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Stakeholder Engagement as Organizational Sensing Infrastructure: A Capability Model Linking External Voice, Strategic Attention, Learning, and Adaptive Corporate Response

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Abstract

Organizations increasingly invite stakeholder input, yet engagement alone does not explain whether external voice becomes strategically consequential. This article develops an original non-empirical capability model that conceptualizes stakeholder engagement as potential sensing infrastructure rather than as sensing itself. Integrating scholarship on stakeholder engagement and dialogue, organizational attention, sensemaking, learning, adaptation, and managerial microfoundations, the analysis separates four transformations: external voice must become organizationally noticeable, noticed information must be interpreted and integrated, stakeholder knowledge must become response-relevant, and response must be mobilized under organizational and contextual constraints. The proposed stakeholder-sensing capability therefore resides not in the volume of engagement but in the organization's capacity to preserve, prioritize, interpret, connect, and revisit heterogeneous stakeholder signals without treating them as automatically accurate, representative, or actionable. The model further makes filtering endogenous: stakeholder status, attention structures, executive cognition, internal conduits, and interpretive frames can amplify some signals while attenuating or distorting others. Adaptive response is consequently treated as a conditional endpoint rather than an inevitable or inherently successful outcome. The article contributes by linking stakeholder theory to attention-based and organizational-learning perspectives while preserving level-of-analysis, temporal, power, and measurement boundaries. It also identifies temporal recursion and cross-level enactment as central research challenges. The integrated architecture remains proposed rather than empirically validated, universally applicable, ethically sufficient, or performance enhancing.

Keywords: Stakeholder engagement, Organizational sensing, Strategic attention, Organizational learning, Adaptive response, Stakeholder voice

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Introduction

Stakeholder engagement has become a central vocabulary for describing how organizations relate to actors who affect or are affected by organizational activity, yet the construct covers heterogeneous practices, purposes, and theoretical assumptions [1]. That breadth creates a problem for explanations of organizational adaptation. An organization may establish consultation forums, maintain investor dialogue, solicit community input, or create boundary-spanning roles while still failing to notice consequential information, integrate it into organizational knowledge, or alter action. Dialogue itself is also narrower than stakeholder communication generally and should not be treated as a synonym for engagement [2]. The analytical question is therefore not simply whether engagement occurs, but what happens to externally generated information after contact has been established.

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This article develops a proposed stakeholder-sensing capability model that treats engagement as potential organizational sensing infrastructure. The starting premise is that stakeholder signals do not enter organizations in an unmediated form: leaders interpret expectations and enact engagement through situated sensemaking processes [3]. Building on that premise, the article separates external voice, selective organizational notice, interpretation and learning, and adaptive response as analytically distinct transformations. It also treats filtering, amplification, distortion, and exclusion as features of the sensing process rather than peripheral implementation problems. This formulation is deliberately bounded. It does not assume that stakeholders possess complete information, that all voices are equally representative, that noticed issues are correctly interpreted, or that organizational response constitutes success. Its contribution lies in specifying the transitions through which engagement may acquire adaptive significance and the conditions under which those transitions may fail.

From stakeholder engagement to organizational sensing

Engagement is an observable relationship or practice; sensing is proposed here as an organizational capability for converting selected external information into revisable interpretations and response possibilities. The distinction matters because engagement itself varies with managerial antecedents. CEO motivation and means can predict different patterns of engagement with primary and secondary stakeholders [4]. Thus, the existence or intensity of engagement may partly reflect who is willing and able to engage rather than the organization's capacity to learn from what stakeholders communicate. Treating contact as sensing would therefore collapse an antecedent of information access into the capability that processes information.

The informational qualities of engagement also vary. Firm–stakeholder dialogue differs in timeliness, valence, richness, and topicality, and these features can have different relational consequences depending on stakeholder type and status [5]. Moreover, internal actors may operate as conduits between external stakeholders and organizational decision processes, as documented in B Corporations [6]. The proposed model consequently locates sensing neither wholly at the boundary nor wholly inside formal strategy structures. It begins with engagement-generated access but asks whether signals cross organizational interfaces, attract attention, survive interpretation, and become available for action. Engagement is therefore necessary for some forms of sensing, but it is neither a sufficient condition nor a validated proxy for the capability itself.

