

Reimagining Project Management for a New Era

Project Sponsorship: The Missing Muscle in Most Transformations ¹

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There is a persistent illusion in modern organizations: that good projects fail because of complexity.

They don't.

Most strategic initiatives fail for a far more mundane—and uncomfortable—reason. The person who is supposed to own the outcome never truly does.

We call that role the sponsor.

And in most organizations, it is the weakest link in the entire transformation chain.

The Role That Looks Powerful—but Isn't

On paper, project sponsors hold enormous authority. They are senior. Influential. Accountable for outcomes. Their names sit at the top of governance charts and steering committees.

In reality, their involvement is often intermittent and symbolic.

They attend key meetings. They endorse direction. They ask thoughtful questions. But they rarely make the hard decisions that move the project forward. They hesitate to intervene across silos. They avoid forcing trade-offs that create friction with peers.

So the project continues—but without real backing.

This is not a capability issue. It is a role design failure.

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We have defined sponsorship as a position of oversight, not as a discipline of leadership.

The Systemic Consequence: Projects Without Power

In a Project-Driven Organization (PDO), projects are not side activities—they are the primary vehicle through which strategy is executed and value is created. As I argue in my recent Harvard Business Review book, *Powered by Projects: Leading Your Organization in the Transformation Age*, organizations must be designed around their most important initiatives, not around legacy functions.

But this model only works if projects have real power.

And power, in organizations, comes from sponsorship.

Without strong sponsors, even the most strategically aligned initiatives remain structurally weak. They lack decision velocity. They get trapped between functions. They compete endlessly for resources without resolution.

This is why so many organizations remain, in practice, “project-driven in name only.”

Because while projects exist everywhere, ownership does not.

Why Even Well-Designed Projects Stall

Consider a large-scale transformation I recently observed. The organization had done everything right—at least structurally.

A clear strategy.

A capable project leader.

A well-funded initiative.

A robust governance model.

Yet within months, momentum faded.

The root cause was not technical complexity. It was organizational friction. Multiple business units were involved, each with competing priorities and incentives. Critical decisions required alignment across senior stakeholders.

The sponsor was present, visible, and supportive.

But not decisive.

No trade-offs were enforced.

No priorities were reset.

No conflicts were resolved at the source.

The project did not fail outright. It simply slowed until it became irrelevant.

This is how most transformations fail—not through collapse, but through gradual loss of energy.

Sponsorship Is Not Governance

One of the most damaging misconceptions in project management is the belief that strong governance can compensate for weak sponsorship.

It cannot.

Governance is designed to monitor progress. Sponsorship exists to create it.

Governance operates through cadence—meetings, reports, stage gates. Sponsorship operates through intervention—decisions, alignment, and action.

When sponsorship is weak, organizations instinctively increase governance. They add more reviews, more controls, more reporting layers.

This creates the appearance of rigor.

But in reality, it replaces leadership with process.

And process, no matter how sophisticated, cannot resolve strategic tension.

Only people can.

What Real Sponsors Actually Do

If sponsorship is a leadership discipline, then it must be defined by behavior—not by title.

In practice, effective sponsors do three things consistently.

First, they impose clarity. They define what success looks like and, more importantly, what does not matter. They make prioritization explicit, even when it is politically uncomfortable. Without this clarity, projects become arenas of competing interpretations rather than engines of execution.

Second, they resolve conflict. Most strategic initiatives fail at the intersections between functions, geographies, and agendas. Sponsors step into that complexity. They force decisions where consensus stalls. They reallocate resources when needed. They make trade-offs visible and unavoidable.

Third, they maintain momentum. They stay close enough to the work to detect friction early. They intervene before escalation becomes necessary. They do not manage the project, but they actively shape the conditions under which progress is possible.

This is not passive oversight.

It is active ownership.

Why Sponsorship Remains Underdeveloped

If sponsorship is so critical, why is it consistently weak?

Because it demands what most leadership systems are designed to avoid.

Time.

Conflict.

Accountability.

Real sponsorship requires executives to step out of their functional roles and act in the interest of the enterprise. It forces them to challenge peers, reallocate resources, and make decisions with incomplete information.

It is far easier to remain at a distance—to review, to advise, to support.

But distance is precisely what undermines execution.

As we explored the shift toward project-led leadership, the executive role is no longer about protecting the system. It is about reshaping it. Sponsorship is where that responsibility becomes real.

