Improve your effectiveness as a Project Sponsor

The project sponsor faces a difficult but critical task; being ultimately responsible for the project's vision, direction and end deliverables, without being involved in the day-to-day running of the project. The sponsor (or project executive) provides project funding, defines the overall aims and objectives, resolves issues, approves major deliverables, controls scope changes and provides high-level direction. The sponsor is the project's ultimate decision maker and the person who is responsible for ensuring that the business benefits are delivered and realised.

No wonder why the effectiveness of the sponsor is one of the biggest determining factors for project success!

The project sponsor's responsibilities
As a project sponsor, your ultimate success is dependent on your understanding of the business and your ability to translate the business needs into viable and tangible project objectives and success criteria. You need to champion the overall transformation process and clearly articulate the vision to the core team and steering committee. Why is the project being undertaken? Which tangible benefits should it produce, to which quality and within which constraints? What will the business need to do to realise the benefits of the project and what will the human impact be of the change?

As a sponsor you need to provide the 'why' and 'what' whilst the project manager will provide the 'how', 'who, 'when' and 'how much'.

Being the project sponsor of a major change initiative is not something, which should be taken lightly or only attended to when issues arise or steering committee meetings come up. To be successful, and to secure a satisfying outcome for the business, you must invest a significant amount of time and be proactive in supporting and leading the initiative.

Don't wait for written status reports or monthly meetings to come around. Make a real effort to stay up to date with project progress and have informal chats with the project manager and other key stakeholders to pick up concerns before they turn into issues. This is not to say that you should be doing the project manager's job or step on anybody's toes.

This is about creating a strong working relationship between you and the project manager where each of you is dealing with a different layer of the project. So often projects fail due to lack of direction, executive decision making, buy-in or internal politics. These are the areas you need to pick up on and where you can really make a difference.

The sponsor's main responsibilities can be summarised as;

- Represent business interests and provide project funding.
- Make key organisational and commercial decisions for the project.
- Support, promote and act as a champion for the project.
- Set project direction, inspire the team and be the ultimate leader of the change initiative.

- Produce, own and monitor the validity of the business case.
- Define project objectives, aims and outcomes.
- Define project success criteria and their relative priority.
- Approve the project definition (scope, budget, schedule, solution, resource demands etc.).
- Monitor high-level progress and be accountable for delivery of end products and benefits.
- Resolve major risks and issues in a timely, consistent and effective manner.
- Make priority calls and approve changes to scope, schedule and budget.
- Be the project's voice to more senior executives and protect it from internal politics.
- Appoint the project manager and provide leadership to steering committee members.
- Chair steering committee (or project board) meetings and resolve conflict between stakeholders.
- Help inspire and motivate the team.

Assess your own performance and capabilities

The higher up the hierarchy you move within an organisation, the more you will be watched and the more will be expected of you. The challenge most executives face is not that of managing tasks but that of leading people. The more senior you are, the more your interpersonal skills will matter; that is your ability to lead, inspire and build effective relationships.

Assess yourself ...

Do you exhibit the character and behaviour of and effective project sponsor?

For each of the statements below, rate yourself with a score between 1 and 10.

- I accept full ownership and responsibility for the project.
- I buy into the project and fully support its purpose.
- I have a strong understanding of the business domain and the concerns of the end users and beneficiaries of the project.
- I have produced a thorough and realistic business case and know that there is a valid reason for undertaking the project.
- I continuously validate the project against the business case and make decisions accordingly.

- I provide the team with a clear and lucid picture of the project's aims and objectives.
- I clearly articulate what project success looks like and have provided the team with a prioritised list of measurable success criteria.
- I understand that trade-off's may have to be made between budget, time and quality as the project progresses.
- I continuously validate that the project's deliverables will produce the expected business benefits.
- I have a high degree of gravitas and respect within the organisation.
- I have the authority and control to make decisions over finances, scope and resources.
- I inspire and provide focus to the team.
- I set a good example as a role model.
- I am able to make (and stick to) decisions.
- I avoid making kneejerk decisions and seek to be congruent, timely and consistent.
- I am proactive in the resolution of major risks and issues that are escalated to me by the project manager.
- I actively prioritise requests and features from competing voices.
- I understand the challenges in planning a project and accept that a degree of flexibility and openness is required from my part.
- I earn rather than demand respect and I never criticize a team member publicly.
- I spend sufficient quality time with the project manager and senior stakeholders.
- I monitor project progress as often as a required and I challenge the team when necessary.

If you are new in the role as a sponsor, consider being formally, or informally, mentored by someone who has previously sponsored projects. Chose someone you respect and who has made a few mistakes so that you won't have to.

Even experienced sponsors can learn from a mentor or an independent coach. A mentor is very useful if there are specific techniques and methods you would like to improve on whereas a professional coach can help you develop your leadership and people skills in a multitude of ways.

