Using Your APR to Select a Technology Solution That Catapults Stakeholder Relations and Engagement

By Michael N. Daily, APR

Just as Mr. Spock and the science fiction crew of "Star Trek" boldly go where no one has gone before, as an Accredited communications professional for more than 45 years serving our government, I've found that many of the "Star Trek" stakeholder relationship conflicts and political dimensions are allegories of contemporary cultural realities. These include multiple competing and partnering stakeholder groups, faced with dissimilar objectives and priorities, and evolving toward greater diversity and inclusiveness.

Like Spock, I was given the challenge to provide a large space industry company, with many employees and dispersed global operations, a technology solution to help it conduct a more efficient, effective and transparent stakeholder relationship management and engagement program.

This challenge encompassed the APR Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSA) area of study: Managing Relationships; with a focus on a major KSA area subtopic: "Networks." I employed the principles of Research, Planning, Implementation and Evaluation.

Research. Beginning with primary and secondary, qualitative and quantitative research into the space industry sector (aka "NewSpace"), I learned that the Universal Propulsion Applications Corporation (UPA)*, a publicly traded company, is a leading designer and producer of small rocket engines, as well as a recognized propulsion system test and evaluation organization. UPA's niche market-leading position and reputation is built upon its commitment to ethical business practices, safety, reliability and a value-based culture. Our research identified the following areas of concern:

- Altering the business development model from single customer (Government only) to a multi-customer focus
- Environmental compliance
- Labor union issues and contract renegotiation
- Increased government space-related testing, regulation, and compliance
- Cyber security and protection of Intellectual Property (IP)
- Regulatory compliance, especially with Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR)
- Loss of revenue due to (current) major clients bringing T&E work in-house
- Effective and efficient supply chain coordination

Initial research included a thorough communication audit of the NewSpace transportation sector, propulsion industry subsector, resulting in a compilation of current industry and organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). Upon review of the research with the UPA Board of Directors and senior leadership, the company made the strategic decision to become the globally preferred provider of small rocket engines. UPA recognized through the formidable realities of the research that it must reorient its *entire* organizational marketing and communication model to focus on stakeholder relations. This shift in stakeholder engagement would improve its global market share within the industry, while increasing cost savings; and effectively, efficiently and transparently managing areas of stakeholder concern.

The crew of the starship Enterprise routinely confronted multiple alien races, friendly and hostile alike, as they explore unknown worlds, making objective decisions based on deeply enriched data, supported by artificial intelligence (AI). Our objective was identified as the following: Within 12 months, design and implement a collaborative and integrated stakeholder management engagement process supported by adaptable and innovative technology to ensure a measurable level of connectivity with all UPA stakeholders identified in the stakeholder mapping. To meet this objective, we would need to provide two deliverables:

1. A (new) stakeholder engagement program.
2. Technology architecture, systems and processes to support that program.

Planning. During the planning phase, we addressed the eight areas of stakeholder concern previously identified and determined the need for an integrated, collaborative, and synchronized Stakeholder Engagement Plan supported by a dedicated stakeholder technology solution. The technology-provider assessment process consisted of five phases:

- Research various technology solutions.
- Plan the technology implementation and integration.
- Prepare the organization and stakeholders.
- Implement the stakeholder management and engagement process.
- Measure, Evaluate and Adjust.

I required that the UPA stakeholder engagement team to provide interim reporting on the campaign progress at the completion of each phase and asked UPA to appoint a senior Stakeholder Relationship Manager to manage the engagement process, reporting directly to the CEO and board of directors on plan progress. Our stakeholder relationship project team profiled and mapped all organization stakeholders in accordance with the software architecture design, reviewing and revising the profiles and map throughout the process.

The stakeholder engagement plan design determined the levels and methods of engaging the stakeholders best suited to the purpose and scope of the engagement and to the relevant stakeholders. Communication channels, events and activities were tailored to individual stakeholder preferences and processes.

The plan developed specific tactics, timelines, budgets and other required resources utilizing existing UPA project management processes and reporting protocols, and we requested that the UPA leadership establish boundaries of engagement disclosure and communicated the boundaries to all UPA Stakeholder. We created an engagement planning document and made the document available to stakeholders for additional critique and input.

The planning document established indicators to measure the process and effectiveness of the plan. and identified resources required for successful engagement. The Plan identified those organizational areas requiring additional communications capacity to be built, focusing on the general areas of knowledge skills, financial and physical, information access, time requirements and personnel optimization.

Based on the UPA Stakeholder engagement planning requirements and process identified above, 10 Stakeholder Relations software development companies were identified utilizing six criteria:

1. Specialized. Choose software specifically designed for managing stakeholders and stakeholder engagement.
2. Collaboration. Choose Software that stimulates and simplifies collaboration.
3. Adaptable and Evolutionary. Choose Future-Focused Software That Values User Input.
4. Risk Management. Select Software that Helps Limit Risk.
5. Expandabale. Choose software that integrates new innovations and emerging technology (i.e., AI, data science, etc.)
6. Support. Choose software that includes continuous updates and subject matter expertise

A Canadian software development company, specializing in stakeholder engagement software, won the competition and fully participated in the remaining stakeholder engagement planning, implementation and evaluation process.

