension of self, as practitioners must adapt their tone and behaviour to achieve these goals, observing themselves dispassionately and stepping aside from their own prejudices and views.

The Voice on the Shoulder provides insight into the authenticity, integrity and moral groundedness of an accomplished stakeholder engagement practitioner. The sub-categories of Power and Conflict, Cross-Paradigm Sensitivity, Engagement Sensitivity, and Tactics of Engagement can be fruitfully used to enhance training interventions, especially when linked to the categories described within Showing Up. Practitioners can critically evaluate their roles and find ways to enhance their contributions.

Stakeholder engagement professionals are required to communicate with the "other" or the "out-group" (Powell, 2018). This is the essence of their job. This research explains how this may effectively be undertaken. The stakeholders with whom they must establish relationships are not selected by them, and so practitioners have little control over who is in the process. Practitioners must rely on their skills, experience and techniques to establish a working, constructive relationship with a stakeholder. Negotiation, persuasion, relationship building, and conflict resolution are all necessary components of this process (Redford & Ratliff, 2018). However, stakeholder engagement is more than just the application of techniques, skills and experience. These are simply tools available to practitioners. A certain kind of person is required to use these tools adroitly. This study is a first step in addressing that gap in theory and in practice. Practitioners must be comfortable in building relationships with stakeholders of many kinds of organisational sophistication. The art of engagement is played out in the minds of practitioners, and it influences their attitude, timing, tone, and behaviour.

To engage effectively with stakeholders, practitioners must have a comprehensive understanding of the stakeholders, their interests and their needs. This requires that the practitioner exhibits empathy and the ability to perceive the situation from the stakeholder's standpoint, but not to be misled by it. The

primary category of directing the Theatre of Engagement, along with the dependent sub-categories, provides a dynamic structure for undertaking engagement. Moreover, the stakeholder engagement practitioner must master the art of active listening, as it is the fundamental skill to comprehend the stakeholder's perspective on issues. Alongside this, practitioners must articulate their objectives and opinions lucidly and succinctly. They must establish a bond of trust with stakeholders to foster a constructive relationship. Finally, practitioners must be capable of adapting to dynamic situations and embrace flexibility in their approach, since every stakeholder engagement instance is distinct and presents unique challenges. All this must be done while furthering the interests of the organisation. Thus, stakeholder engagement practitioners must possess a diverse skill set, including empathy, active listening, effective communication, trust-building, adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to relate to different degrees of organisational sophistication to ensure successful stakeholder engagement.

On a broader, more academic level, the theory of stakeholder engagement makes further contributions. The act of engagement involves the deliberate effort to establish a connection with individuals or groups who are perceived as "other". This process fosters a mutually beneficial relationship with an out-group. However, it is important to note that not all out-groups are hostile or antagonistic towards the in-group. In fact, they exist on a spectrum ranging from lack of interest to active confrontation (Staszak, 2009). Nevertheless, the challenge in creating a harmonious coexistence with more aggressive and hostile stakeholders remains. The category of Showing Up provides anyone who wishes to engage with the other, with a personal experiential framework within which to undertake the role.

At an operational level, the findings of this study can be directly applied in the recruitment and training of stakeholder engagement practitioners and their support teams. The theory positions the role of stakeholder engagement practitioner at the Paterson E-band level (programming decisions) (le Roux, 1985) and at Stratum VI in the Stratified Systems Theory (Jaques, 1985) (overseeing complex systems). Paterson E-band roles require complex cross-functional coordination, and interpreting and implementing strategic policy decisions made by top management.

6.2 Recommendations

This study offers valuable insights into the experiences of practitioners and provides a framework within which to understand the complexities of engagement and cultivate successful relationships with the "other." This was the primary objective of the present authors, who sought to comprehend the practitioner's perception of the "other" in the process of building trust and understanding, as posited by Vaahensalo (2021).

By exploring the perceptions and experiences of practitioners, greater insight has been gained into how the practitioner effectively bridges gaps between diverse groups. This understanding is fundamental in a globalised and interconnected world, where the ability to engage and collaborate with diverse groups is increasingly crucial. With a better understanding of the mental processes that underlie successful engagement strategies, it is possible to better equip practitioners to navigate the challenges of engagement and build more effective relationships with the "other".

