



Wisdom for Building the Project Manager/Project Sponsor Relationship: Partnership for Project Success

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The project sponsor can promote information technology (IT) project success in several ways, yet many projects either have no formally designated project sponsor or the project sponsor is confused about his/her role. The project sponsor's role traditionally includes project approval, funding, and staffing, but can include much more. The project sponsor is sometimes called the champion of the project or the key stakeholder of the project. Because the role of the project sponsor sometimes overlaps with the project manager's role, confusion can arise. This article discusses conventional roles and responsibilities of the project sponsor and then discusses strategies a project manager can employ to define boundaries to reduce role confusion and promote partnership to facilitate project success.

What is the role of the project sponsor? Projects fail for a plethora of reasons. One of the most common reasons for project failure is lack of project management discipline. Another which is much harder to rectify is cultural resistance to change [1]. These reasons identify the point of demarcation between the project manager and the project sponsor. The project manager runs the project on a day-to-day basis to produce a solution to a business problem, and the project sponsor manages the organizational culture to ensure it is ready to receive, accept, and implement that solution. If success is about getting results, then the role of the project sponsor – in the simplest terms – is to help the project manager ensure the project achieves success through desired results.

Thomsett International has reviewed more than 20 major projects that were in the process of failing or had failed. They did these reviews not as an academic exercise or a controlled experiment, but rather these reviews were undertaken *in the heat of the battle*. In every one of the 20 major failed projects, lack of an effective sponsor was a common deficiency. As one project manager recently put it: *To manage a project without an effective executive sponsor is to visit hell on Earth* [2].

If you have ever been a project manager, then perhaps you have come to realize the limitations of your influence because no matter how well trained or experienced you may be, corporate objectives associated with your project will never be achieved if there is not someone leading and directing the business change. Back in 1515 when he published “The Prince,” Nicolò Machiavelli said the following:

And it ought to be remembered

that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them. Thus it happens that whenever those who are hostile have the opportunity to attack, they do it like partisans, whilst the others defend lukewarmly, in such wise that the prince is endangered along with them. [3]

The perils associated with creating *a new order of things* are just as true today as they were back in Machiavelli's day. And this is where the project sponsor comes in to assist the project manager in the shared responsibility of delivering both project deliverables and project outcomes.

So what does managing the culture entail? Neil Love and Joan Brant-Love define the project sponsor's role as mentor, catalyst, cheerleader, barrier buster, boundary manager, and senior management liaison [4].

1. Mentor

- Increases the confidence of the project manager.
- Helps the project manager understand the full business context of project decisions.
- Improves the project manager's

leadership and problem-solving skills.

2. Catalyst

- Stimulates the thinking and perspectives of the project manager.
- Challenges assumptions.
- Plays *devil's advocate* to help the project manager see more options/reactions and raises the level of thinking of the project manager.

3. Cheerleader

- Helps the project manager and others stay motivated and deal with team issues.
- Occasionally directly helps the team members stay motivated through pep talks and celebrations.
- Reminds the project manager and the team of the importance of the mission.

4. Barrier Buster

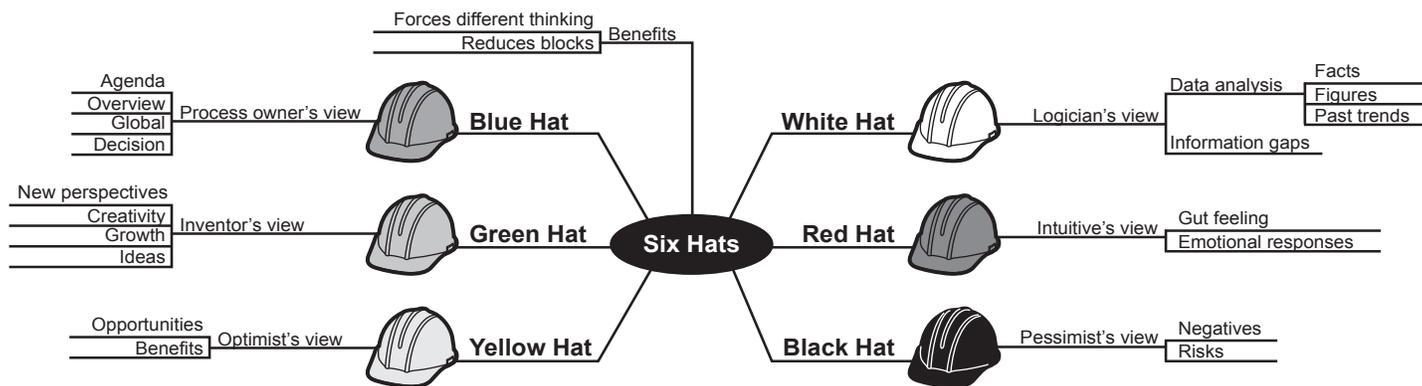
- Knocks down barriers that are beyond the control of the project manager or project team.
- Barriers can include non-supportive senior managers and managers of team members, resource problems, team member availability problems, or lack of tools/equipment/facilities/software needed by the team.