The Hidden Organizational Cost

Weak sponsorship does more than delay individual projects. It reshapes organizational behavior.

Teams become cautious because decisions are uncertain.

Accountability diffuses because ownership is unclear.

Talent disengages because effort does not translate into progress.

Over time, a pattern emerges. Initiatives start with energy but rarely finish with impact.

Eventually, the organization internalizes a dangerous belief: that execution is unreliable.

At that point, even the best strategies lose credibility before they begin.

From Sponsor to Owner

Part of the problem is linguistic.

The word “sponsor” suggests distance. Advocacy. Occasional involvement.

What organizations actually need is ownership.

In a true Project-Driven Organization, every strategic initiative has a clearly accountable owner at the executive level—someone who is not just endorsing the project, but actively driving it.

Someone with the authority to decide.

The courage to prioritize.

And the discipline to stay engaged.

Because without ownership, projects become organizational orphans—touched by many, driven by none.

A Simple Leadership Test

For executives, the test is straightforward.

Can you clearly articulate the outcome of the projects you sponsor?

Have you made a difficult trade-off for them recently?

Do teams experience you as a decision-maker or as a reviewer?

Are you actively removing obstacles—or merely observing them?

The answers to these questions reveal more about execution capability than any maturity model ever will.

Final Reflection: Where Transformation Succeeds or Fails

Organizations do not lack strategy. They do not lack ambition. They do not even lack capability.

What they lack is consistent, accountable ownership of execution.

They design bold transformations.

They mobilize talented teams.

They implement sophisticated frameworks.

But they underinvest in the one role that determines whether any of it matters.

Project sponsorship is not a ceremonial responsibility.

It is the mechanism through which strategy becomes reality.

And in a Project-Driven Organization, it is the difference between motion and progress.

Until sponsorship is treated as a core leadership discipline—expected, developed, and measured accordingly—most transformations will continue to underdeliver.

Because in the end, projects do not move at the speed of plans or processes.

They move at the speed of the person who is willing to own them.

See you in May.

About the Author



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Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, PMI Fellow, is one of the **world's leading experts in Project Management and Strategy Implementation**. He is the author of the "[Harvard Business Review Project Management Handbook](#)" (HBR 2021) and is the **most published author on project management matters in Harvard Business Review**. His upcoming book, [Powered by Projects: Leading Your Organization in the Transformation Age](#), will be published by Harvard Business Review Press in early 2026.

Antonio has brought Project Management to the center of executive leadership, positioning it as a critical capability for transformation in the next decade. He is the creator of influential concepts such as the **Project Economy®**, the **Hierarchy of Purpose®**, and the **Project-Driven Organization™**, which argue that *projects have become the operating system of modern organizations—and the language of future careers*.

His global impact on management and leadership has been recognized by [Thinkers50](#), where he is **the only project management thinker included twice in a row** in the ranking of the world's most influential management thinkers. He is also the recipient of the prestigious **Thinkers50 Ideas Into Practice Award** and a member of the **Marshall Goldsmith 100 Coaches** community.

He was the global Chairman of the Project Management Institute in 2016 and has been recognized as a Fellow of PMI for his contribution to the project management profession. He led the creation of the Brightline Initiative, founded [Projects & Co](#), and co-founded the [Strategy Implementation Institute](#).

His work focuses on advising senior leaders on how to prioritize and implement strategic initiatives and lead transformational change.

Antonio is also the author of "[Lead Successful Projects](#)" (Penguin, 2019), "[The Project Revolution](#)" (LID, 2019), and "[The Focused Organization](#)" (Taylor & Francis, 2014), and has contributed to seven other books. A pioneer and leading authority in teaching and

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He is a much-in-demand speaker at events worldwide. Antonio has presented at more than 800 conferences around the world, regularly evaluated as the best speaker. European Business Summit, Strategy Leaders Forum, Gartner Summit, TEDx, and EU Cohesion Policy Conference; are some of the events he has delivered inspirational keynotes.

He is former Sustainability Program Director and Head of Global Program Management Office at GlaxoSmithKline Vaccines. Previously he also served as Head of Project Portfolio Management at BNP Paribas Fortis and Head of Post-Merger Integration at Fortis Bank, leading the acquisition of ABN AMBRO, the largest in financial service history. He also worked for ten years at PricewaterhouseCoopers, becoming the global lead practitioner for project and change management.

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