A key aspect of stakeholder relationship management and engagement is the management of risk. As a member of a business ecosystem traditionally focused on risk management, our team formally assessed and addressed engagement risks and established a robust framework for sustained risk assessment that aligned

with the risk management approach of existing UPA operations. A stakeholder engagement risk matrix was created based on seventeen potential risks that might be encountered prior to, during and as a result of UPA stakeholder engagement activities and initiatives.

As an organization steeped in a collaborative tradition, UPA ensured that stakeholders were invited to participate reasonably well in advance and that communications were appropriate for each stakeholder, based on earlier mapping activities and profiling research. UPA developed and provided participants with the briefing materials needed to ensure success of the engagement campaign.

UPA developed, with the input of all stakeholders, procedures and behavior ground rules for the participants in the engagement. The ground rules were agreed upon by all participants.

UPA documented the engagement and its outputs and developed an action plan, going forward, based on an analysis of the engagement and its outputs articulating how UPA responded to outputs of the engagements. The UA Stakeholder Engagement Action Plan addressed all outputs. The action plan was developed in consultation with those responsible for implementing it. UPA communicated the outputs and action plan to participants of the engagement in an appropriate and timely manner.

Implementation. Total implementation of the new stakeholder engagement plan, technology and process occurred over a 12-month period with first six months used to establish the stakeholder engagement process, including some internal personnel reorganization and training and the next six months used to evaluate and adjust the system where required. To avoid internal political hurdles, I requested that UPA appoint a senior Stakeholder Relationship Manager to manage the new engagement process, reporting directly to the CEO and Board of Directors on plan progress.

Activities in the first six months consisted of continuous stakeholder registration, mapping and profiling and integration of the stakeholder management technology into existing communication programs and processes. Engagement activities utilizing the new management technology included participation in government policy panels, product and service demonstrations, open houses, trade show participation, stakeholder roundtables and technical information exchanges. Stakeholders were included on all organization distribution lists and routinely invited to UPA leadership meetings. Finally, the UPA Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) community outreach program refocused support for local STEM education programs as future workforce and innovation source.

Evaluation. UPA leadership required that the stakeholder relationships engagement process provide continuous feedback and pathways to improvement. The UPA stakeholder management technology systematically monitored and evaluated the overall quality of the stakeholder engagement and evaluated the quality of the individual engagements including the monitoring and evaluation of:

- Stakeholder Commitment and integration
- Purpose, scope, and stakeholder participation
- Process (Planning, preparing, engaging, acting, review and improving)
- Outputs and outcomes (are the stakeholder engagement improving stakeholder trust and two-way communications)
- Reporting

UPA Senior leadership received five key reports from the technology platform, graphically displayed in a single, comprehensive dashboard format:

➢ Hot subject categories (emerging issues and opportunities)
➢ Staff engagement activity/levels
➢ Stakeholder engagement activity/levels
➢ Stakeholder communication feedback
➢ Stakeholder Relationship Barometer (based on the Grunig-Hon Relationship Measurement Model)

Results. Over the course of 12 months, stakeholder (two-way) communications improved by several percentage points, as did the quality and quantity of stakeholder engagements. Stakeholder issues (existing and emerging) reduced in scope and frequency, reducing associated costs in the process. Utilizing the Grunig-Hon Stakeholder Relations measurement scale, factors like stakeholder trust and positive attitude also showed measurable improvement.

With input/feedback from the stakeholders, UPA is continually improving its stakeholder engagement, identifying, and acting on specific improvements and finding competitive advantage through stakeholder insights and recommendations. As a public traded company, UPA's stakeholder engagement technology annually reports on its stakeholder engagement to include diversity and inclusion initiatives. Report formats and delivery were tailored to existing operational processes to simplify and assist organizational acceptance.

The name of the Company has been changed at its request.

Michael Daily, APR, ICME, received his APR in June 2011. Mike specializes in integrating stakeholder relationship management practices and technology applications. For the past 22 years, he has counseled senior-level executives and helped establish numerous stakeholder management and engagement programs for both government and non-government organizations; and is considered a subject matter expert in the areas of Stakeholder Relations Engagement and Management, change management communications, brand design and management, operational planning and employment of strategic communications, and communication measurement, analysis, and effects assessment. Mike is the author of numerous professional articles, lectures and educational workshops related to strategic communications planning, research, management, and measurement. Mike also serves as an Accreditation in Public Relations (APR/APR+M) instructor, facilitator and mentor. Colonel Mike Daily (Ret., U.S. Marine Corps) served as a public affairs and information Operations officer from 1976 to 2006. He is a 1976 graduate of the US Naval Academy and holds master's degrees from the University of Southern California (1982) and National University (1989); and is a graduate of the Department of Defense Information School.