5. Boundary Manager

- Keeps executives, managers, and professionals from meddling or interfering with the team's progress.
- Protects the team from unnecessary interactions with others or unnecessary reporting to others.
- Lets the team perform within the boundaries of the agreed-to team mission and contract.

6. Senior Management Liaison

- Before establishing a team, the project sponsor briefs the organi-



The de Bono Group's *Six Thinking Hats*® is property of The de Bono Group.

Figure 1: *The de Bono Group's Six Thinking Hats Topics* [9]

zation's senior leadership group on the planned team's mission, desired team members, and any constraints on the project.

- As the team moves through the project life cycle, the project sponsor periodically communicates to management the team's progress to date, and asks for help on issues beyond the control or influence of the project sponsor.

Breaking it down further, responsibilities of the project sponsor can include the following:

- Ensuring the project manager and the team are aligned to a common purpose.
- Providing guidance for key business strategies.
- Empowering the project manager.
- Championing the project and the team.
- Formally managing the project's scope.
- Approving plans, schedules, and budgets.
- Ensuring sustained buy-in.
- Clearing roadblocks.
- Ensuring timely availability of resources.
- Reviewing the project's progress.
- Ensuring that project benefits are realized.
- Leading the functionals through business process re-engineering.

So, another way of looking at the division of role and responsibilities between the project manager and the project sponsor is the project sponsor plays a more strategic role helping the team and the rest of the organization understand how the project supports the strategic plan of the organization. The project manager plays a more tactical role and is responsible for the day-to-day progress of the project.

What Can the Project Manager Do to Make Sponsorship Work?

Technology pull or technology push cre-

ates different conditions for project initiation and consequently the staffing of the project. In the technology pull scenario, it is more likely the project sponsor will manifest prior to the project manager. As the project and project goals evolve, the project manager will have to assess whether or not that initial person driving the adoption of the technology remains the best candidate for continued project success. In the technology push scenario, the project manager will more likely appear before the sponsor. This scenario affords the opportunity for the project manager to work with the organization's leadership to help identify and select the sponsor.

The person identified as the sponsor must be high enough in the organizational hierarchy to have organizational authority commensurate with the scope of the project. Conversely, the project sponsor cannot be too high in the organization such that he or she does not have sufficient time to dedicate to the project or is too far removed from the scope and objectives of the project to be effective in giving direction. The logical project sponsor is the person in the organization who both wants the project accomplished and has responsibility for all of the organizational units affected. In short, the sponsor is the person who can make it happen.

Further complicating matters is the possibility that the project sponsor and manager may come from different organizations. For example, project managers for United States Army Medical Command (USAMEDCOM) enterprise-wide projects are assigned from the U.S. Army Medical Information Technology Center (USAMITC) and the project sponsor (functional proponent) is typically assigned from another command within the USAMEDCOM where the functional expertise resides. This dynamic

can lead to conflict from differing cultures and loyalties that will have to be reconciled.

Once the project sponsor is identified and teamed with a project manager, the project manager needs to commit to taking responsibility for the quality and productivity of the manager/sponsor relationship to meet project accountabilities [5]. Developing a good manager/sponsor team is not an accident; rather, it is a function of the manager's relationship behavior (the manner in which the manager relates to the sponsor, which in turn creates a response that sets the tone of the relationship). The project manager must take personal responsibility for the quality of that relationship, never waiting for senior leadership to notice and act on a situation that needs attention. To do that, the project manager must do the following:

- Recognize individuals are not passive recipients in the team/partnership experience, that individual behavior shapes every team, and that the individual affects the team at least as much as the team affects the individual.
- Acknowledge that not attending to team performance and the project manager/sponsor relationship is a choice and puts the project manager at the mercy of chance.
- Accept in the scenario of project sponsor/manager shared responsibility that the quality and productivity of that relationship is worthy of focus.
- Learn what behaviors and processes lead to a successful partnership and exhibit them [5].

