

Project Sponsorship

Effective sponsorship is a key element in the successful delivery of projects and programs; the way a sponsor interacts with the project and other managers can create or destroy value. '*Sponsoring Change*¹' describes the role of the sponsor as the link between corporate direction and accountability and the management of programs and projects. This is a key governance role². The sponsor transmits management information and decisions *downwards* to the project and represents the project in senior management circles, communicating important information *upwards*.

The sponsor will normally be a senior manager with a relevant area of responsibility that will be affected by the outcome of the project. The project manager needs an effective sponsor to have a chance of delivering the designated project effectively but the sponsor should typically have a wider 'through life' responsibility for the overall initiative starting with the feasibility/business case (can we and should we do the work) through to seeing the benefits realized to generate the expected value defined in the business case and is consequently involved with a project or program for far longer than the appointed managers.

Sponsor has a 'continuity' role, firstly engaging with the people responsible for the inception of the project, including defining the benefits to be realised and the scope of the project. The sponsor then commissions others to deliver the project and champions their cause throughout the life of the project. Once the project has been launched they should ensure that it is actively reviewed and where appropriate projections and assessments made by the project team should be questioned and validated. The Project Sponsor is also usually the one who has to negotiate a path through any tricky diplomatic areas impacting the project! Finally, the sponsor works with the operational aspects of the organisation to ensure the intended value is fully realised.

Sponsors may be at different levels in the organisation. Where programs exist, a senior manager should be the program sponsor but it would be quite usual for the program manager to act as sponsor for the projects he/she creates to deliver the outputs needed to facilitate the overall outcome of the program.

Key Roles

The sponsor:

- Acts as champion of the project and supports the project (or program) manager.
- Is accountable for the delivery of planned benefits associated with the project³.
- Is responsible for the original business case and for ensuring that the business case is kept in alignment with the organisations strategy and portfolio direction (but the sponsor would not normally write the business case, other technical experts would do this).
- Has ultimate authority and responsibility for the project and leads the Project Steering Board (if one is created/used).
- Works with the project team to optimise the project delivery strategy⁴
- Makes key organisation/commercial decisions for the project and provides decisions in a timely fashion⁵.
- Promotes ethical working⁶.

¹ **Sponsoring Change, A Guide to the Governance Aspects of Project Sponsorship:**

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<http://www.apm.org.uk/page.asp?categoryID=4&subCategoryID=27&pageID=0>

² For more on governance see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1033_Governance.pdf

³ For more on Value Delivery see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1023_Benefits_and_Value.pdf

⁴ See **Project Strategy:** http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1038_Strategy.pdf

⁵ For more on decision making see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf

- Governs project risk and has responsibility for top level contingences (management reserves).
- Approves the budget and decides tolerances.
- Ensures resolution of issues escalated by the Project Manager.
- Assures availability of essential project resources.
- Sponsors the communications programme and communicates the project or programme's goals to the organisation as a whole.
- Supports and is actively engaged in stakeholder management, particularly with the client.
- Monitors and controls the progress of the business change at an operational level.
- Formally closes the project and ensuring that the lessons learned are documented.

Attributes of a Sponsor

The sponsor:

- Must understand the role, its significance and the project context.
- Must be competent to fulfil the role including having the requisite knowledge, skills and personal attributes.
- Must have credibility and be accepted by stakeholders as being suitable for the role.
- Must give the role the personal time and priority necessary to fulfil its duties and responsibilities.
- Must be willing to take personal ownership of the project and its outcomes.
- Must be able to influence and lead people and ensure effective communications are in place.

Managing your sponsor

The organisation appoints the project sponsor, sometimes with little regard to the person's experience, capability or capacity. The Project Manager should evaluate the sponsor and complete, in a subtle way, a 'Strengths and Weaknesses' assessment so that the PM can adapt his/her approach and communication methods⁷ to maximise their sponsorship support for the project that you now manage.

At your first meeting with the sponsor ask softer, more open questions: 'What are your hopes for this project? What are your fears about this project?' – You will learn a whole lot more than by asking direct, closed questions⁸.

Based on understanding the requirements of this key stakeholder, you can then develop an effective strategy for *Advising Upwards*⁹ to optimise the support you receive.

Conclusion

Improving project and program sponsorship will directly contribute to improved outcomes for the organisation. Surveys have consistently shown a strong positive correlation between the effectiveness of sponsors and the success of projects and programs. However, sponsorship does not exist in a vacuum, the

⁶ For more on ethics see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1001_Ethics.pdf

⁷ Advising Upwards is a key skill for project managers. For more on this see our workshop:

Communicating for Effect (Advising upwards): www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Training-Communication%20Planning.html

⁸ See WP1012 **Effective Questions:** http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf

⁹ See **Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders:** <http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Books.html#AdvisingUpwards>

organisation needs to ensure that their sponsors have appropriate support in terms of training¹⁰, clear authority, access to decision makers and adequate resources. There should be continuity of sponsorship through the life of a project or program with effective handovers if the sponsor has to change.

Sponsors need to understand their central role in the overall governance of projects and programs and act in the long-term interests of the organisation¹¹, providing ethical leadership consistent with the organisations culture and values. There are many decisions a project manager should not be authorised to take including determining the purpose and objectives of the project, the projects priority relative to other aspects of the organisations work and whether the project should continue, be deferred or terminated. These aspects of governance sit with the sponsor and other senior managers.

The role of sponsor is intensive. Project managers focus on the work of the project, they are (or should be) skilled in the management of projects and the technology being used. Sponsors provide the critical linkage between technical excellence at the project level and the organisations objectives and strategies. Success is created by the partnering of the sponsors senior management skills with the project manager's technical knowhow.

¹⁰ See: ***Successful Project Sponsorship, the critical role of the Senior Responsible Owner.***
<http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Training-Sponsor.html>

¹¹ For more on the overall management of project management see:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1074_PPP_Taxonomy.pdf