

FREE GUIDE

PM PRO SKILLZ | DELIVERY LEADERSHIP SERIES

The Difficult Stakeholder *Field Guide*

7 stakeholder archetypes decoded.
Response strategies, scripts, and an alignment
checklist for high-stakes delivery moments.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 7 difficult stakeholder archetypes decoded
- Situation-specific response strategies for each
- Scripts for the conversations most leaders avoid
- Early warning signs by archetype
- A high-stakes alignment checklist

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

A field guide, not a theory book

Every delivery leader has a version of this problem. The stakeholder who said yes and now cannot be reached. The executive whose expectations shifted without a formal conversation. The department head who is cooperative in meetings and obstructive everywhere else.

These situations are not planning failures. They are relationship and authority failures. And unlike project timelines or resource plans, they cannot be fixed with a better template. They require a different kind of preparation.

This guide gives you seven archetypes, each based on patterns that appear across delivery environments. For each one you will find what to look for, how to respond before the situation escalates, and a conversation starter for the moments that feel hardest to navigate.

USE THIS GUIDE WHEN

You are preparing for a difficult stakeholder conversation. You have noticed a pattern but cannot name it. You are trying to understand what is driving a stakeholder dynamic before it becomes a problem. Or you are in the middle of it and need a starting point.

A note on the scripts

The conversation starters at the end of each archetype are not scripts to read verbatim. They are starting points. The language is direct but not aggressive. The goal in every case is to open a conversation, not to win an argument. Adapt the wording to your relationship and context.

CONTENTS

The Seven Archetypes

01 The Disengaged Sponsor

Present at kickoff. Gone when it matters.

02 The Scope Creeper

Every conversation adds something new.

03 The Silent Resistor

Agrees in the room. Disappears outside it.

04 The Uncommitted Approver

Yes means maybe. Maybe means wait.

05 The Territorial Department Head

Protective of their team. Resistant to shared ownership.

06 The Moving Goalpost Executive

The definition of success keeps changing.

07 The Overloaded Decision Maker

Always available. Never able to decide.

Also in this guide: The High-Stakes Alignment Checklist on the final page.

01

ARCHETYPE 1 OF 7

The Disengaged Sponsor

Present at kickoff. Gone when it matters.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

Your sponsor was enthusiastic at the start. Signed the charter. Attended the kickoff. Then gradually stopped showing up. Emails go unanswered for days. Decisions that need their authority sit in a queue. When they do appear, they seem disconnected from where things stand. The project keeps moving, but without the air cover it needs.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Consecutive steering committee absences without explanation
- Delegating decisions to someone without the authority to make them
- Short, vague responses to status updates that were previously detailed
- Increasing reliance on you to manage upward on their behalf
- Their name invoked by others as justification, but they are rarely in the room

RESPONSE STRATEGY

Do not wait for the sponsor to re-engage on their own. Request a brief one-on-one framed around a specific decision that only they can make. Come with a clear ask, not just a status update. If access is blocked, identify who has their ear and build from there. The goal is to reconnect them to a consequence they care about.

CONVERSATION STARTER

"I want to bring you one decision before our next steering meeting. It will take ten minutes and I can work around your schedule. Are you available Thursday morning or would Friday be better?"

02

ARCHETYPE 2 OF 7

The Scope Creeper

Every conversation adds something new.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

They never formally request a change. Instead, new requirements appear in meeting notes, casual conversations, or forwarded emails. Each addition seems small on its own. Collectively they represent weeks of unplanned work. When challenged, they express surprise that you are not already handling it.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Requirements arriving via chat, corridor conversations, or forwarded emails
- Phrases like 'while we are at it' and 'I assumed that was included'
- Scope discussions that start in passing and never get formally documented
- Resistance to the change control process described as excessive bureaucracy
- Their team making requests directly to your delivery team, bypassing you

RESPONSE STRATEGY

Make the cost of scope addition visible every time it happens. Do not absorb the work quietly and do not refuse it outright. Instead, document the addition, estimate the impact, and bring it back formally. The goal is to make informal scope creep structurally expensive, not to create conflict.

CONVERSATION STARTER

"I want to make sure we handle this properly. Based on what you described, I am estimating an impact of approximately [X] on timeline and [Y] on resources. I will put together a formal change request so we can get it approved and resourced. Can we connect Thursday to confirm the details before I send it through?"

03

ARCHETYPE 3 OF 7

The Silent Resistor

Agrees in the room. Disappears outside it.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

They never push back directly. In meetings they nod, say little, and raise no objections. Outside the room, they quietly fail to deliver on commitments, influence their team against the change, or surface concerns through other stakeholders. The resistance is real but never formally owned.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Consistent agreement in meetings followed by missed commitments
- Their team expressing concerns that were never raised by the leader directly
- Declining to engage in detailed discussions about implementation
- Routing concerns through third parties rather than raising them directly
- Their name appearing in risk conversations without them being in those conversations

RESPONSE STRATEGY

Create space for private honesty. Silent resistance usually reflects a concern that feels unsafe to raise publicly. A one-on-one framed as seeking their perspective, not as a confrontation, often surfaces the real issue. Once named, it can be addressed. Unspoken, it will persist.

CONVERSATION STARTER

"I value your perspective and I want to make sure I am not missing something. Are there concerns about this approach that we have not had a chance to work through together? I would rather know now than discover them later in the delivery."

