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How can project sponsors help projects succeed?
by Yogi Schulz
Advisory

How can project sponsors help projects succeed? [1]

Yogi Schulz

Most projects flounder when sponsors are absent, hiding, or unsure of their role. Project managers and teams suffer dysfunctional consequences when project sponsors interfere or shirk their roles.

Ideally, project sponsors collaborate with project managers and stakeholders to position projects for success, reduce risks, and mitigate the impact of issues that arise as projects progress.

Here's a list of actions project sponsors can take to help project managers and teams.

You can explore these and other tips to help project sponsors and project managers be more effective in our new book_, A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide - Improving Project Performance_. It's available from Amazon at this link.

Champions project benefits throughout the organization

The project sponsor and steering committee members must enthusiastically communicate, sell and defend the project benefits in meetings and informal discussions throughout the producer organization. If these individuals fail to champion the benefits or, worse, challenge the benefits or criticize the project, the project is doomed.

For example, they remind the organization of the project's value proposition, such as lower operating costs, and maintain its commitment to the project at various management meetings or town hall events.

When this visible public support is absent, project managers provide project sponsors and steering committee members with brief talking points to encourage greater communication.

Provides support and guidance for the project manager

The project sponsor provides support and guidance for the project manager. The project sponsor offers organizational insights to the project manager, who often lacks sufficient

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seniority and reputation for the producer organization to accept necessary but unwelcome recommendations.

When project managers feel neglected, they can reach out to project sponsors to reconfirm the following best practice points for their relationship:

- Commit to a firm schedule of meetings with the project manager. The frequency is usually weekly or bi-weekly.
- Respect the project manager's mandate and delegation of authority.
- Provide open, frank feedback to the project manager on project observations and potential improvements.
- Demand honest opinions from the project manager about project status and issues.
- Guide the project manager on key topics, including internal politics, corporate history, and the prejudices held by various stakeholders.
- Will not create pressure to provide a false, overly optimistic project status.
- Operate the project manager relationship based on mutual trust.
- Ensure the project manager receives leadership coaching if needed.

Conversely, if the project sponsor loses confidence in the project manager, the project sponsor must replace the project manager.

Supports the team at a strategic level

The project sponsor provides meaningful guidance to the team on quality, cost, and schedule trade-offs as they arise. The team documents the conclusion in the issues log. The project sponsor enforces ethical standards.

For example, the project sponsor clarifies team questions about the organization's strategic plan and how the project contributes to advancing the plan.

When teams feel ignored, project managers can diplomatically encourage project sponsors to hold a project issues meeting with the team.

Encourages the team

The project sponsor occasionally speaks to the entire team to publicly provide kudos, encouragement, and boost morale. On these occasions, the project sponsor strongly supports the project and the team's work.

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For example, the project sponsor can share some senior management scuttlebutt that would be good for the team to hear and that would reinforce the importance of the team's work to the organization.

When teams feel unappreciated, project managers can diplomatically encourage project sponsors to attend a team meeting.

Ensures resource commitments are fulfilled

When the project was approved, various stakeholders, including multiple VPs, accepted resource commitments to work with the project. However, as the project proceeds, the business departments are typically hit with new resource demands and gradually de-commit from the project. Only the project sponsor can reverse this trend.

For example, only the project sponsor can effectively glare at senior managers or VPs to rebuild the commitment. Project managers can't do that and survive in the organization.

It's up to project managers to point out this failure to fulfill commitments to project sponsors so that they can resolve it.

Resolves issues that the project manager cannot resolve

Every project develops issues related to scope, priorities and approach. Only the project sponsor can resolve or lead the resolution of the more significant problems that tend to cross organizational lines.

For example, the project depends on production and defect data; the data quality is low. Only the project sponsor can march into the VP of Production's office, ask that the data be cleaned up, and extract a commitment that the data will remain high quality in the future. If the data doesn't improve, the project deliverable will disappoint.

It's up to project managers to raise these issues with project sponsors for resolution.

Shields the team from distracting internal politics

To the greatest extent possible, the project sponsor shields the team from distracting and harmful internal politics. The project sponsor also protects the project team from being hijacked to solve a business crisis.

For example, if the team is distracted and upset by rumours of a merger, reorganization or downsizing, the project sponsor can reassure the team.

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It's up to project managers to raise the concerns with project sponsors for attention.

Ensures the team's performance

Through discussions and reports, the project sponsor monitors the team's performance at a high level. The project sponsor makes a determined effort to support the project manager and the team. However, if the project manager loses confidence in the performance of specific individuals or some team members, personnel changes must be made.

For example, if some team members are absent excessively or interfere with others' work, project leadership cannot ignore such behaviours.

It's up to project managers to candidly share team performance issues with the project sponsor. Allowing non-performance to fester only adds cost and risk to the project.

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Project sponsors can often help project managers improve project performance by collaborating to resolve project issues. You can explore these and other topics that help project sponsors in our new book, *A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide - Improving Project Performance*. It's available from Amazon at this link. View the book as a reference tool. You don't have to read it all to obtain actionable insights.

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Yogi Schulz has over 40 years of experience in Information Technology across various industries. Yogi works extensively in the petroleum industry, selecting and implementing financial, production revenue accounting, land & contracts, and geotechnical systems. He manages projects arising from changes in business requirements, leveraging technology opportunities, and mergers and acquisitions. His specialties include IT strategy, web strategy, and systems project management.

Mr. Schulz regularly speaks to industry groups and writes a regular column for Engineering.com and for TechNewsDay.com. He has written for Microsoft.com and the Calgary Herald. His writing focuses on project management and IT developments of interest to management. Mr. Schulz served on the Board of Directors of the PPDM Association, the global energy data professionals, for 20 years, until 2015. He can be contacted at yogischulz@corvelle.com.

His new book, co-authored by Jocelyn Schulz Lapointe, is "A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide: Improving Project Performance."