

Effective Sponsorship – turning the vision into the reality of success

Bob Buttrick's fifth article on the role of the project sponsor looks at the 'people aspects'. If leadership and change are about getting people to move towards a stated objective, which styles tend to be the most effective?

Your personal style

There are probably more books and seminars on effective personal style than any other management topic. Yet time and time again projects go wrong for very human reasons. During the 1990s it was estimated that ten academic papers a day were published on the subject and nowadays, virtually every organisation includes leadership as a topic within their management or executive development programmes. Few, however, actually include 'project sponsorship' in those programmes! The project sponsor role is extraordinary in this respect, as it challenges many of the traditional assumptions associated with power and leadership. Notably:

- you, as sponsor, may be leading across the company, impacting on people and capabilities outside your traditional line management remit and even from other organisations; these people may also be from diverse disciplines with different ways of working, jargon and values;
- traditional hierarchy and ranks may be sidestepped, with senior line managers accountable to managers they perceive to be more junior;
- you may have no direct authority over the project manager and teams from a line

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management perspective. As such, the normal disciplinary sanctions for non-performance of individuals may not exist – you have no 'big stick'.

In such situations, aspects of 'pushy' or 'blue' styles, such as assertion and persuasion, can be ineffective.

- Persuasion is only useful if the issue is open to rational debate and you are perceived as being competent in the topic under discussion. It is notoriously poor if used in a highly charged emotional environment.
- Assertiveness can be powerful if your needs are legitimate and you stand to lose if those needs are not met. The list of accountabilities associated with your role gives you your legitimacy, but do check what incentives you can offer or sanctions you can impose to gain agreement or compliance with your wishes. If you can provide neither, assertion can be fruitless.

The sponsor encourages his team using his usual flair and style.



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'Pull' or 'green' styles such as bridging and attraction may be more effective for you.

- Bridging involves gaining others' commitment and is of most value if you are seen to be open to influence and value their opinions. Look at your key stakeholders and you will probably find this form of influence appropriate for most situations involving them.

- Attraction or envisioning is about generating enthusiasm and excitement, taking people beyond the everyday to higher plains and new possibilities. It is often seen as totally irrational, but is no less effective for that. If shared values and trust are what you need to achieve your aims, this is a good influencing style.

In summary, the 'best style' to use depends on the situation of the project sponsor and who he or she is trying to influence. If, however, if you find yourself saying the following, think again:

What you say . . .	What this may mean . . .
'Don't come to me with problems, only with solutions.'	Problems are kept hidden until it is too late to do anything about them.
'I only accept "can do" as an option.'	You are told only what you want to hear and not what you need to hear. Self-delusion rarely achieves anything.
'Don't come moaning to me; just do it.'	Problems remain buried, with the team giving the appearance of making progress rather than actually making any progress.
'I want action NOW!'	Work proceeds with little thought to its value or necessity.

All these phrases may lead to over-optimistic reports of progress, the truth being hidden and blame being laid on others for failure to deliver.

It is more powerful for a leader to surround himself or herself with 'constructive dissenters' who are prepared to tell the truth or ask awkward questions than with 'yes men' who merely repeat what the leader wants to hear.

Remember, the benefits from your project will only start to flow once those deliverables have been put into use in the operational environment. If you, as project sponsor, have not obtained the consent of those senior managers who will actually operate the 'new order', your efforts and that of the team will come to nothing. It would have been more cost-effective to send the team and their families to Spain for three months' holiday than create something which is never used.

Finally, bear in mind the following in your dealings with the project manager. A successful project is one which meets its business objectives. An enabling part of that is producing the project deliverables on time, to

quality and to budget. Against this background a project team can perform as expected or can fail. If the project is well

Open, even-handed styles, which foster a common sense of purpose and trust, will always win in the long run over leadership based on bullying and fear.

planned, the project manager and team should not be expected to produce a higher quality, quicker and cheaper solution than the one defined. If the expectations were higher, the project should be planned to meet those higher aspirations. If carried out properly, the investigative stages of the project will ensure the most appropriate solution is chosen and defined. This is when the big gains are made or lost, not during the development and build stages of the project. A project, which completes on time and to budget is not necessarily an easy project, it could be a very difficult project that has been managed well by the project manager. You should give credit where credit is due.

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