

The Campaign for Real Sponsors by Peter Taylor

Critical to any projects success is having a good project manager we all know but after that then it is pretty important to have a good project sponsor; but, like the saying goes, 'you can pick your friends but you can't pick your relatives' and the same is true of project sponsors.

The job specification

But what exactly is a project sponsor supposed to do? Well, the responsibilities for project sponsors typically include:

- Providing direction and guidance for strategies and initiatives
- Negotiate funding for the project
- Actively participating in the initial project planning
- Identifying project Steering Committee members
- Working with the Project Manager to develop the Project Charter
- Identifying and quantifying business benefits to be achieved by successful implementation of the project
- Reviewing and approving changes to plans, priorities, deliverables, schedule, etc.
- Gaining agreement amongst the stakeholders when differences of opinion occur
- Assisting the project when required (especially in an 'out-of-control' situation) by exerting their organizational authority and ability to influence
- Assisting with the resolution of inter-project boundary issues
- Chairing the Project Steering Committee
- Supporting the Project Manager in conflict resolution
- Make the project visible in the organisation
- Encouraging stakeholder involvement and building and maintaining their ongoing commitment through effective communication strategies
- Advising the Project Manager of protocols, political issues, potential sensitivities, etc.
- Evaluating the project's success on completion.

OK, nice list but do we really have good project sponsors out there that work in harmony with project managers the world over?

The good, the bad and the confused

To judge that we need to look in more detail at what makes a good project sponsor.

The project sponsor is the key stakeholder representative for the project and provides the necessary support for the Project Manager with the primary responsibility of achievement of the project objectives and benefits. An inappropriate choice of project sponsor can seriously impact the possibility of success of the project and provide you, the project manager, with an unwanted additional overhead.

Now you can't practically ask a sponsor for their CV¹ and put them through a formal interview process, nice as it would be sometimes to utter the phrase 'I'm sorry but I just don't think that this is the job for you right now'.

A potentially bad project sponsor will exhibit some or all of these behaviours.

To be a successful partner in this project then they need to be connected to you the project manager and to the project team, if they are remote then that is a red flag for sure. And if they are too busy to meet, to discuss, and to aid then that paints that red an even darker shade. If they avoid helping in the assignment of project roles and responsibilities and never have time to 'timely' approve documents then you have a problem that is reaching critical status. Throw in a dash of blaming anyone but themselves for any problems then it is probably time to walk away. You are in real trouble (and so is your project).

A bad sponsor is potentially your worst nightmare.

Conversely a good project sponsor will behave in the opposite manner in these areas and will happily act as advisor to the project manager and will focus on removing obstacles in the path of project success.

All this is well and good but to be truly fair to project sponsors around the world how have they managed to gain this position of importance and how have the companies that they worked for supported them in this critical activity?

Let the campaign begin

It is said that a project is one small step for a project sponsor and one giant leap for the project manager. Wouldn't you feel so much better if you knew that the project sponsors' one small step made sure that your giant leap offered a safe and secure final landing?

It has been my experience that the skill profile of project managers continues to grow and more and more organisations are developing project managers in a disciplined and mature manner. But the same cannot be said of all project sponsors, many wrongly believe that the project sponsor is just a figurehead that is never called to active duty.

How wrong. How very wrong.

There is a lack of personal development support and sources of information and guidance for project sponsors and it is needed urgently I believe. And so I would like to launch the 'Campaign for Real Project Sponsors' where we see real investment in anyone who acts in such a key role.

¹ A résumé, also spelled resumé or resume; also called curriculum vitae or CV, is a document that contains a summary or listing of relevant job experience and education. The résumé or CV is typically the first item that a potential employer encounters regarding the job seeker and is typically used to screen applicants, often followed by an interview, when seeking employment.

About the Author

Peter is a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in Project Management.

His background is in project management across three major business areas over the last 26 years, MRP/ERP systems with various software houses and culminating in his current role with Infor, Business Intelligence (BI) with Cognos, and product lifecycle management (PLM) with Siemens.

He has spent the last 7 years leading PMOs and developing project managers and is now focusing on project based services development with Infor.

He is also an accomplished communicator and leader and is a professional speaker as well as the author of '*The Lazy Project Manager*' (Infinite Ideas) and '*Leading Successful PMOs*' (Gower) and '*The Lazy Winner*' (Infinite Ideas).

More information can be found at www.leadingsuccessfulpmos.com – and through his free podcasts in iTunes.