External voice as distributed environmental information

Stakeholder voice is best understood as distributed environmental information: situated observations, expectations, claims, interpretations, and challenges held across actors with different relationships to the organization. Engagement can help organizations address knowledge problems, but the same process creates ethical difficulties concerning whose knowledge is sought, how it is used, and how participation is structured [7]. This cautions against treating stakeholder statements as objective environmental measurements. External voice may contain privileged local knowledge, partial information, strategic framing, contested values, or incompatible interpretations. Its value lies partly in revealing what the organization could not generate internally, not in guaranteeing epistemic accuracy.

Dialogue can also change the informational object itself. In shareholder engagement, communicative interaction has been shown to create common ground through an evolving process rather than merely transmit fixed preferences [8]. The proposed capability model therefore rejects a simple sender–receiver metaphor. Stakeholder information can be generated, clarified, reframed, or contested through interaction, after which it must still pass through organizational attention and interpretation. This makes heterogeneity analytically important: differences in source position, status, timing, and communicative form may affect which signals enter later organizational stages. External voice becomes sensing input only when its situated character is retained long enough for the organization to evaluate rather than prematurely homogenize it.

Strategic attention and selective organizational notice

Organizations cannot process every external claim with equal intensity. The attention problem is therefore not an unfortunate deviation from perfect sensing but a constitutive feature of it. Research on emergent attention networks shows that organizational attention can arise from interdependent allocation acts such as focusing, reinforcing, mixing, and clustering [9]. Attention is consequently patterned rather than neutral. A stakeholder signal may be available to the organization yet remain strategically invisible because it fails to enter the interaction networks, agendas, categories, or problem structures through which attention is allocated.

Configurational research likewise indicates that attention focus and attentional frameworks operate jointly rather than as interchangeable quantities [10]. The proposed model translates this insight into a distinction between signal availability and organizational notice: the former concerns whether information can reach the organization; the latter concerns whether it is selected as worthy of interpretive effort. Attention-based strategy scholarship further treats strategic attention as selective, while communication helps constitute and redirect attention during strategic change [11, 12]. Accordingly, stakeholder sensing should not be measured merely by information volume. A more discriminating question is which signals become

noticeable, through what attentional arrangements, and with what displacement effects on alternative claims. Selective notice is thus a gate that can prioritize consequential weak signals but can equally institutionalize blindness.

Interpretation, learning, and knowledge integration

Notice does not convert information into organizational knowledge automatically. Once selected, stakeholder signals must be interpreted relative to existing categories, causal beliefs, commitments, and temporal expectations. Work on temporally complex problems shows that external knowledge can alter organizational learning, but its value depends on the structure and timing of the problem being learned [13]. This is important for stakeholder sensing because external information may arrive before consequences are visible, after commitments have hardened, or in forms whose relevance becomes apparent only across repeated episodes. Learning therefore requires more than acquisition; it requires linking signals to evolving problem representations.

Interpretation is also meaning-making rather than mechanical classification. Research on corporate-purpose sensemaking illustrates how organizational meanings are constructed, negotiated, and stabilized rather than simply discovered [14]. The proposed model therefore places an interpretive layer between attention and learning. A noticed stakeholder claim can be assimilated into existing assumptions, reframed as a new strategic issue, compartmentalized, or discounted. Knowledge integration occurs only when interpretations become connected to organizational memory, expertise, routines, or decision conversations sufficiently to influence later judgment. This distinction preserves an important failure possibility: an organization can listen attentively and still learn little if interpretive frames strip a signal of novelty or disconnect it from action-relevant knowledge.

From stakeholder knowledge to adaptive response

Even integrated stakeholder knowledge does not compel organizational response. Adaptation is a distinct organizational accomplishment involving coordination across levels, decisions, and time. Longitudinal research in the Scottish healthcare system demonstrates that organizational adaptation can unfold through recurrent multilevel dynamics rather than a single centralized adjustment [15]. The implication for stakeholder sensing is that response capacity should not be located solely in senior management. Information may need to move across levels, encounter different causal representations, and be translated into locally feasible action before organizational change becomes visible.

Adaptive search is also conditional. Computational work separating how much organizations explore from where exploration occurs shows why more search is not necessarily equivalent to better adaptation [16]. Formal modeling of organizational culture similarly indicates that belief accuracy, values, and social-learning arrangements can condition adaptation rather than operate as uniformly beneficial assets [17]. The proposed model therefore treats response as a branching stage: stakeholder knowledge may prompt experimentation, reprioritization, escalation, delay, symbolic accommodation, or deliberate non-response. None of these outcomes is assumed to be effective. The analytical task is to explain how sensed information becomes connected to feasible response options and how subsequent consequences return information to the organization for reassessment.