04

ARCHETYPE 4 OF 7

The Uncommitted Approver

Yes means maybe. Maybe means wait.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

They give approval without authority, agreement without conviction, and commitment without follow-through. Decisions that passed through governance come back re-opened. Agreements from last month are revisited this month. The team cannot build on decisions that will not hold.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Approvals given in session that are questioned or reversed outside of it
- Requests to revisit decisions that were formally agreed
- Hedging language: 'I think,' 'probably,' 'we should be fine'
- Low engagement during decision discussions but high engagement afterward
- A pattern of seeking further input after decisions are supposedly made

RESPONSE STRATEGY

Make the decision and its terms explicit at the point of agreement. Confirm it in writing immediately. Before the meeting ends, restate what was decided, by whom, and what it means for delivery. A decision that is restated and documented is harder to un-make than one that simply happened in conversation.

CONVERSATION STARTER

"Before we close this item, I want to confirm what we have agreed so I can update the team. My understanding is that we have approved [X] with the following conditions: [Y]. Is that a fair summary? I will send a brief confirmation note after this meeting."

05

ARCHETYPE 5 OF 7

The Territorial Department Head

Protective of their team. Resistant to shared ownership.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

They are cooperative when the work stays within their department and obstructive when it crosses into shared territory. They raise concerns about workload, prioritization, and authority whenever integration is required. Their team is well-managed within the silo and difficult to work with across it.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Requests for integration routed back as requests for formal approval
- Protective language around their team's time, capacity, and priorities
- Late or partial participation in cross-functional planning sessions
- Informal feedback that your project is deprioritized within their function
- Accountability conversations that end without named owners

RESPONSE STRATEGY

Approach through shared outcomes, not shared authority. Territorial stakeholders respond better to conversations about what success looks like for both functions than to governance structures that feel imposed. Find the outcome they care about and position integration as the path to it.

CONVERSATION STARTER

"I know your team has a lot of competing priorities right now and I want to be realistic about what I am asking for. The integration point I need is specifically [X]. It protects [Y], which I know matters to your team. Can we agree on what that looks like so I can plan around it?"

06

ARCHETYPE 6 OF 7

The Moving Goalpost Executive

The definition of success keeps changing.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

The original objective was clear. Over time, what they say they want has shifted. Sometimes the shift is explicit. More often it is gradual, surfacing in comments about the direction, comparisons to other programs, or reactions to progress updates that suggest the target has moved without anyone formally moving it.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Success metrics referenced in updates that were not in the original brief
- Comparison to programs or benchmarks introduced after delivery began
- Positive updates that receive neutral or skeptical responses without explanation
- Questions about the program that suggest a different understanding of its purpose
- Key stakeholders referencing a version of the objective that differs from yours

RESPONSE STRATEGY

Surface the gap explicitly and early, before it becomes a delivery failure. Bring the original objective back into the conversation and ask directly whether it still reflects what is needed. A documented realignment conversation is far less costly than discovering the gap at delivery.

CONVERSATION STARTER

"I want to make sure we are still aligned on what success looks like before we go further. My current understanding is [original objective]. Based on some of our recent conversations, I want to confirm that is still the right target, or adjust our approach if priorities have shifted."

07

ARCHETYPE 7 OF 7

The Overloaded Decision Maker

*Always available. Never able to decide.***WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE**

They have the authority. They are not blocking deliberately. They are simply stretched across too many competing demands to give your decision the attention it needs. Escalations sit in queues. Meetings get cancelled. When you do get time, it runs short. The project is not their top priority and they do not always know what to do with the decisions you bring them.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Meetings that are cancelled or shortened at short notice
- Escalations acknowledged but not resolved within expected timeframes
- Requests to follow up with their chief of staff or EA instead of directly
- Decisions returned without resolution and a request to bring options
- A consistent pattern of deferral rather than refusal

RESPONSE STRATEGY

Make it as easy as possible to decide. Come with a clear recommendation, not a menu of options. State the decision needed, the consequence of not deciding by a specific date, and your recommended path. Reduce the cognitive load to a single yes, no, or redirect.

CONVERSATION STARTER

"I need one decision from you and I will keep this to five minutes. We need to choose between [Option A] and [Option B] by [date] or [consequence]. My recommendation is [Option A] because [one clear reason]. Do you agree, or is there something I am missing?"

ALIGNMENT CHECKLIST

Before High-Stakes Stakeholder Moments

Use this checklist before steering committee meetings, difficult one-on-ones, escalation conversations, or any moment where stakeholder alignment is critical to the outcome.

BEFORE THE MEETING

- I know what decision, agreement, or outcome I need from this conversation

- I have identified which stakeholder archetype I am dealing with

- I have a specific ask, not just a status update to share

- I know who else in the room has a stake in the outcome

- I have anticipated the most likely objection and prepared a response

- I have a one-sentence summary of what success looks like at the end of this conversation

DURING THE CONVERSATION

- I stated the purpose of the conversation clearly at the start

- I gave space for concerns to surface before presenting my position

- I listened for what is not being said, not just what is

- I named the decision or agreement needed before the conversation ended

- I confirmed shared understanding before closing the topic

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

- I sent a brief written confirmation of what was agreed

- I noted any outstanding concerns that were raised but not resolved

- I identified the next action and who owns it

- I flagged any signals that suggest the agreement may not hold

YOU HAVE THE MAP.

The next step is the conversation.

This guide gives you the framework. What it cannot do is have the conversation for you. The scripts are starting points. The strategies are grounded in real delivery experience. The rest depends on showing up prepared and staying focused on the outcome.

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