

# Effective project sponsorship – turning the vision into the reality of success

This, the second in a series of four articles by **Bob Buttrick** on the project sponsor, looks at three important facets of project sponsorship: leader, change agent and decision maker.

## Who will sponsor my project?

Do you often find people in your organisation hunting around for someone to ‘sponsor my project’? If so, you need to consider carefully who you think is running the organisation! A project management framework is not a sophisticated ‘company suggestion scheme’ which collates ideas from everywhere and assembles them into ‘good ones’ and ‘bad ones’. Rather, projects are ways of implementing strategy on the ground, moving the organisation towards the business leaders’ vision. It therefore follows, it is the business leaders who should proactively take on the ‘project sponsor’ role and be looking for people to manage ‘their projects’, not the other way round.

You need to determine who is accountable for directing and leading what. An underlying principle of project management is that of ‘single-point accountability’. This is meant to stop ‘things falling down the cracks’ and applies not only to the management of projects and the constituent work packages, but also to the direction of a project. There should be only one project sponsor per project. In this respect, the term ‘sponsorship’ should not be used in the same sense of ‘sponsoring Tom to run a marathon’, where the objective is to have as many sponsors as possible. If you are to be an effective project sponsor, rather than just someone who gives some money, you will need to be an effective:

- business leader
- change agent
- decision maker.

## Project sponsor as a business leader

We have seen from the first article, the project sponsor role is primarily one of business leadership. As the project sponsor, you are the primary

Single-point accountability stops things ‘falling down the cracks’

risk taker and accountable for the realisation of the benefits to the organisation. This is an active role and includes ensuring the project always makes sound business sense, involving all benefiting units (using a project board if appropriate), approving key deliverables and

Simon, in purchasing, tries to get his idea off the ground.



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making decisions or recommendations at critical points in the project's life. As such, you will probably be a director, executive, or senior manager. In particular you will:

- ensure a real business need is being addressed by the project;
- ensure the expected benefits from the project are likely to be realised;
- ensure the project remains a viable business proposition, bearing in mind any changes to the business environment;
- initiate project reviews;
- ensure the delivered solution matches the needs of the business;
- represent the business in key project decisions;
- sign off key project deliverables and project closure;
- resolve project issues outside the control of the project manager;
- chair the project board (if one is required);
- appoint the project manager and facilitate the appointment of team members.

This is not merely a ‘figurehead’ role. You are fundamentally accountable for ensuring ‘why’ the organisation is spending time and resources on a particular project. You must ensure that whatever is being created is really needed and this need is fulfilled in a viable way. The project team will have their heads down developing whatever outputs and

deliverables are needed. You have to keep your head up, making sure the need still exists and the capabilities being produced fit the need. This cannot be over-

emphasised; current research is indicating that a prime cause of project failure is the lack of effective sponsorship and stakeholder engagement (we'll come to this in a later article!).

The degree of confidence you show in your leadership will critically influence how others behave towards you, and therefore communication and influence are skills you need to have. Conversely, if you are invisible or disinterested, the failure of your project should come as no surprise and you will only have yourself to blame.

## Project sponsor as a change agent

Some may see the roles of change agent and leader as synonymous. If so, that is good. For others, I have separated these out so they can be related to what many consultants and academics often refer to as ‘the management of change’. Every project will create some change in the organisation, otherwise there is no point in undertaking it! However, some changes

are ‘easier’ to effect than others as they align with the status quo and do not cross any politically sensitive boundaries. In essence, most of the people carry on as they always have done. Other changes, however, are fundamental and will result in shifts in power bases internal to the organisation or even external, such as in unions, suppliers or customers. Further, projects are not the only way of making change happen, although they are the most visible.

All organisations are ‘political’ to some extent and the greater your project's scope to change the status quo, the more you will need to be tuned in. While projects create change, that change may not necessarily be beneficial to everyone it touches and this will trigger a political dimension to your role. People's attitudes to ‘corporate politics’ differ, ranging from believing it is unnecessary, through to seeing it as an opportunity. Suffice to say, you

This is not merely a figurehead role. It is a fundamental accountability

All projects create change, otherwise there is no point in doing them!

must acknowledge the political aspects, understand the sources and motivations of the key players and then develop an appropriate approach to them. You will need to identify the power bases you and others are operating from – these may be real or perceived and include:

- Position power, resulting from rank and formal authority. This can be actual rank or 'reflected' by association (eg, the CEO's assistant).
- Status, resulting from how people perceive an individual, often related to their charisma and leadership qualities, and may bear no relationship to facts of any particular project!
- Resource power, where a person has direct authority over resources and can therefore smooth the way for, or block any initiative requiring, those resources.
- Expertise, where the knowledge or skill of an individual is such that others listen to and follow that person.

From these power bases, all will seek to influence (positively or negatively) the direction of the company. You will need to understand the nature of their interest, the impact they can have and how this may limit or enhance your influence and that of your project manager.

### Project sponsor as a decision maker

The decisions you will need to make fall into two broad types:

- decisions which steer the project in a certain direction;
- approval of certain deliverables.

The former relates to go/no go decisions at the gates, decisions regarding how to react to issues and changes and decisions on when to close the project. The latter relates to particular outputs from the project. It should not be necessary for you to approve every single deliverable. But it is necessary for you to agree who should have approval authority over which deliverables.

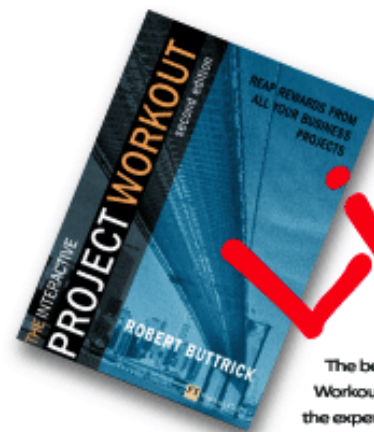
If you are unable to make decisions, the project sponsor is not likely to be a role you will be comfortable with! Most of the decisions you will have to make will be predictable (in terms of timing, if not outcome!) and backed up by evidence. The project documentation, such as project definitions, business cases, closure reports and suchlike, are designed to provide you with the information you need. In addition, you can call for supplementary information (eg, a feasibility report) to help you. Make sure you do not spring the requirement for these onto your project manager as a surprise; you should make your needs plain from the start, when a particular stage of the project is being planned, which should be before the stage actually starts!

### Summary

- Your role involves being a business leader, change agent and decision maker.
- Project sponsorship is a single-point accountability, but do use your key stakeholders either formally (eg, in a project board) or informally to help you achieve your aims.
- Keep your head up, ensuring the project remains needed and viable, while the project manager and team concentrate on delivery.
- The way you are perceived as a leader can have a far greater impact on project success than many people realise.
- All projects create change, otherwise there is no point in doing them. The greater the change, the more likely the political aspects will dominate. Be prepared.
- Understand your own and others' motivation and power sources.
- Decision making is fundamental to your role – if you cannot make decisions, don't be a project sponsor!

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