The stakeholder-sensing capability model

The proposed stakeholder-sensing capability is defined as an organization's patterned capacity to acquire heterogeneous stakeholder signals, allocate selective attention to them, interpret and integrate their informational content, and connect resulting knowledge to revisable response options. The capability is not a synonym for stakeholder orientation, dialogue quality, responsiveness, or dynamic capability. It is an integrative architecture that links distinct processes whose component logics are supported in separate literatures, while the complete sequence remains unvalidated as a unified mechanism.

Three properties distinguish the proposed capability. First, sensing is selective: attention necessarily produces inclusion and omission. Second, sensing is interpretive: stakeholder information acquires organizational meaning through framing and knowledge integration rather than direct transmission. Third, sensing is recursive: response consequences can alter future stakeholder relationships, attention priorities, and interpretive assumptions. These properties also expose vulnerabilities. Boundary conduits can broaden access yet privilege particular sources; attention structures can elevate weak signals yet crowd out competing claims; interpretive routines can integrate knowledge yet normalize novelty; and response systems can mobilize learning yet detach it from affected stakeholders.

The architecture in **Figure 1** therefore represents stakeholder sensing as a conditional information-processing system rather than an uninterrupted engagement-to-response sequence.

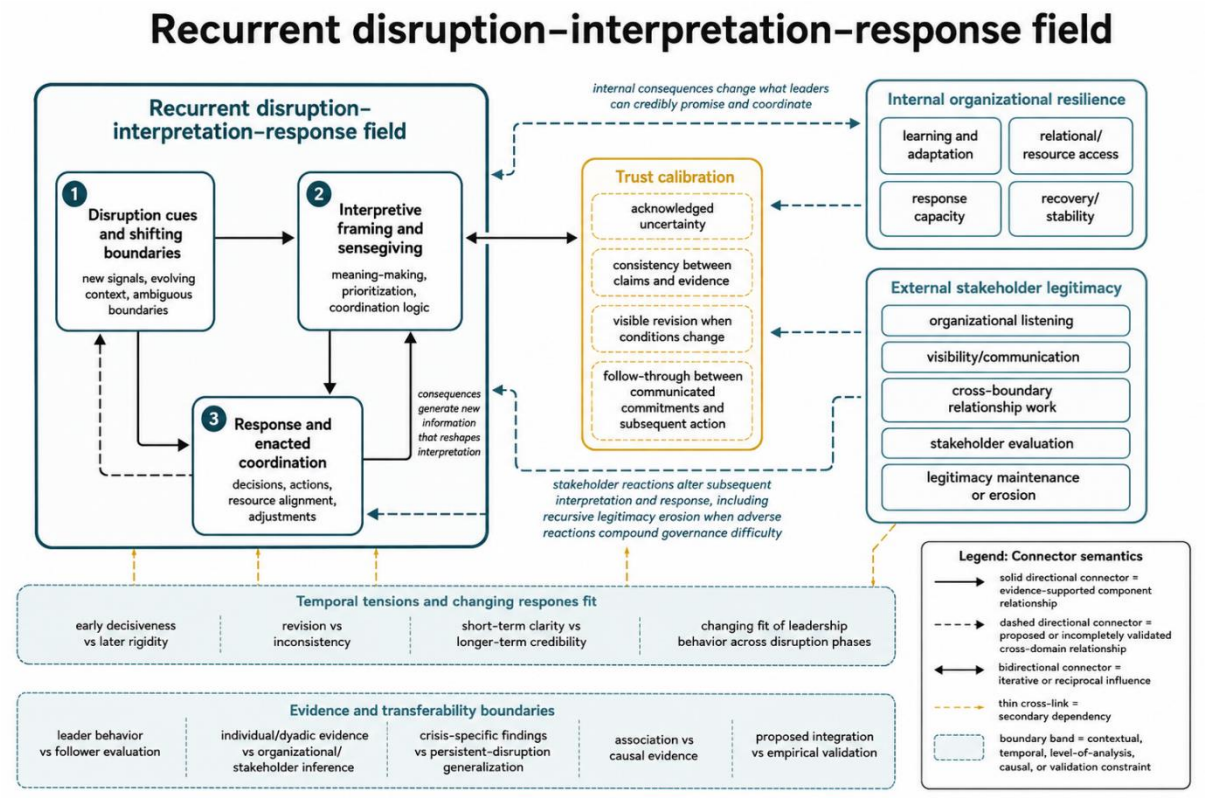

Figure 1. Stakeholder voice acquires adaptive significance through selective attention, interpretive integration, and organizational action

