

# Effective Project Sponsorship – turning the vision into the reality of success

The fourth article on the Project Sponsor by Robert Buttrick looks at the relationship with the Project manager.

As shown in earlier articles, we know the Project Sponsor is there to direct the project. The project manager's role, on the other hand, is to manage the project on a day-to-day basis. He ensures all members of the project team are gainfully employed in creating the project deliverables to the right quality standards. He or she will be looking for you, the Project Sponsor, to: provide the vision; ensure the business need is still valid; keep the team informed of the prevailing business environment; provide direction; make decisions; engage key stakeholders; approve key deliverables; remove blockages.

In return, you should:

- receive regular progress updates;
- be kept informed of key risks and issues;
- be asked to approve deliverables, give guidance and make timely decisions.

This requires you and the project manager to be driving in the same direction. If you made your intentions clear during the set up and investigative stages of the project, there should be little problem. If, however, you have only given the merest hint of the problem or opportunity to be addressed and have then left the detail to the project manager to determine, you are taking a BIG risk. People who proclaim themselves to be 'big picture' people are very adept at dodging awkward (but vital) questions, often using their rank or status to rise above it all. True sponsors, however, know detail counts and sometimes they need to work at this in order to communicate their intentions. Far too often, I have met project managers who are unable to gain sufficient insight into a sponsor's intentions merely because the sponsor will not take the time to talk to them or avoids the tricky questions. If you were spending your money on a major home extension, would you let the architect and builders get on with it, only looking in when it is all finished? Why treat the company's money any differently?

You also need to consider your priorities. For example, would you rather have the project delivered late than badly built? Projects never go completely as planned; something is bound to crop up to knock it off course – that is what project change control is there for. You must be prepared for

this and understand whether adherence to timescale, cost or quality is paramount for your project. When push comes to shove, what will you stick by? Which aspects have the biggest impact on benefits? Again, don't assume the project manager knows your views. You need to discuss this with him, as there may be many other senior stakeholders with differing priorities. Without your direction, the project team will be faced with making a decision for themselves, which may be one that suits them best, and not necessarily the you and the company!



Certain lifecycle stages of a project require more direct work from you than others. The investigative stages are crucial. If you have not taken the time to work with the project manager and key stakeholders defining the need and possible solutions, don't be surprised if what you get does not satisfy your need. If the project is being undertaken in an unstable, political or emotionally charged environment, do share your views with the project manager. The more you create a common understanding of the goals and risks, the more likely it is the project manager will meet your needs. He should also pay attention to any sensitive issues.

Even if the project was set up properly and you are very confident you and the project team are singing from the same hymn sheet, you still need to have regular meetings with the project manager. You need to be available, often at short notice, if required. Remember, whilst it is your project, do not take over the project manager's role, by delving into aspects which are not your direct accountability. Each project manager will have his own way of approaching the work; imposing your ways may be counter productive. Rather, you need to enquire and challenge just deep enough to ensure:

- you are confident the need or opportunity

Each Project manager will have their own style and imposing yours may be counter productive

is understood

- the deliverables will be fit for purpose,
- the team and stakeholders are engaged and
- your business objectives will be realised.

A word of warning, 'challenge' does not mean 'bulldoze'. You may find the project manager tells you things you do not want to hear. For example the project will take longer than you want. Issuing 'instructions' to him to 'just do it' will not deliver anything any sooner. You need to understand the reasons for any 'bad news' and then explore, with the project manager, the options for dealing with this.

Do not expect your project manager to have all the answers and be the technical expert on every facet of the project. The role of the project manager is to manage the project, not to be a design or technical expert; that is what the core project team is for. Do ensure the project manager uses the full team capability and don't inadvertently block this, for example by insisting only the project manager attends your progress or review meetings.

Whilst the formal and informal interactions with the Project manager may form your primary linkage for directing the project, you should not rely solely on this route for information gathering. Remember, benefits do not come from the project itself, but from using the deliverables and outputs the project produces – those who use the outputs are called stakeholders! Engage them and keep engaging them. Listen to what they are saying, how they say it, what they are not saying and observe what they are doing. Are they walking the talk? Are they saying the right things but behaving in a contrary way?

Even a good project manager will not pick up all the 'messages' from stakeholders, so do not think you are undermining him by checking behind the scenes. Be especially sensitive if people start withdrawing resources:

Never underestimate stakeholders' ability to ruin your best laid plans!

- 'for that other really important project';
- because they have lost confidence;
- because another sponsor has leant on them.

Is this their way of blocking the project? Are their people really engaged and signed up to the solution or merely paying lip service?

Never underestimate stakeholders' ability

to ruin your best laid plans! It is the project manager's and project sponsor's role to ensure all stakeholders are adequately briefed and engaged on the project. Too much communication will drown them -they won't bother with it. Not enough, will mean your project will be lower down their priority list than you want it to be. Agree with your project manager which stakeholders each of you will target.

The relationship between project sponsor and project manager is fundamental to a successful project. A clear understanding of each others' roles and working styles is essential if you are to keep the project going when things get tough.

One delegate at a sponsorship workshop put down on his end-of-seminar To Do List, 'Talk to the project manager'. That's good advice!

**Summary**

● The Project Sponsor directs, whilst the project manager, manages, but both need to be driving in the same direction. It is a partnership.

- Be prepared to take time to put your vision across and answer questions, especially at the beginning of the project. The 'big picture' man who refuses to be drawn, seldom makes a good sponsor.
- It is your project, be available and be interested.
- Challenge the project manager but don't bulldoze him.
- Don't expect the project manager to have all the answers and ensure he uses the core project team to best effect and do not inadvertently block this.
- Keep the project manager informed of the prevailing business circumstances and political environment.
- Agree how you will engage the stakeholders. Then do it. And keep doing it!

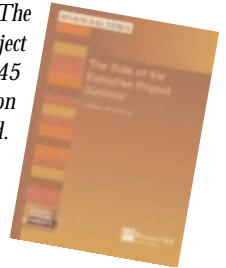
The Project Sponsor checks progress on his vital project.



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