

The Executive Edge: Essential Skills to Become an Exceptional Project Sponsor ¹

Randall L. England & Alfonso Bucero

Today's project-driven organizations do not deliver their strategy through operations; they deliver it through projects. Yet, despite advances in methodologies and tools, one factor continues to determine success or failure: executive sponsorship. Research across leading project management journals and practitioner literature—including the work of Randall L. England and Alfonso Bucero—consistently shows that effective sponsors are not passive supporters. They are active leaders who shape outcomes. The question is no longer whether sponsorship matters.

The key question for us is:

- *What skills must executives develop to sponsor projects successfully?*

We (England & Bucero) propose the following *Competency Model*, see Figure 1:



Figure 1: England & Bucero Executive Sponsor Competency Model

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1. Strategic Alignment Thinking

Exceptional sponsors ensure that every project aligns with the business strategy, and it requires the ability to:

- Translate strategy into executable initiatives
- Challenge misaligned projects
- Continuously validate business value

As highlighted in project sponsorship literature, sponsors are the bridge between vision and execution. Without this skill, projects drift into irrelevance. The sponsor asks:

“Why does this project matter—now?”

2. Organizational Influence and Political Intelligence

Projects do not fail because of Gantt charts—they fail because of people dynamics. An effective sponsor needs to:

- Navigate organizational politics
- Influence peers at the executive level
- Remove barriers beyond the project manager's authority

According to multiple PM journal studies, organizational resistance is one of the top causes of project failure. Sponsors need to act as organizational orchestrators. We are not talking about authority. We are talking about credibility, trust, and timing.

3. Decision-Making Under Uncertainty

Projects operate in ambiguity. Sponsors need to make decisions with incomplete information. Based on our practice, we can share that critical capabilities include:

- Balancing speed vs. accuracy
- Making risk-informed decisions
- Avoiding analysis paralysis

We (England & Bucero) believe that strong sponsors provide timely decisions, not perfect ones. A delayed decision is often worse than a wrong one.

4. Accountability and Ownership Mindset

One of the biggest myths in organizations is that the project manager “owns” the project. The reality is: the sponsor owns the outcome. We defend that effective sponsors:

- Take full accountability for business results
- Stay engaged throughout the lifecycle
- Do not disappear after project approval

As we emphasize in our Project Sponsorship framework, sponsorship is not a role—it is a commitment.

5. Relationship Leadership and Emotional Intelligence

Projects succeed through people, not processes. Sponsors need to:

- Build trust with project managers and teams
- Listen actively and empathetically
- Manage conflict constructively

Research consistently highlights that emotional intelligence is a differentiator between average and outstanding sponsors. The best sponsors create an environment where people feel supported, heard, and empowered.

6. Benefits Realization Focus

Many projects deliver outputs—but fail to deliver outcomes. Sponsors need to:

- Define clear success criteria
- Track benefits beyond project closure
- Ensure a sustained value realization

This fact aligns with insights from Randall L. England and modern PM thinking: a project is only successful when it achieves business benefits.

7. Courage to Challenge and Say “No.”

Great sponsors are not cheerleaders—they are guardians of value. We suggest that Project Sponsors:

- Challenge unrealistic expectations
- Stop or redirect failing projects
- Protect teams from overload and strategic noise

This action requires executive courage, often overlooked in traditional competency models.

8. Visible and Consistent Engagement

Perhaps the simplest—and most neglected—skill is to “show up”.

Effective sponsors:

- Attend key meetings
- Communicate regularly
- Stay accessible to the project manager

PM journal research repeatedly shows that visible sponsorship correlates strongly with project success.

From Sponsor to Strategic Leader

The role of the sponsor is evolving. It is no longer enough to approve budgets and sign off on milestones. Today's organizations require sponsors who lead change, inspire people, and drive strategic outcomes. As emphasized throughout our work and object sponsorship, it is a leadership discipline—not an administrative role. In Figure 2 below, we show our Project Sponsorship Skills Framework.

England & Bucero's Project Sponsorship Skills Framework

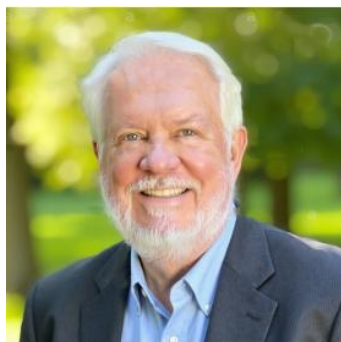


Figure 2: England & Bucero's Project Sponsorship Skills Framework

Summary Thoughts

- If project management is the engine of strategy execution, then executive sponsorship is the fuel that powers it.
- Organizations that invest in developing these executive skills will not only improve project success rates—they will transform how strategy becomes reality.
- You can help executives by seeding the message: TODAY IS A GREAT DAY and TOMORROW WILL BE BETTER. Excellence in project sponsorship is possible if you have well-skilled project sponsors who contribute to organizational success.
- Please join in the quest to evolve this role into its greater potential.

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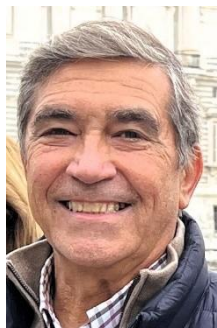


Randall L. England, MBA, BSEE, NPDP, CBM believes all leaders need to create healthy environments for people to consistently and sustainably achieve project success. Sponsors can do a better job of guiding and supporting project teams, and project managers can expand their people skills.

Randall offers keynote talks, consulting, professional facilitation, executive education, and advanced training services to people in management, managing projects, and working on project teams. His approach includes the behavioral, technical, business, and change management aspects that create an environment for project success. The goal is to get greater, optimized results from projects underway or contemplated in the organization. An organic approach to implementing projects, program, and portfolio management taps the inherent power of people to work in harmony, have fun, and be more productive.

He co-authored with Alfonso the book *Project Sponsorship: Achieving Management Commitment for Project Success, 2nd Ed* as well as *The Complete Project Manager: Integrating People, Organizational and Technical Skills, 2nd Ed*. Randall also co-authored *Creating an Environment for Successful Projects, 3rd Ed*.

The Project Management Institute honored Randall with the *PMI Distinguished Contribution Award* and the *PMI Eric Jenett Excellence Award*. You may contact Mr. England at englundr@englundpmc.com



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Alfonso Bucero, Ph.D., CPS, ACE, PMP, PMI-RMP, PfMP, SFC, IPMO-E, PMI Fellow, is an International Correspondent and Contributing Editor for the *PM World Journal* in Madrid, Spain. Mr. Bucero is also the founder and Managing Partner of BUCERO PM Consulting. Alfonso was the founder, sponsor, and President of the PMI Barcelona Chapter until April 2005 and belonged to PMI's LIAG (Leadership Institute Advisory Group). He was the past President of the PMI Madrid Spain Chapter and then nominated as a PMI EMEA Region 8 Component Mentor. Alfonso was a member of the PMIEF Engagement Committee.

Alfonso has a Computer Science Engineering degree from Universidad Politécnica in Madrid and a Ph.D. in Management from the ISM University. He has 39 years of practical experience and is actively advancing the PM profession in Spain and Europe. Alfonso received the *PMI Distinguished Contribution Award* on October 9, 2010, the *PMI Fellow Award* on October 22, 2011, and the *PMI Eric Jenett Excellence Award* on October 28, 2017. You can contact Mr. Bucero at alfonso.bucero@abucero.com.

To see other works by Alfonso Bucero, visit his author showcase in the PM World Library at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/alfonso-bucero/>