Whatever you do, keep and open mind and develop a habit of assessing your own performance and capabilities. Increase your self-awareness and continuously ask what you can do to leverage your strengths and address your weaknesses. Don't be judgemental, but be as objective as possible when determining how you can take action to better yourself. If you have the courage, you may even ask others for feedback on how they feel you are performing.

Support and challenge the project manager
A big part of the sponsor's job is to support and challenge the project manager in the execution of the project. Many sponsors neglect this part as they are pressed for time and purely manage by exception; hence assuming that no news is good news.

But keeping the finger on the pulse, and liaising closely with the project manger, formally as well as informally, could make a big difference to the project. The better and more open and honest your relationship, the easier it will be for you to keep taps of what is going on. Create and environment where bad news is acceptable. It will make the project manager more inclined to open up and ask for advice and guidance and in turn enable you to use your power and influence to help resolve queries and risks before they spiral out of control.

Be proactive and ask how things are going. Ask into specific deadlines and deliverables and what the risks are. Ask what is holding the project team back and what is being done about it. Ask in a non-judgemental way and be sincere about your willingness to help out with issues that aren't trivial. You will quickly get a sense of what is going on and if there is anything you should be doing to assist.

Be as open and supportive as you can and positively challenge the project manager. Look out for things that may have been overlooked but enquire without looking for mistakes or failures. The idea is not that you do the project managers job, but that you know what is going on so that you can immediately step in if needed.

By way of a checklist, these are all the situations and areas in which you should positively challenge the project manager;

• Check that business domain and project scope is understood. Ask to have it illustrated to you.
• Ensure that the proposed solution is the best one for the business's needs. Check that alternative solutions have been explored and ask into constraints and assumptions. Ask for the solution to be demonstrated to you and the users.
• Check that the project's solution and approach has been documented in sufficient detail prior to the project entering into the execution phase. Query the approach and its underlying assumptions.
• Question the foundation of the estimate. Ask for the estimate to be explained to you in detail.
• Check that the project plan is realistic and that it contains enough buffer to cater for unexpected events. Does the plan allow for early successes of the most important business benefits? Is sufficient time allocated for testing, rework and user training?
• Ask the project manager how much confidence he/she has in the schedule. Consider asking for a range of dates between which delivery will be made as opposed to just one target date.
• Check that estimates are periodically being refined and revalidated.

- Verify that the end users are frequently involved in the project and that they liaise as much as possible with the remaining team. The users should help specify requirements, test cases and assist in the execution of end user testing.
- Challenge project reports and information presented to you. Does it seem open, honest and realistic? Are all key risks and issues logged and has sufficient thought been given to their root cause, impact and resolution?
- Check that the project manager is on top of the financials and knows exactly how much money has been spent compared to budget.
- Query the team's approach to quality. How does every team member contribute to quality and how does the project manager know that what is being built matches the user's needs?
- Check that the project manger uses sound methods for measuring progress. Progress should be measured in terms of tangible deliverables as opposed to what team members say they have completed.
- Verify that the project manager has a structured approach for managing changes to scope and what the process is for escalating them to you for sign-off.
- Ask the project manager what he or she is doing to motivate the team. Is sufficient time being spent with each individual team member?
- Assess if the project manager spends enough time liaising with individual stakeholders beside you.
- Investigate if the team has sufficient knowledge to carry out the project and if it needs further training and information about the business domain.
- Ask the project manager what is being done to secure resources (especially in matrix organisations) and what is being done to resolve potential resource contentions and constraints.

Questions …

- In which ways could you get better at positively challenging the project manager?

- How can you start doing that right now?

Susanne Madsen is an internationally recognized project leadership coach, trainer and consultant. She is the author of _The Project Management Coaching Workbook_ (2012) and _The Power of Project Leadership_ (2015, 2019).

Prior to setting up her own business, she worked for 17 years in the corporate sector leading large change programmes of up to $30 million for organisations such as Standard Bank, Citigroup and JPMorgan Chase. She is a fully qualified Corporate and Executive coach, an NLP Practitioner, DISC accredited and a regular contributor to the Association for Project Management (APM).

Susanne specialises in helping managers improve their leadership skills so that they can gain control of their projects and fast-track their career. She does this through a combination of training, coaching, mentoring and consulting.

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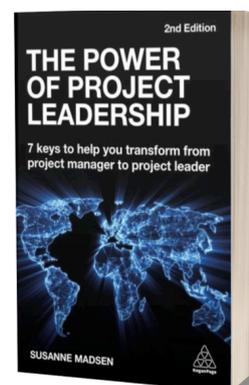
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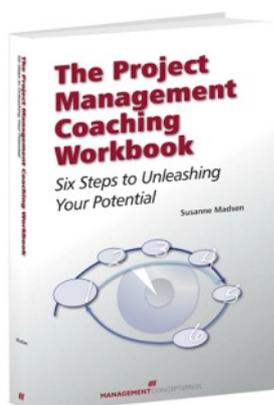
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