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Sponsor expectations disrupt project managers
by Kik Piney
Commentary

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Crispin ("Kik") Piney

I enjoyed the article by Yogi Schultz called "*Project Manager Delusions Embarrass Project Sponsors*"[2]. I agree with the points he raises and have even taken the liberty of reusing some of his text in this article.

As "it takes two to tango", and Yogi Schultz's article only addresses half of the problem, I would like to present my view for the other half.

It is important to recognize that sponsors think in terms of business objectives, whereas project managers focus on delivering the specified capability as effectively as possible.

<u>Project sponsors</u> correctly interpret their responsibility as achieving the best possible outcomes from the initiatives for which they are responsible. Unfortunately, this well-meaning aspiration can cause sponsors to:

- Produce overly optimistic targets for time and costs.
- Underestimate the probability and impact of threats.
- Refuse to accept the detailed plans submitted by the project manager if these disagree with their own assessments.
- Ultimately blame the project manager when the corresponding failure occurs.

Excessively ambitious targets are part of the mindset of project sponsors. They frequently try to impose these targets on the managers of their projects. Project managers, unless they have the self-confidence to stick to their convictions, can easily become the passive victims of this behaviour when the projects ultimately fail. Excessively optimistic behaviours are driven by beliefs and aspirations that are disconnected from objective evidence and are resistant to reasoning. When left unaddressed, such behaviours will materially damage project outcomes, team morale, and organizational credibility. This situation is particularly prevalent in strongly hierarchical organizations.

As Yogi Schultz correctly concluded: "Recognizing and correcting these patterns is essential for improving delivery reliability, preserving professional credibility, and ensuring that projects serve strategic intent rather than collective self-deception."

Here's how <u>project managers</u> can reduce the likelihood of failure.

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[2] Schulz, Y. (2026). Project manager delusions embarrass project sponsors, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue II, February. Available online at https://pmworldjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/pmwj161-Feb2026-Schulz-Project-manager-delusions-embarass-project-sponsors.pdf

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- Resist any hierarchical pressure to manipulate your results, and prepare a detailed set of realistic plans based on the goals, specifications, and constraints of the endeavour. Optimize the plans.

- Identify options and compromises for reducing time and costs. Clearly define the effects and negative impacts of each option.

- Prepare a briefing that the sponsor could use if necessary to counteract pressure from their senior management to modify the new plans in line with the targets that were originally used to justify the project

- Be prepared to defend your planning even in the face of hierarchical pressure from the sponsor. Keep in mind that the sponsor needs you in order to get the project delivered, so that taking you off the project would increase the likelihood of total failure – and leave them with no scapegoat to blame.

Do your utmost to make the sponsor your ally in resisting pressure that may be applied to reject your plan. If your plan is not accepted, make sure the people responsible for the decision formally accept to take personal responsibility for the effect of their decision. Document this agreement. If this is not possible, refuse to accept the project rather than becoming complicit in their self-delusional behaviour.

Conclusion

I have had personal experience, as the project manager, of this problem. In one project, although I had tried all of the steps outlined above, the sponsor said to me. "If I insist on maintaining all of the original specifications including time and cost, what can we do?" I replied quite simply, "We can fail!". The sponsor clapped his hands and said "Right, let's get started then. "My reply: "I'm afraid we just did" fell on deaf ears!

Later, as the project evolved along the lines I had forecast, I was able to help the sponsor to justify change requests to help us achieve the best compromise possible.

As a final comment, I was once brought in as a consultant to evaluate an organization's project management record. In answer to the question from a senior manager "why do our projects consistently exceed our planned budget and time forecasts?" I gave a simple answer: "It's because you insist on being lied to!"

When asked what I meant, I explained, "if you refuse to accept the truth from the experts who report to you, it is much easier for them to take the path of least resistance. As an external consultant, I do not have that constraint, so I have been free to tell you the truth."

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After many years of managing international IT projects within large corporations, **Crispin ("Kik") Piney**, B.Sc., PgMP is now a freelance project management consultant based in the South of France. At present, his main areas of focus are risk management, integrated Portfolio, Program and Project management, scope management and organizational maturity, as well as time and cost control. He has developed advanced training courses on these topics, which he delivers in English and in French to international audiences from various industries. In the consultancy area, he has developed and delivered a practical project management maturity analysis and action-planning consultancy package.

Kik has carried out work for PMI on the first Edition of the Organizational Project Management Maturity Model (*OPM3™)* as well as participating actively in fourth edition of the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* and was also vice-chairman of the Translation Verification Committee for the Third Edition*.* He was a significant contributor to the second edition of both PMI's Standard for Program Management as well as the Standard for Portfolio Management. In 2008, he was the first person in France to receive PMI's PgMP® credential; he was also the first recipient in France of the PfMP® credential. He is co-author of PMI's *Practice Standard for Risk Management*. He collaborates with David Hillson (the "Risk Doctor") by translating his monthly risk briefings into French. He has presented at a number of recent PMI conferences and published formal papers.

Kik Piney is the author of the book *Earned Benefit Program Management, Aligning, Realizing and Sustaining Strategy*, published by CRC Press in 2018

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