Capability microfoundations

The capability is organizational, but its enactment depends partly on individual and relational behaviors that connect external information to organizational processes. Research on dynamic managerial capabilities identifies internal and external advice seeking as relevant microfoundational behaviors in business-model innovation, while distinguishing those behaviors from the higher-order organizational capability they may support [18]. Applied cautiously, this suggests that stakeholder-facing search, listening, translation, and escalation can be treated as candidate microfoundations of sensing. Their presence does not validate an organization-level capability; rather, they identify observable behaviors through which external information may gain access to organizational attention and coordination.

Microfoundations can also degrade sensing. Evidence that CEO paranoia and paranoia-relevant cues are associated with avoidance and aggressive stakeholder-engagement responses shows that executive cognition can shape how stakeholder relationships are approached [19]. The proposed model therefore treats cognition as a cross-level influence, not as the capability itself. Managers may broaden search, broker competing interpretations, or preserve weak signals; they may also discount unwelcome claims, over-amplify threatening information, or channel attention toward stakeholders who fit prior expectations. Organizational sensing emerges only when these individual behaviors are embedded in routines and structures that allow signals to survive beyond particular actors, be challenged by alternative interpretations, and remain available for collective learning and response.

Filtering, amplification, and distortion of stakeholder signals

Stakeholder signals can be altered before they ever become organization-level knowledge. Participation may be formally invited while prevailing strategy discourse still constrains what participants can say or how their contributions are interpreted, and dialogic procedures can retain temporal and power tensions despite democratic aspirations [20, 21]. Filtering is therefore not merely loss of information. It includes selective admission, differential amplification, reframing, compartmentalization, and exclusion. These mechanisms may operate at the engagement boundary, inside attention structures, or during interpretation.

The proposed model distinguishes structural filtering from actor-level distortion. Attention networks can concentrate notice around already connected issues [9], while executive cognition can bias engagement toward avoidance or aggression [19]. Amplification may be useful when dispersed weak signals need organizational visibility, but the same mechanism can privilege high-status, familiar, or threatening claims. Distortion occurs when the organizational meaning assigned to a signal

materially departs from what the source communicated or when contextual qualifiers are removed during transmission. **Table 1** organizes these vulnerabilities by where fidelity can be lost and by the sensing capacity required to counter them.

Table 1 identifies the principal points at which stakeholder information can change character before response.

Table 1. Where stakeholder signals lose fidelity before organizational response

Signal-path vulnerability	Signal/ source	Attention gate	Filtering or amplification	Interpretation/learning distortion	Power asymmetry	Likely response bias	Feedback consequence	Corrective sensing capability
Status-weighted notice	Low-status or peripheral voice	Salience threshold	Familiar/high-status claims amplified	Peripheral knowledge treated as low relevance	Unequal access/status	Narrow prioritization	Excluded actors disengage	Source-diverse attention review
Executive threat filtering	Critical or adverse claim	Senior interpretation	Threat cues amplified; challenge avoided	Motive inferred instead of content examined	Hierarchical discretion	Defensive or aggressive response	Future candor declines	Multi-actor interpretation
Discourse conformity	Dissenting internalized stakeholder input	Strategy agenda	Nonconforming claims attenuated	Novelty reframed to fit prevailing assumptions	Agenda control	Symbolic accommodation	Blind spots persist	Protected challenge channels
Translation loss	Context-rich local knowledge	Boundary handoff	Complexity compressed	Qualifiers separated from claim	Expertise/representation gap	Mis-specified action	Weak learning loop	Traceable signal provenance