Conversely, the project sponsor must take an active role and may be required to back that role up with travel, late nights, and presentations to stakeholders. First time sponsors typi-

cally underestimate the amount of time and commitment it takes, and the seasoned project manager will be prepared with estimates and confirmation from other project sponsors. Project managers, more typically devoted to a single project, must take into consideration that the sponsor may be covering multiple projects. However, there is an upper limit for the project sponsor. If the sponsor covers too many projects at once, effectiveness can become diluted.

Dr. Ted Weston, Jr., Professor in the Computer Information Systems Department of Colorado State University's College of Business, cannot overemphasize the importance of a single project sponsor:

Without an empowered sponsor, the project is essentially DOA [dead on arrival]. In order to get the project support needed, the sponsor must be a part of top management and have the ear of top management. The vision of the sponsor (and there must be one) and the vision/expectations of the stakeholders must be essentially one and the same. The project steering committee, by whatever name, must be supportive of both the sponsor and the project's goals. If wishy-washy – STOP. If functional area or sponsor is not respected, the project is off to a bad start. Furthermore, the sponsor's commitment to the project must be real and not lip-service. If you cannot sense the *fire in the belly* of the sponsor – stop! The sponsor must actively champion the project and communicate the sense of project urgency. No urgency – the project is again in trouble. [6]

Both the project manager and sponsor must recognize what effective sponsorship looks like. Project sponsorship is far more than saying, *here's a bunch of resources, tell me when we're better*. Many project sponsors have little understanding of the role, and it may fall to the project manager to educate and coach them – on both the tasks and the time commitment.

Some organizations offer some kind of training for the project sponsor. For example, the Army Medical Department (AMEDD) offers the Health Systems Functional Proponent Course (HSFPC) to help prepare project sponsors for the demands of the role [7]. Dr. Barbara Erickson, one of the cre-

ators of the HSFPC, said the following:

The HSFPC was established in response to the education and training assessment resulting from the Task Force Mercury Reengineering Study of 1996, which was commissioned by The Army Surgeon General (then Major General James Peake). The task force identified Information Management (IM)/Information Technology (IT) requirements and gaps. Subsequently, Information Manage-

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ment/Information Technology Subject Matter Experts and training experts worked together to identify the critical tasks, skills, and knowledge needed to meet deficiencies that could be corrected by education and training and thus the HSFPC was born to serve as the missing link between the functional (or business process) requirements and the technical realization of them. [7]

USAMITC is the AMEDD's execution, acquisition, and materiel development arm for information technology. In this role, USAMITC houses the project managers for the AMEDD enterprise IT project who partner with the functional proponents (aka project sponsors) for the delivery of a new IT

system or service. When LTC Patton was the Chief Information Officer (CIO) at USAMITC, she made a point of personally presenting at the HSFPC. Prior to her arrival, the block of instruction on USAMITC and its services was taught by a USAMITC marketing specialist. Mission success for USAMITC is in part derived from successful partnerships between the USAMITC project directors and the functional proponents. Knowing the graduates of the course would be paired with project managers from USAMITC, she decided advocating and facilitating this relationship was too important to delegate to a marketing specialist. Thus, project managers should enlist their organization's IT leadership in promoting successful partnerships between project sponsors and managers.

If the organization is less formal in training project sponsors, the project manager can refer the sponsor to other reading material. For example, the California Office of Systems Integration posts its best practices on its public Web site, which includes a listing of the roles and responsibilities of the project sponsor in their work environment [8].

Negotiating the Sponsor Agreement

While the roles and responsibilities cited earlier are commonly associated with the project sponsor, each project is different and there is always room for negotiation. Depending on the situation at hand and the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the people involved, roles can be assigned differently (see Figure 1, page 5). Each person is different. Each person has a unique set of talents, a unique pattern of behaviors, passions, and yearnings. Each person's pattern of talents is enduring and resistant to change. Each person has a unique destiny. *The goal is to help each person become more of who he already is to maximize benefit for the manager/sponsor partnership and the project team* [9]. Thus, the project manager can and should work with the sponsor to develop a sponsorship agreement, clarifying the sponsor's role and specific responsibilities and identifying role boundaries between the sponsor and the project manager, thereby reducing the confusion created by the occasional overlap of the roles and leveraging individual strengths to promote project success.

Even the most educated and experienced managers occasionally argue or misunderstand each other; however, the

probability of this occurring can be minimized by laying out in writing the roles and responsibilities of the project sponsor. Documenting delineated roles and responsibilities is particularly important when sponsorship has been delegated to an acting sponsor – some responsibilities may be delegated and others may remain with the logical (original) sponsor.

