



Taking responsibility for making the sponsor/project manager partnership work

Much has been written about the role and responsibilities of the project sponsor (project executive in PRINCE2™ terminology) and the role and responsibilities of the Project Manager. The many text books on the subject are surprisingly in agreement on the definition of the core accountabilities and the duties associated with each project role. There is absolute agreement that these are the most important roles on any project such that many reasons for project failure are attributed to inadequate sponsorship or lack of a competent Project Manager. As always however, what organisations and people actually do in comparison with the text book definitions varies massively.



Let's assume that what needs to happen is that all projects require:

- Someone to take ultimate accountability for the investment in the project by the business; someone who understands the project context, understands and is responsible for realising the benefits the business requires and has been promised, 'owns' the Business Case and appoints and supports someone who is responsible for delivering the project in line with the business needs. We'll call this role the project sponsor.
- Someone to take responsibility for delivering the project in line with the Business Case; someone who understands the business needs and can build a team of people who are committed to delivering what is needed (the scope) to defined standards and specification (quality),

defined time-scale (schedule) and defined cost (budget). We'll call this role the Project Manager.

All the comments below have been told to us in the last year. Most of the companies are multinational and broadly 'successful' but all of them could significantly improve the way they manage projects:

- *'I don't know who the sponsor is on my project' (said by a Project Manager on a large internal change project).*
- *'We deliver projects for our external clients. The project sponsor is in the client organisation; we don't have or need a project sponsor within our own company.'*
- *'We deliver projects to improve things internally. Someone senior might tell us broadly what needs to be achieved, but there is no project sponsor - the buck stops with the Project Manager.'*
- *'Our projects are mainly to bring new or improved products to our market. There is notionally a project sponsor but they don't really do anything - there is no Business Case that I've seen for the project as Project Manager.'*
- *'The only way that a project gets a Business Case in my organisation is if the Project Manager writes one and gets the project sponsor to agree it. For most projects there is no documented and approved Business Case that is used to inform and guide the project.'*
- *'If project sponsors had to be responsible for the project achieving benefits we wouldn't have any sponsors.'*

- *'Isn't the Project Manager accountable for everything?'*

Our view is that 'absent sponsor', 'don't really care sponsor' and 'I know I'm the sponsor but I don't know what that means' scenarios are all sub-optimal; but real life for many organisations. These situations need to be managed.

One practical way of managing them is by the project managers taking responsibility for making sure that there is a satisfactory sponsor-Project Manager partnership in place. The roles and responsibilities may not be divided in text book fashion, but as long as they are all performed by the partnership then that's good enough. In truth does it really matter who writes the Business Case as long as one is written? However it does matter that the sponsor owns the Business Case even if they didn't write it. Does it really matter who takes responsibility for realising benefits as long as they are? Does it really matter who liaises with external stakeholders and manages their expectations as long as someone does?

Having just read the previous paragraph you might be asking yourself so why do we need two different individuals to be sponsor and Project Manager; why can't the roles be combined? We believe that the answer is simple and it's not just two heads are better than one. The sponsor needs to be business focussed; they need to be 'head up' looking outwards to the organisation and wider business context, checking that the project is still in line with corporate strategy and capable of delivering the required and promised benefits. The Project Manager needs to be 'head down', focussed on engaging the team and delivering the project in line with its objectives. They need to be concerned with the day-to-day management of the project and not concerned with what is going on in the wider environment.

Our point is that it is really important that there are two people involved in assuming the business accountabilities and project responsibilities, but that the division of work can

reasonably vary from the text book definitions as long as it all gets done by someone. So in response to the comments quoted earlier the three minimum requirements are:

- *Every project needs a person internal to the performing organisation who will take accountability for benefits and the Business Case.*
- *Every project needs a person who understands the Business Case and takes responsibility for delivering the capability for the benefits to be achieved.*
- *Every project needs a partnership of two people who, between them, embrace the points above on behalf of the organisation and work together to achieve them or are wise enough to stop when the project is no longer viable.*

Test out your own projects. Perhaps there are shortcomings that need to be addressed?

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