A comprehension of the experiential aspect of engagement, and a suitable grounded theory to elucidate general principles, make it feasible to train professionals more effectively in the art and practice of stakeholder engagement (Frechette et al., 2020). Improved stakeholder engagement will result in greater societal benefits, by reducing conflicts and disharmony in inter-organisational relationships. The *Showing Up* category provides a strong basis for the recruitment of stakeholder engagement practitioners. Applicants who do not embody the characteristics inherent in the sub-categories of *Being*, *Accepting* and *Acting* are unlikely to succeed in the role. However, the significance of this research extends beyond this. This research aids in the development of a structured framework for effectively engaging with the "other," by dealing with differences between groups creatively and sensitively. This will enable us to achieve equality without having to compromise identity, and to accept differences without resorting to ideas of superiority and inferiority.

Effective stakeholder engagement depends on practitioners who combine ethical integrity, relational intelligence, and reflective, adaptive thinking. Evidence-informed recommendations are provided below for the recruitment, training, and professional development required to cultivate practitioners capable of building constructive, trust-based relationships with diverse stakeholders. There are several ways in which the findings of this study can be pout to beneficial use:

6.2.1 Recruit for integrity and relational competence

Practitioners should demonstrate ethical reasoning, empathy, and interpersonal sensitivity. Recruitment should assess candidates' ability to act authentically, manage complex interactions, and uphold diversity and inclusion. Training should reinforce these qualities through ethics, self-awareness, and reflective practice, ensuring practitioners engage stakeholders with credibility and moral clarity.

6.2.2 Prioritise the ability to navigate "otherness"

Competent practitioners can constructively engage with diverse perspectives and groups. The findings underpinning cross-paradigm sensitivity are worthy of deeper exploration. Recruitment should favour candidates exhibiting adaptability, cultural humility, and curiosity. Training should provide

experiential learning in intercultural communication, bias awareness, and perspective-taking, enabling practitioners to view differences as opportunities for collaboration.

6.2.3 Develop reflective and cognitive agility

Effective engagement requires practitioners to interpret complex dynamics, question assumptions, and adapt strategies in real time. Recruitment and training should assess and develop reflective capacity, critical thinking, and cognitive flexibility through structured exercises and debriefing, promoting continuous improvement in engagement practice.

6.2.4 Train for systems thinking and relationship management

Practitioners must understand stakeholder networks as interconnected systems. Recruitment should prioritise experience in collaborative or multi-stakeholder contexts. Training should include systems thinking, conflict resolution, negotiation, and facilitation skills to build sustainable, constructive relationships across diverse stakeholders.

6.2.5 Strengthen skills in active listening and co-creation

Practitioners need to foster trust through open communication and collaboration. Recruitment should value prior experience in facilitation, mediation, or participatory projects. Training should emphasise experiential learning through role plays, simulations, and co-creation exercises, developing the ability to co-design solutions with stakeholders effectively.

6.2.6 Applying these insights in other business contexts

The principles emerging from this study extend beyond stakeholder engagement to other areas of organisational life. In leadership development, the emphasis on integrity, empathy, and understanding "otherness" can inform leadership competency models that prioritise relational intelligence alongside strategic acumen. Leaders who embody these qualities are more likely to build trust and legitimacy across teams and communities. The notion of Showing Up is particularly relevant here.

In human resource management, these insights advocate for recruitment practices that value interpersonal and ethical capabilities as much as technical skills. By selecting individuals who display relational competence, organisations can cultivate inclusive cultures that enhance collaboration and reduce interpersonal conflict. The earlier comments about cross paradigm sensitivity are particularly apt here.

The findings also have strong relevance for change management, where stakeholder resistance often stems from a lack of engagement or shared meaning. By applying the principles of co-creation, reflection, and open dialogue, change leaders can foster ownership and shared accountability, leading to smoother transitions and more sustainable change.

In corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability initiatives, the research underscores the importance of authentic relationship-building with communities and partners. By adopting practitioner-centred approaches that prioritise trust and participation, organisations can move from symbolic gestures to genuine social impact.

