

Understanding Project Sponsorship: The secret Weapon to Exceptional Project Delivery

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As a seasoned project professional, you'll be well aware that successful project delivery hinges on various factors, and one of the most crucial of these, is having a capable project sponsor.

In this edition, we'll explore what a project sponsor is, why they are indispensable, how to effectively leverage your sponsor in your day to day PM tasks and how you can aspire to take on this influential role and elevate your project management career to new heights.

Understanding the Project Sponsor's Role

In project management, a project sponsor is an individual or group responsible for providing leadership, direction, and support throughout the project lifecycle. The project sponsor acts as a champion for the project, ensuring alignment with organizational goals, securing necessary resources, and advocating for the project's success.

Sponsorship Lessons from one of the UK's Largest Delivery Projects

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"Sponsorship is vitally important to a project and goes beyond being an administrative or funding function. It is a professional skill that depends on people with directly relevant delivery and operational experience. Most importantly, it requires the ability to ask basic questions, such as "does the project feel right?" or "is it ready for the next phase?" and then act in the right way, landing the key messages with good effect, coping with ambiguity, and managing senior stakeholder expectations in a realistic way."

Nick Smallwood, Chief Executive, Infrastructure and Projects Authority

The Importance of Project Sponsorship

The significance of a project sponsor cannot be overstated. They serve as the primary link between project teams and senior management, providing strategic guidance and removing obstacles that may impede progress.

Here's why project sponsorship is crucial for successful project delivery:

1. Strategic Alignment: Project sponsors ensure that projects align with the organization's strategic objectives, thereby maximizing their value to the business.

- 2. Resource Allocation:** Sponsors secure the necessary resources, including budget, personnel, and technology, to support project execution.
- 3. Risk Management:** Sponsors play a vital role in identifying and mitigating risks that may impact project outcomes, safeguarding against potential setbacks.
- 4. Stakeholder Engagement:** Sponsors engage with key stakeholders, fostering collaboration and ensuring their needs are addressed throughout the project lifecycle.
- 5. Decision-Making Authority:** Sponsors have the authority to make critical decisions, resolve conflicts, and provide timely guidance to project teams, facilitating smoother project execution.

Developing into a Project Sponsor

For aspiring project sponsors, transitioning into this role requires a blend of leadership, strategic thinking, and relationship-building skills. Here are some steps you can take to develop into a proficient project sponsor:

- 1. Gain Experience:** Start by excelling in project management roles, demonstrating your ability to lead teams, manage resources, and deliver successful outcomes.
- 2. Build Relationships:** Cultivate strong relationships with senior management, stakeholders, and other key influencers within your organization, showcasing your leadership potential and commitment to driving results.
- 3. Seek Mentorship:** Seek guidance from experienced project sponsors or senior leaders who can provide valuable insights and mentorship as you progress in your career.
- 4. Develop Strategic Acumen:** Hone your strategic thinking abilities, understanding how projects contribute to broader organizational objectives and how to prioritize initiatives accordingly.
- 5. Communicate Effectively:** Master the art of communication, conveying project goals, progress, and challenges clearly and persuasively to stakeholders at all levels of the organization.

Different Levels of Sponsor Capability:

Project sponsors vary in their capability and effectiveness, ranging from new project sponsors to experienced leaders accountable for a complex project or portfolio.

The differences in delivery levels lie in their ability to provide vision, support, and guidance tailored to the complexity of the project. Here's how different levels of sponsor capability support the delivery of more complex projects:

- 1. Novice Sponsors:** Novice sponsors will start on simple projects, with less complex stakeholder structures and smaller project values. As a new sponsor they may lack experience or understanding of their role's full significance, and common issues include potential for misalignment with project goals and

inadequate levels of support for project teams. You may have seen this in your projects, as a project leader on the receiving end of ineffective or poor project sponsorship. However, with guidance and development opportunities, novice sponsors can grow into more capable leaders. Gaining the experience and confidence to progress in their careers.

2. Competent Sponsors: As a competent sponsor, these individuals will be elevated to work on more complex projects and programmes of works. There will be a requirement for sponsors at this level to possess a wide level of experience coupled with authoritative and directive personality characteristics. Mid-level sponsors possess a solid understanding of project management principles and actively support project teams by providing resources, resolving issues, and advocating for project success. They effectively engage with stakeholders and contribute to strategic decision-making, thereby enhancing project outcomes.



3. Expert Sponsors: Expert sponsors are seasoned leaders with extensive experience in project management and strategic leadership. Working on the very complex programmes and mega-projects you will expect the value of such projects to run to the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars. Delivering major infrastructure works and impacting significant societal outcomes. Senior level sponsors excel in navigating these complex undertakings, managing risks, and leveraging their networks to overcome challenges. Expert sponsors inspire confidence in project teams, driving high-performance and delivering exceptional results – you will find them where failure is not an option!

If you are seeking to develop your career as a Sponsor, examine the multiple ways outlined that you can gain access to the necessary experience, ensuring hands on project delivery and the opportunity for expert decision making that is the hallmark of credible sponsors. While there are few specific training courses and accreditations available, look out for the opportunities to learn on the job, working with experienced professionals from this discipline.

Project sponsorship remains a cornerstone of successful project delivery, providing the leadership, direction, and support necessary to achieve desired outcomes. By understanding the role of the project sponsor, aspiring project managers can cultivate the skills and expertise needed to excel in this influential

role, contributing to the success of their organizations and advancing their own careers.

I hope you found this newsletter informative and insightful. Stay tuned for more valuable content on project management best practices and industry trends.

Best Regards,

Wishing you continued growth on your mission to greatness!



Nicola Benjamin