The entire project team must agree on both the unique and shared responsibilities of the project sponsor and project manager based on what the organization and project team agree is important and feasible.

Table 1 represents a standard template the team can use to start the negotiation process [10, 11].

As the project progresses, the project manager can take specific steps to keep the sponsor involved throughout the life of the project. Again, knowing what the sponsor should be doing and clearly stating those expectations is primary. The project manager can facilitate sponsor involvement in the following ways:

- As the project moves from one phase to another, discuss with the sponsor what to expect and what questions he/she should be concerned with.
- When deliverables are submitted for review, indicate what kind of feedback is needed.
- Involve the sponsor in the preparations for major project reviews, emphasizing decisions required for progress.
- Inform the sponsor promptly of issues needing sponsorship resolution, providing background, pros/cons, and recommendations (see Table 2, next page).

Real-Life Applications

Approaching the project manager/sponsor relationship as a true partnership, the project manager and project sponsor can divide specific roles given the general guidelines provided according to each partner's strengths and non-strengths. For example, back in 2000, USAMITC was embarking on its implementation of PlanView, an enterprise project management and human resource planning tool. Operation of the tool requires employees to submit timesheets in which they record their time against tasks associated with project work breakdown schedules. Initially the assigned project manager worked alone without the help of a project

| Title | Role |
|--|--|
| Project Manager | The person responsible for developing, in conjunction with the project sponsor, a definition of the project. The project manager then ensures that the project is delivered on time, to budget, and to the required quality standard (within agreed specifications). He/she ensures the proper allocation of resources within the project, and manages relationships with a wide range of groups (including all project contributors). The project manager is also responsible for managing the work of consultants, allocating and utilizing resources in an efficient manner, and maintaining a cooperative, motivated, and successful team. |
| Responsibilities | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing and leading the project team. • Recruiting project staff and consultants. • Managing coordination of the partners and working groups engaged in project work. • Using detailed project planning and control, including the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Developing and maintaining a detailed project plan. ○ Managing project deliverables in line with the project plan. ○ Recording and managing project issues and escalating where necessary. ○ Resolving cross-functional issues at project level. ○ Managing project scope and change control and escalating issues where necessary. ○ Monitoring project progress and performance. ○ Providing status reports to the project sponsor. ○ Managing project training within the defined budget. ○ Providing liaison with, and updates progress to, project steering board/senior management. ○ Managing project evaluation and dissemination activities. ○ Managing consultancy input within the defined budget. ○ Providing final approval of the design specification. • Working closely with users to ensure the project meets business needs. • Providing a definition and management of the user acceptance testing program. • Identifying user training needs and devising and managing user training programs. • Accepting ultimate authority and responsibility for project outputs/deliverables. | |
| Title | Role |
| Project Sponsor | The person who commissions others to deliver the project and champions the cause throughout the project. Sponsors will normally be a senior member of staff with a relevant area of responsibility that will be affected by the outcome of the project. They are involved from the start of the project, including defining the project in conjunction with the project manager. Once the project has been launched, they should ensure that it is actively reviewed. The project sponsor is usually the one who has to negotiate a path through the tricky diplomatic areas of the project. |
| Responsibilities | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts as champion of the project, ensuring it is adequately resourced for success. • Ensures the timely availability of these essential project resources. • Develops and communicates a vision and direction. • Sponsors the communications program; communicates the program's goals and relates them to the strategic goals and objectives of the organization as a whole. • Behaves congruently and provides a consistent message. • Promotes participation and inclusiveness particularly within the business unit in which the solution will be implemented and assists the project manager in promoting this within the project team. • Gets things done through commitment rather than control. • Ensures resolution of issues escalated by the project manager or the project board. • Makes key organization/commercial/business decisions for the project. • Approves the budget and decides tolerances; recommends killing the project if appropriate. • Leads the project steering board. • Accepts authority and responsibility for achieving the desired business outcomes derived from the project. • Is accountable for the timely delivery of planned benefits associated with the project. | |
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Table 1: *Negotiation Process Standard Template*

sponsor to facilitate implementation. However, that arrangement did not produce the desired results as the implementation was not adequately progressing for the satisfaction of the commander. The commander decided to assign one of the division chiefs as

the new project manager.