Finally, in innovation and global business, the capacity to engage constructively with diverse perspectives enhances creativity and responsiveness. When practitioners and leaders alike embrace "otherness" as a source of insight rather than division, they open the door to more inclusive and forward-thinking problem-solving. This approach supports the development of adaptive, ethical, and resilient organisations that can thrive in complex and interconnected environments.

Recruiting and training stakeholder engagement practitioners around principles of integrity, reflexivity, relational intelligence, and cultural humility transforms engagement from a procedural function into a strategic organisational capability. These insights highlight that engagement is not simply about managing communication but about cultivating the moral and cognitive maturity to navigate difference constructively. When applied more broadly, they offer a model for ethical leadership, inclusive innovation, and sustainable collaboration across all business domains.

7. Conclusion, limitation and future scope

This study provides insight into the lived experience of practitioners to help us truly comprehend the intricacies of engagement and building fruitful relationships with the other. This is the primary objective of the present authors, who sought to comprehend the practitioner's perception of the "other" in the process of building trust and understanding, as posited by Vaahensalo (2021). The study goes beyond a mere mechanistic description of the observable interactions between the parties involved, as recorded by Donaldson and Preston (1995) in their identification of four main types of stakeholder theory. Instead, a structured understanding of the lived experience that underlie successful engagement strategies is presented.

It fills the gap in the research of Barquet et al. (2022) by expanding on the notions of relevance, inclusion, learning, effectiveness and credibility) that captures dimensions that they considered relevant

for understanding stakeholder engagement. This study also adds substance to the work of Maak (2007) in that expands the understanding the relationship between responsible leadership, stakeholder engagement and social capital. This article delivers a deeper understanding of the complexities of the engagement process. Falcao et al. (2021, p. 404) argue that: "Corporations should assess their existing stakeholder manager and evaluate whether the profile, skills, and attitude are most compatible with the" needs of the organisation. This study presents a detailed framework within which to conduct such an evaluation. By exploring the experiences of practitioners and not of organisations in a generic sense, greater insight has been gained into how the practitioner effectively bridges gaps between diverse groups. This understanding is fundamental, particularly in today's globalised and interconnected world, where the ability to engage and collaborate with diverse groups is increasingly crucial. By gaining a better understanding of the mental processes that underlie successful engagement strategies, it is possible to equip practitioners better to navigate the challenges of engagement and build more effective relationships with the "other". Austhof et al. (2020) in a study on participation and engagement of public health stakeholders in climate and health adaptation, confirmed that "fostering scientist–stakeholder relationships … is paramount to catalyse collaborative efforts around climate impacts on public health and building resilience against current and projected health impacts" (Austhof, 2020, p. 265). It can be argued that a similar injunction applies to other types of organisations. Ultimately, this would contribute to creating a more harmonious and inclusive society.

The authors set out to analyse and explain how stakeholder engagement practitioners organise and manage themselves in the engagement process. They have demonstrably explained what is happening (the process) when a stakeholder engagement practitioner engages with a stakeholder. This research outcome will find immediate application in situations where a practitioner must bring different, possibly antagonistic, stakeholders together and achieve a better outcome. It can also be powerfully applied in the recruitment and training of stakeholder engagement practitioners. Furthermore, it will assist practitioners with a deeper understanding of the scope and impact of their role.

A systematic framework of behaviour that enables productive interaction with people who are considered "other" is presented here. It does this by providing a new understanding of dealing with the disparities between groups innovatively and delicately. In the robust world of stakeholder engagement, it is crucial to have upright persons of integrity who can constructively explore shared values and build connections with others. It is premised on the assumption that in contemporary society, the presence of individuals exhibiting integrity is essential. Such individuals are capable of constructively engaging with others to explore shared values. This process facilitates the development of beneficial and collaborative relationships. This research definitively supports novel approaches for the creation of

constructive relationships, without requiring us to sacrifice individuality, and shows how we embrace differences without having to resort to conflict. In this context a constructive stakeholder relationship refers to a positive, mutually beneficial personal connection between an organisation's stakeholder engagement practitioner and the organisation's stakeholders. These relationships are ideally characterised by open, transparent communication, active engagement, and collaboration aimed at addressing common goals and concerns. Constructive relationships foster trust, respect, and ongoing dialogue, enabling stakeholders to feel valued and involved in decision-making processes.

