

PM TIPS & TECHNIQUES

How to improve Project Sponsorship

Many organizations do not spend enough time training executive sponsors and explaining their expected role and responsibilities.

by Alfonso Bucero, PMP

Some years ago, I worked as a PMO manager for a multinational company in which business managers were assigned as project sponsors for the whole project life cycle. Results were not very good because project managers often felt alone when dealing with customers.

As a solution, I organized a workshop meeting with the project sponsors. I asked some questions to find out the level of knowledge they had about their projects. Seventy percent of them did not know the accurate project status, and 50 percent never visited the project customer site. Most of the sponsors didn't know much about their projects at all.

In the last five years, I have seen organizations focus on improving project management, implementing methodologies and developing the project management career path. But I have seen only a few organizations that are aware of how to develop the skills of their managers and top executives.

Organizations often confuse the project sponsor role. Sometimes, the Sponsor is not involved in the project enough. Other times, the project sponsor is too involved and acts like a "super project manager", generating conflicts and problems.

Project sponsors must spend time with project managers, the team and customer: Executives will learn how to become more effective and can even potentially generate more business. Complex projects need sponsors who are more leaders than managers, people who establish directions for the future, communicate through vision, create aligned, high performance teams, and who are highly focused on planning and short-term goals. Complex projects need leaders who inspire people and fuse them into a motivated and performing team driven by a common vision.

Good sponsor adds value to the project and plays different functions during the project life cycle: mentor, catalyst, motivator, barrier buster, boundary manager. He or she must link the project manager with upper management. Most of all, project sponsors must be involved from initiation to closeout. Considering their essential start-up tasks, they must:

- ❑ Develop an initial draft about the project mission, objectives, risks and constraints
- ❑ Identify the right project manager
- ❑ Sell the project to upper managers, team members and the rest of project stakeholders.
- ❑ Communicate the importance of project mission.

During execution, the sponsor must be informed of progress and status. The sponsor and project manager must meet regularly to discuss issues, lessons learned, and both good and bad news. The two should avoid using e-mail as the only communication medium and talk. At least by phone, once per week. Face-to-face meetings build relationships.

The project sponsor also must play the role of “change leader”. As Peter Senge, author of *The Dance of the Change*, says: “*In essence, leaders are genuinely committed to deep changes, in themselves and in their organization. They naturally influence others through their credibility, capability, and commitment, and they come in many positions*”.



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