The resulting distortion architecture is synthesized in **Figure 2.**

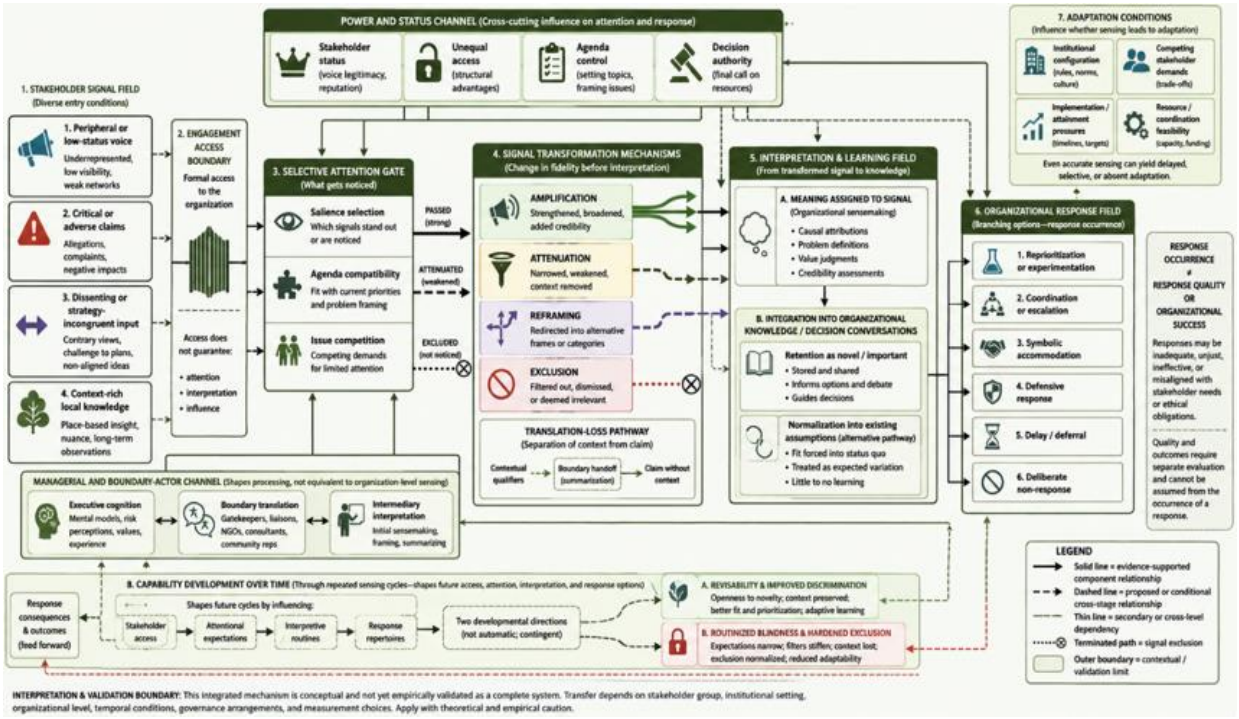

Figure 2. Selective attention and power reshape stakeholder signals before organizational response

Caption: The figure depicts multiple points at which stakeholder signals may be amplified, attenuated, reframed, excluded, or converted into biased response. Solid links denote evidence-supported component relationships; dashed links denote the article's proposed cross-stage mechanisms. Feedback can either improve future sensing or reproduce prior filtering. Power, context, and temporal conditions remain explicit boundary constraints.

Alt text: Left-to-right architecture showing heterogeneous stakeholder signals entering attention gates, interpretive filters, and response pathways. Upper and lower side channels represent power and managerial cognition. Branches show amplification, attenuation, exclusion, and reframing, while recursive arrows return response consequences to later engagement. An outer boundary marks contextual and validation limits.

Capability development over time

A sensing capability should not be treated as a fixed organizational possession. Repeated engagement episodes can change who is consulted, what receives attention, which interpretations become routinized, and how rapidly response options are mobilized. Longitudinal comparison of two firms exposed to the same exogenous settlement shows that stakeholder-engagement strategies can diverge substantially over time even when the initiating shock is shared [22]. Such divergence is consistent with path dependence: prior responses can alter stakeholder relationships, organizational expectations, and the repertoire through which later signals are processed.

The proposed model therefore treats capability development as recursive. Response consequences feed back into subsequent sensing by changing stakeholder willingness to communicate, managers' expectations about signal credibility, and the organizational memory attached to particular issues. Learning may improve discrimination between noise and consequential information, but repetition can also harden selective attention and normalize exclusion. Development is thus not synonymous with accumulation or improvement. A mature sensing routine may become efficient while becoming less receptive to unfamiliar claims. Longitudinal analysis should consequently examine not only whether sensing routines stabilize, but whether they retain revisability: the capacity to reopen settled interpretations, alter attention priorities, and recover signals that earlier cycles suppressed.