Building constructive relationships with those who are different from us allows us to learn about the different struggles our stakeholders face. Sometimes, people who are different from us inspire us to do something different, better, or more meaningful. Having an open mind to other people's perspectives enriches our lives by revealing other things about our lives and reality. People who are different from one another in race, gender and other dimensions bring unique information and experiences to bear on the task at hand. When we hear dissent from someone who is different from us, it provokes more thought than when it comes from someone who agrees with us. It can lead to better decision-making and more thoughtful consideration of different perspectives. The emotional support provided by constructive social connections with our stakeholders helps to reduce the damaging effects of stress and can foster a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Belonging is a fundamental human need, and it is critical for everything from well-being to performance. When we, in our disparateness, share a sense of social identity as a group and with other groups, we can lean in, use our strengths, and be authentically who we are.

At the time of the study, I was a 68-year-old white South African male who speaks English as a home language. The study's three main participants were Black individuals in their 40s and 50s; two were men and one was a woman. Although English serves as the language of communication in their corporate environments, when interacting with stakeholders they switch to the language most appropriate to the situation, which might not be their native tongue. Since the researcher did not speak these languages fluently, some meanings could have been lost or misunderstood.

Because of Covid-19 restrictions and work-from-home preferences, the interviews were conducted via an online meeting platform, which produced a rough transcript and a video record. Opportunities for loss of meaning in transition were thus magnified. These concerns were addressed as follows: the literally transcribed words often do not convey the meaning intended, or the meaning the researcher received in the live exchange. Because the words have come from participants who are not native

English speakers, the first glance reading may be jarred and awkward. The researcher frequently re-watched the video recordings while looking at the transcripts. This kept the analysis close to the raw data and kept the researcher from flights of fancy. The conversation immediately came alive: fractured, meaningless sentences suddenly imparted meaning when spoken by a live human voice. In this way, the researcher "lost less" from the transcripts. Revisiting the videos clarified the interpretation of what has been said.

This study focused on top stakeholder-engagement practitioners in the South African mining industry. Care must be taken in extending the conclusions to other industries and to practitioners' different skill levels and experience. There is little reason to expect the applicability of the theory to differ markedly outside the South African mining industry. However, the theory may well be influenced by context. Hence, it is surmised that the style of the engagement approach may differ in other industries.

The experience of the stakeholder engagement practitioner was the focus of this study. It may well be that a different set of theoretical insights would be arrived at if the experiences of the stakeholders themselves and or company management were included in the study. A constructivist grounded theory approach underpinned this study. Although this approach was favoured to provide a definitive and conclusive set of results, other philosophies, such as an ethnographic design, may have allowed for a different set of factors to be integrated into the study. This will be left to future research.

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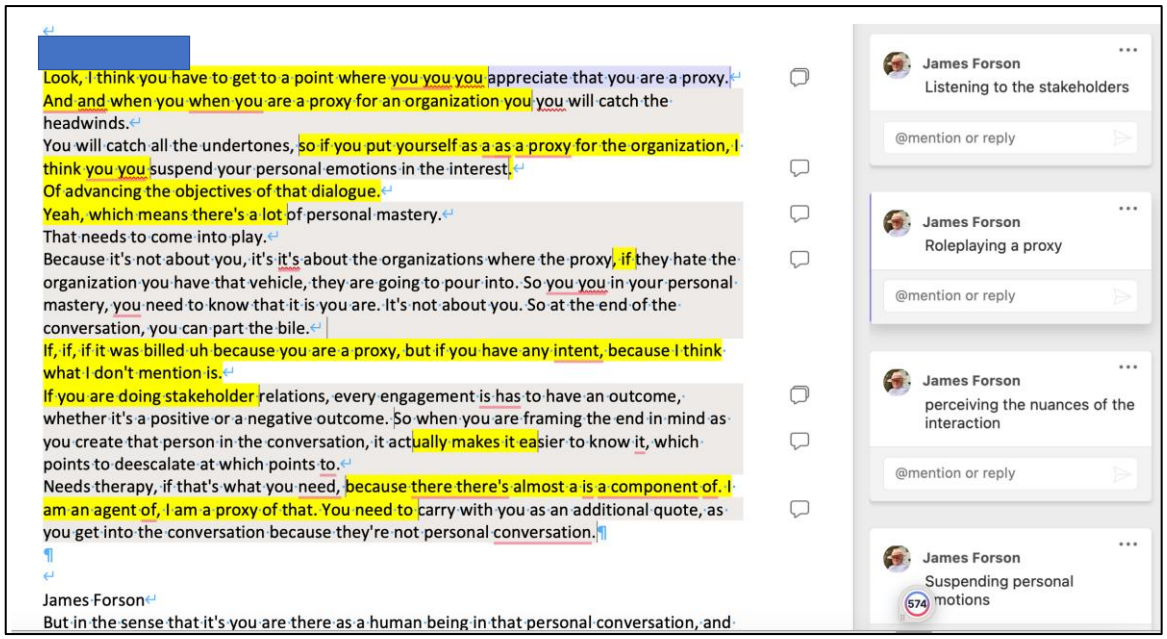
Appendices

