

Working Paper | Strategy

Five Frameworks for Navigating Non-Linear Stakeholder Environments

Classical strategy tools still apply when stakeholder timelines no longer overlap.

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Stakeholder theory was originally developed in an era when the relevant parties to a business decision could, with reasonable confidence, be convened in a single room on a single afternoon. That assumption has eroded. Cross-border governance, multi-generational ownership structures, multi-decade ESG commitments, and the emergence of interlocutors who experience duration differently from the operating team have all contributed to what we refer to internally as the non-linear stakeholder environment.

The leadership challenge is no longer which stakeholders to prioritize. It is how to align stakeholders whose planning horizons do not overlap, or, in a small but growing subset of cases, do not proceed in the same direction.

I. SWOT, Temporally Weighted

The strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats matrix remains, in our view, the most durable tool in the strategy toolkit. Its limitation in non-linear environments is scope: a stakeholder who will complete their evaluation in 2041, or who has already completed it in 1983, cannot be well-served by a quadrant assembled this quarter.

We recommend a temporally weighted SWOT, in which each quadrant is populated three times: once for the near horizon (zero to three years), once for the lifetime horizon (three to thirty years), and once for the continuity horizon, which we reserve for entities whose relationship to the organization extends beyond conventional succession planning.

	NEAR (0–3 yrs)	LIFETIME (3–30 yrs)	CONTINUITY (30+ yrs)
Strengths	Market position, team capability	Brand equity, IP portfolio	Institutional memory, stakeholder persistence
Weaknesses	Cash flow, talent gaps	Succession risk, regulatory exposure	Continuity obligations not yet mapped
Opportunities	Adjacent markets, partnership	Platform shift, new categories	Stakeholders who acknowledge you first
Threats	Competition, regulation	Disruption, obsolescence	Temporal asymmetry (see Framework 2)

Fig. 1: Temporally Weighted SWOT. The continuity horizon (rightmost column) surfaces alignment failures that a single-horizon SWOT would route around.

2. Porter's Five Forces, Adjusted for Asymmetric Counterparties

Porter's framework remains the field standard for industry analysis. It was designed, however, for counterparties with symmetric information and bounded lifespans. When a supplier has operated in your category longer than your category has existed, "supplier power" becomes difficult to quantify with the standard instruments.

Our recommended adjustment is the introduction of a sixth force: temporal asymmetry, representing the relative positional advantage conferred by a counterparty's duration. In engagements where we have been able to isolate it, temporal asymmetry explains approximately 31% of the otherwise unexplained margin variance in industries where at least one participant predates written record.

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3. The McKinsey 7-S Framework, with Expanded Soft Elements

The 7-S framework is, to our eye, the most humane of the classical tools. It respects that organizations are made of people. It does, however, assume that all seven elements can be observed from within the conventional business day.

We propose two extensions. First, that shared values be assessed across the full set of entities with claims on the organization, including those whose claims are historical or liturgical. Second, that staff be interpreted to include contributors whose attendance is not recorded on the HRIS but whose pattern of contribution is nonetheless legible in the output.

4. RACI, Extended to Unknowable Parties

The responsibility-accountability-consulted-informed matrix is the workhorse of program governance. We find that RACI breaks down in two specific circumstances: when the accountable party has withdrawn from direct communication, and when the consulted party can only respond at intervals determined by their own calendar.

Our practice has developed a modified matrix, RACI-U, in which a fifth column, Unknowable, is reserved for stakeholders whose preferences cannot be directly polled but whose approval is nonetheless required for initiative continuity. We treat the Unknowable column as a governance reality, not an escape hatch.

ROLE	R	A	C	I	U
Definition	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed	Unknowable
Communication	Direct	Direct	Bidirectional	One-way	Inferred
Cadence	Per task	Per milestone	Per request	Per report	Per alignment
Typical party	Team lead	Executive	SME	Board	[See legal]

Fig. 2: RACI-U Matrix. The Unknowable column (gold) is a governance reality, not an escape hatch.

5. OKRs, with Recursion

Objectives and key results, as originally formulated, assume a quarterly cadence and a measurable outcome. We recommend layering recursive OKRs: a quarterly set nested inside an annual set, nested inside a multi-generational set, with the outermost ring owned by a trustee function rather than an executive function.

The multi-generational ring should not be expected to produce quarterly attribution. Its role is to ensure that the quarterly rings, summed over time, still produce an arc that stakeholders at all horizons can recognize as the organization's.

The Point of All Five

No framework, on its own, makes a non-linear stakeholder environment legible. Used together, they reduce the terrain's complexity to something executives can govern against. The practice discipline is to select two frameworks per engagement, apply them rigorously, and accept that stakeholder alignment in this context is not a destination but a standing agenda item.

Organizations that adopt these adaptations tend to outperform peers on three dimensions: retention of long-horizon partners, reduction in pattern-breaking decisions, and, in our post-engagement surveys, a quiet sense among senior leaders that the organization is finally being heard by the parties it most needs to be heard by.

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