When stakeholder sensing produces adaptation—and when it does not

Sensing can expand organizational awareness without producing adaptation. Cross-national configurational evidence indicates that the consequences of stakeholder-engagement strategies depend on national institutional arrangements rather than following a single universally advantageous pattern [23]. Institutional context can therefore condition both what responses are feasible and which stakeholder claims carry strategic force. The proposed model treats this as a response boundary rather than as a residual contextual control.

Competing signals create a second difficulty. External stakeholder demands may generate paradoxes that interact with organizational ambidexterity rather than collapse into one consistent directive [24]. In such cases, successful sensing may increase awareness of contradiction without resolving it. Organizations may need to preserve competing interpretations long enough to explore alternatives. A third constraint concerns implementation. Corporate target management can expose trade-offs between pressures generated by stakeholder expectations and pressures associated with actual attainment [25]. Accordingly, adaptation requires more than noticing and learning: organizations must possess decision authority, coordination capacity, resources, and temporal room to act. Non-response may therefore arise from exclusion or inertia, but it may also reflect recognized conflict, feasibility limits, or deliberate prioritization. The model does not classify these outcomes as successful merely because they follow sensing.

Power asymmetries and signal exclusion

Stakeholder sensing is inseparable from governance because voice does not confer decision authority. A decision-based perspective on stakeholder governance highlights the importance of who possesses rights to participate in or determine organizational decisions [26]. The proposed model therefore distinguishes signal access, interpretive influence, and decision rights. An organization can hear a stakeholder accurately yet deny that stakeholder influence over the resulting choice; conversely, formal decision procedures can privilege actors whose informational contribution is limited.

Marginalization makes this distinction more consequential. Work on corporate–rightsholder dialogue and community involvement shows that nominal participation does not by itself eliminate exclusion and that sustained procedural arrangements are needed when less powerful stakeholders face dominant interests [27, 28]. Sensing architecture must therefore examine whose claims never enter the signal field, whose claims enter but fail attention thresholds, and whose interpretations are translated by more powerful intermediaries.

Dissent also requires careful treatment. Agonistic approaches to political corporate responsibility show why activism and deliberation need not be mutually exclusive [29]. The proposed model consequently rejects the assumption that conflict is equivalent to noise. Contestation can reveal incompatible values, suppressed information, or unresolved distributional consequences. Yet dissent is not automatically accurate either. The sensing challenge is to preserve disagreement as analyzable information without equating inclusion with endorsement.

Boundary conditions

The model's first boundary is measurement. Reviews of dynamic-capability research demonstrate persistent difficulties in construct specification and measurement transparency [30]. Stakeholder sensing therefore should not be operationalized as a single self-reported capability score before its component processes are differentiated. Measures would need to distinguish access to stakeholder information, selective notice, interpretive integration, response linkage, and recursive updating, while avoiding circular indicators that infer capability from favorable outcomes.

A second boundary concerns levels of analysis. Managerial search or cognition may influence sensing, but individual behavior is not equivalent to organization-level capability. Cross-level claims require evidence showing how individual acts become routines, structures, or shared decision processes. Third, context matters. Stakeholder status, national institutions, organizational culture, temporal complexity, and governance arrangements can modify particular transitions without necessarily altering every part of the model. Finally, the architecture is bounded by stakeholder heterogeneity. It cannot assume that one set of external actors represents an entire environment or that aggregating conflicting claims produces a neutral signal. These conditions make the model a testable organizing logic rather than a universal recipe and require future studies to specify where, when, for whom, and at what level each proposed relationship holds.

Contributions to stakeholder and organizational-learning theory

The first contribution is to stakeholder theory: engagement is recast as potential sensing infrastructure rather than an endpoint. This moves analysis from the presence of stakeholder relationships to the organizational transformations through which external voice becomes noticed, interpreted, integrated, and connected to action. It also makes signal loss and power analytically endogenous. Exclusion can occur before formal engagement, at the attention gate, during interpretation, or when decision rights are allocated.