Appendix 1

The figure below depicts a coded transcript. Notice how the codes were captured in the comments feature of MS Word for later extraction and analysis.



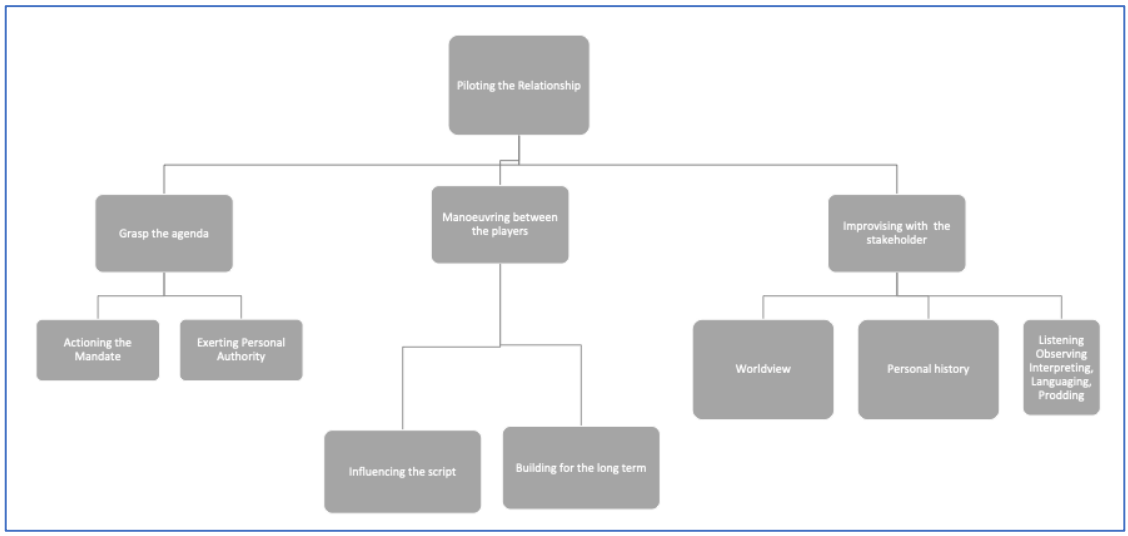
Appendix 2

The table below, drawn from a significantly larger spreadsheet, illustrates how tentative categories emerges from the coded data. It was a lengthy iterative process to put category codes against groups of codes. In some case codes spanned more than one category.

Code	Tentative category
Understanding the purpose of engagement	Purpose
Developing different engagement processes for different stakeholders	Purpose
Protecting value	Purpose
Co-creating value	Purpose
Giving reassurance to stakeholders	Relationship
Cold-calling stakeholders to begin relationship	Relationship
Establishing human relationship with stakeholder	Relationship

Appendix 3

This diagram illustrates how the categories were interpreted to begin to form a story. The categories were reviewed against the codes and against the memos to construct the simplest and most accurate description of the lived experience of stakeholder engagement. The category of Piloting the Relationship ultimately became *Directing the Theatre of Engagement.*



The diagram below depicts a parallel version of the emerging theory. Here the topic of Showing Up was not fully displayed, and it had to be accommodated.