While this division chief had the title of *project leader*, in reality she assumed the role of project sponsor and she partnered with the previous project leader, delegating the traditional day-to-day roles of the project manager

| Project Phase | Concerns |
|---------------|---|
| Initiation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is this project needed? What's the business problem being solved or the opportunity to be seized? How does the project support our corporate goals? • Do we have a long-term vision and investment strategy in place? • From the organizational perspective: What are the objectives? What will the end result look like? • From the employee perspective: What are the benefits? How will life be better when the project is over? • How will we measure success? What is our baseline? What is our target? • What areas of the organization will be affected? In what ways? • What are the constraints – in time, in money, in quality? • What can realistically be achieved within those constraints? • Should we proceed? |
| Planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who needs to be involved? And how? Are they adequately trained? • What are the boundaries or scope of the project? • Roughly how much will it cost and how long will it take? • What are the risks? Can they be managed? • Do we have metrics and processes in place to promote project success? Do we have systems in place to generate quantifiable data and demonstrable knowledge to create go/no-go decisions? • Is the team incentivized on forward-looking measures? • Have we assembled the right team? Are team members aligned to a shared purpose? • Should we proceed? |
| Execution | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are we accomplishing what we planned to accomplish? Within the planned time frame? With the planned resources? Within budget? • Is there anything I can do to facilitate the team's work? • Are we getting the cooperation we need from the business units? • What can I do to remove obstacles and promote the provision of the right level of support so the project manager has a clear path for project execution? • Does senior leadership understand their role and responsibilities in IT project management process? What can I do to facilitate understanding? |
| Control | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are plans in place to measure the predicted benefits? • Have we integrated cost, project control, and knowledge management? |
| Closing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did we accomplish what we planned to accomplish? Within the planned time frame? With the planned resources? Within budget? • How did we perform based on our success criteria? • What lessons did we learn? • What remains to be done? |

Table 2: *Sponsor Concerns by Project Phase* [12, 13]

to the old project leader who remained part of the project team. The previous leader became the *technical lead* and she became the *functional lead* handling the business process reengineering, training, and project promotion. This arrangement leveraged each other's experience, power position, and strengths.

With a partnership established and the roles clearly delineated between the technical lead and the functional lead, she set about to expedite implementation and user adoption of the system, focusing on the desired business outcomes of the commander as a project sponsor is expected to do. To those ends, she developed a metrics program to direct time and energy to activities that would hasten project success. Meanwhile, the technical lead focused on implementing software updates and upgrades, pushing the software to the user base and server manage-

ment. Initially, each week in the commander's staff meeting with the division chiefs, the functional lead would report by division the percentage of staff members completing their timesheets by the designated deadline. If the division did not meet a certain percentage, they were labeled *red*. She continued to focus on this metric until it was mostly *green* across the board and then she changed the key metric.

As a project management organization, the USAMITC leadership had to ensure people were devoting most of their time to project work rather than overhead functions in order to demonstrate value to the AMEDD enterprise. While she continued to report on timesheet reporting compliance as a control measure, she now diverted the attention of the division chiefs to where their staff was reporting their time. Again,

thresholds were set and divisions were given a red, amber, or green rating. As a result of this focused attention, the project team discovered additional categories needed to be added to the system for reporting project work. As these shortcomings and obstacles to adoption were uncovered by the functional lead through her analysis of the metrics and follow up on them with the other division chiefs, the technical lead then modified the customization design for the tool based on these lessons learned. The functional lead continued this cycle of devising and introducing new metrics designed to streamline the business operation of the system until she had to move onto her next assignment. Her successor as project leader continued the same division of responsibilities and expanded her metrics program.

When Raytheon purchased 80 percent of Hughes Aircraft Company, a large project was created for Computer Sciences Corporation to separate the Raytheon portion of the information technology infrastructure from the Hughes Aircraft Company infrastructure. A senior project manager who worked for a program manager responsible for a portfolio of projects saw a dramatic demonstration of the power of a sponsor when he was asked by the program manager to improve the disastrous results realized from a pilot project for desktop changes. The schedule was very tight and the program manager wanted a revised process rolled out the following week. The senior project manager went to the project sponsor that was the process owner and explained the problem. They agreed additional staff (two) and time (six weeks) was needed and the sponsor called the program manager and negotiated additional budget and schedule time to revise the processes and do another pilot. The revised process was a tremendous success, and the time spent creating the process was more than made up in the ensuing months of changes contributing to a program completed ahead of schedule and under budget with minimal disruption to the users. The sponsor's willingness to play an active role in the project, along with his credibility and position was essential in negotiating the additional staff and time to do the job right.

Conclusion

In the shared responsibility of project success, the project manager focuses on deliverables and the project sponsor focuses on outcomes. Keeping this division of labor

clear, the project sponsor can make the project manager's life immeasurably easier and greatly improve the odds for project success. It is a partnership worthy of the project manager's time, focus, and effort. ♦

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