The second contribution is to organizational-learning theory. The model distinguishes acquisition of external information from the selective notice and interpretive work required before learning can influence response. It therefore places attention between engagement and learning and places governance between learning and action. This helps explain why extensive stakeholder contact may coexist with organizational blindness or why accurate learning may coexist with non-response.

The third contribution is an endpoint clarification. Management scholarship has emphasized that organizational goals, outcomes, and assessments of performance should not be collapsed into one notion of success [31]. Accordingly, stakeholder-sensing capability is not defined by favorable performance. Response occurrence, response quality, ethical adequacy, stakeholder approval, and organizational performance remain separable outcomes. The model's contribution is explanatory architecture, not a claim that organizations possessing it will necessarily perform better.

Implications for strategy and governance

For strategy, the model redirects attention from how much engagement an organization conducts to where stakeholder signals lose fidelity. Managers can examine whether weak signals fail at access, attention, interpretation, integration, or response linkage rather than treating all problems as deficiencies of communication. Attention structures deserve particular scrutiny because prioritization can create strategic focus while simultaneously making alternative claims invisible.

For governance, the central implication is diagnostic rather than prescriptive. Organizations should distinguish opportunities to speak from influence over interpretation and from formal decision rights [26]. They should also consider whether marginalized stakeholders require procedural safeguards to keep their information visible across repeated sensing cycles [28]. Such practices may improve informational plurality, but the evidence does not establish that they guarantee better decisions, ethical sufficiency, or superior performance. Governance arrangements therefore remain choices about who can inform, challenge, interpret, and authorize organizational action, not simply mechanisms for increasing stakeholder-contact volume.

Future research agenda

The proposed capability requires validation at the level of transitions rather than only at the level of a global scale. Future studies should trace the same stakeholder signal across engagement, notice, interpretation, integration, and response, recording both surviving and discarded signals. Measurement development should specify formative versus reflective relationships among these stages and should test discriminant validity against stakeholder orientation, responsiveness, environmental scanning, absorptive capacity, and dynamic capability rather than assuming conceptual equivalence [30].

Longitudinal designs are particularly important because recursive sensing is a temporal claim. Repeated observations could examine whether prior response changes stakeholder willingness to communicate, attention priorities, or interpretive frames. Multilevel studies should test how individual advice seeking, executive cognition, boundary-spanning roles, and organizational routines combine rather than transferring evidence across levels by assumption. Comparative cases could deliberately sample high-engagement organizations with divergent response patterns, while field experiments or quasi-experimental designs could test narrower mechanisms such as attention allocation where ethically and practically appropriate. Research should also examine excluded signals: which stakeholders disappear before measurement begins, what organizational structures produce that absence, and whether recovered dissent changes subsequent interpretation.

Limitations

This article integrates literatures that differ substantially in empirical setting, level of analysis, construct definition, and method. Evidence concerning social enterprises, B Corporations, shareholder dialogue, open-source attention networks, healthcare adaptation, corporate target management, and marginalized communities cannot be treated as observations of one

homogeneous process. Their value here is theoretical triangulation around component mechanisms, not proof of a common causal sequence.

The proposed architecture also contains cross-domain relationships that no approved study validates as a complete stakeholder-sensing capability. Recursive feedback, signal survival across stages, and the transition from individual microfoundations to organizational capability remain particularly important inferential steps. Nor does the model resolve the normative problem of whose interests should prevail when stakeholder claims conflict. Measurement is another limitation: component constructs have adjacent measures, but the integrated capability lacks established operationalization. These constraints mean that the model should be tested, refined, partitioned, or rejected as evidence accumulates rather than treated as an implementation-ready organizational design.

Conclusion

Stakeholder engagement can provide organizations with access to external voice, but access is only the beginning of sensing. The proposed stakeholder-sensing capability separates signal generation, selective notice, interpretation, knowledge integration, and organizational response while making filtering, power, and recursion part of the explanatory architecture. Its central claim is not that engagement produces adaptation, but that adaptive significance depends on whether stakeholder information survives a sequence of organizational transformations.

This perspective clarifies why organizations may engage extensively yet remain selectively blind, why learning may occur without action, and why response should not be equated with success. It also preserves difficult cases in which dissent is informative, marginalization precedes formal participation, or feasible action is constrained despite accurate sensing. The model therefore offers a bounded agenda for explaining how organizations hear, learn, and respond while leaving its integrated mechanisms open to longitudinal, multilevel, contextual, and measurement-based validation.

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