

# **How to Improve Sponsor & Executive Accountability for Value-Driven Project Success in Africa <sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Projects, when executed successfully, have been shown to create value and impact on people, communities, organisations, society and nations. Projects have been the vehicle of choice to execute corporate and national strategic transformation in order to achieve competitive advantage. However, the reality on the ground over past decades, has been that many projects still have not been performing as well as they should be, despite many resources, costs and efforts, being expended on project work. This time it is not an issue of not having competent project management or execution capabilities, but rather in more cases than not a lack of effective project governance, weak sponsorship and in some cases, a total absence of proper executive accountability and stakeholder engagement, with many project sponsors not perceiving themselves as a “governor” of the project as much as only an enabler of the Project Management process.

As project success is now increasingly being viewed from a value-perspective, the traditional control, focus and metric of project management is also changing from project delivery, to new ways of perceiving projects as investments, in terms of project portfolio management and value governance. This then also changes the metrics of how we measure project success and performance towards the value being perceived by the stakeholders.

The main focus of this article is around Project Sponsorship and Governance – with a specific focus on the African Project Management context in line with Project Management South Africa’s Theme “Evolving Project Management for Value, Governance, and Impact in Africa”. One of the main objectives of this article would be to raise awareness of the need and basis of governance excellence, as a standard of project performance and executive

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engagement, just as important as project management methodology excellence, as the best way of ensuring project success in Africa. The professionalisation in project work, thus also being argued as, not only applies to project managers, but to governance / strategic executive managers (sponsors) as well. This tie in with the global trends of client-perceived success as the main measure of projects, that are now being increasingly looked at as business value investments (as against the traditional project management disciplines that has been mostly viewed as operational work and not linked to strategic and transformational value performance).

**Keywords:** *Executive Accountability, Project Sponsorship, Value Governance; Governance Maturity, Benefits Realisation, Professionalisation, Portfolio Governance, Ethical Leadership, Strategic Project Governance*

## **1. Introduction – Where Governance and Executive Accountability Meet**

There is no shortage of observations and research that projects have not, as a whole, been as successful as they should or could have been, despite decades of research and investment in developing project management capabilities. As per the evidence shared by PMI in their annual performance and insight reports, one of the major contributing factors has been the lack of effective governance and executive involvement.

Research also shows that one of the major project success factors, is that of having an effective Executive Sponsor (PMI's Pulse of the Profession report 2021). Similarly, Müller and Turner (2010) also shows the Sponsor's Leadership Competence as the key differentiator in project performance.

However, this is also one of the least well-understood and least practiced aspects of project management by most organisations, where executive roles, accountabilities, authorities and decision-making, processes and other governance levers, are simply not well defined or understood. This article therefore attempts to share some thoughts, on the importance of executive accountability and effective project governance, with specific reference to the role of the Project Sponsor.

## **2. From Project Delivery to Value Governance**

Project management's traditional performance metric has for a long time, been that of the iron triangle of project success (Atkinson, 1999). Whilst still very relevant, projects are now also seen as not just tactical or operational tool to be used to deliver work, but rather as an investment for value creation, for strategic and required return on business and stakeholder value.

As also described by Too and Weaver (2014), this means that governance needs to ensure that projects are aligned, and that they need to make a contribution in terms of business benefits realisation as well as the traditional delivery criteria, as a measure of their success. In other words, value governance is required to drive the strategic project investments.

In light of the required shift in emphasis, to the perception of project value performance, the control mechanism of project management (involving the project manager and project team), thus also needs to be expanded to include strategic executive accountability as well as project governance.

## **3. The Role of the Project Sponsor as a Strategic Link**

The role of the project sponsor has over time been recognised as being the person whose primary responsibility is to bridge the GAP between strategy intent and project execution, and whose role is not simply to just support the project management, but to actually ensure business value success. In other words that the business purpose or investment of the project, actually is in fact delivered.

As stated by Müller (2009) in his work on project governance, it is for this primary reason why most instances require that a project sponsor role be established.

However, evidence abounds that in practice, the role of the project sponsor, in reality, is still often not well defined or understood, with many appointments often made more on a status basis, as opposed to actual required competencies. Bryde's (2008) work confirms the lack of understanding and practice of the Project Sponsorship role, in the real world of project work.

Project Sponsors are therefore responsible for:

- i. strategic intent of the project;
- ii. project prioritisation as well as approving and resourcing of investments;
- iii. alignment with organisational objectives;
- iv. benefits realization; and
- v. monitoring and governance.

For this very reason, it is without doubt that, without appropriate sponsorship and executive accountability, projects stand very little chance of success and becomes purely an operational task with no real link to strategic and value contribution.

The professionalisation of project work in an organisation, therefore, cannot be purely focused on project managers as a key process enabler, but must equally see the executives as the professionals responsible for value creation and success, for the organisation or government.

#### **4. Executive Accountability – a Governance Necessity**

Executive accountability is probably one of the most neglected, yet key component of effective governance, that simply cannot be delegated or “assigned” by the executive management to anyone else in the organisation. As project delivery is increasingly viewed from a value-perspective, executive accountability is also now even more important than ever, as it is now required as part of strategic delivery and value.

APM’s (2019) also shows, the evidence of how a lack of clarity in governance structures, leads to delayed decisions, increased risks and eventual poor project performance.

Flyvbjerg’s (2014) work on why megaprojects perform poorly and do not realise their stated benefits, are also mainly as a result of weak executive accountability in government.

Executives are therefore responsible for:

- i. retaining accountability for project performance and outcomes;
- ii. active engagement with projects including their execution and decision-making;
- iii. timely, informed decisions; and
- iv. alignment of projects to strategic objectives.

Project managers or operational leaders, can be delegated the day-to-day project execution accountability, but never project accountability.

## **5. Project Governance – The African Context**

Projects in Africa, present a unique challenge in terms of the importance of effective project governance. Projects in African governments and also in some corporates, have been a popular choice for delivering transformational projects and strategic investments. It is the main vehicle of infrastructure delivery and service delivery, as well as economic development and transformation in many cases.

Weak governance in such an environment, lead to:

- i. inefficient resource utilisation and project waste;
- ii. delayed service delivery;
- iii. loss of trust with the public; and
- iv. minimal economic benefit, impact and other negative effects.

In other words, it is not only a governance performance and practices topic but a developmental priority.

## **6. The Way Forward to Governance Excellence and Professionalisation**

Improving governance, as performance, within the complex context such as the African Project Management landscape, requires a structured and professional approach. Some of the key building blocks of good governance are:

### **6.1 Clear Roles**

There must be no confusion or overlap on the roles and responsibilities of both the sponsor as well as executive leaders and project managers. These roles are not optional as may be the case in some organisations, but mandatory and required.

### **6.2 Governance for Decision-making**

Governance is intended to ensure that there is an effective decision-making framework in place in the organisation, to enable timely and efficient decisions. This can only be achieved if decision-making authority as well as escalation procedures are clear.

### **6.3 Value Realisation Governance**

Governance must not end with project completion, but should also include ensuring that projects are still monitored for benefits realisation and performance, as required, post project close-out.

### **6.4 Portfolio-Governance**

Projects cannot be considered in isolation from a portfolio, and governance must ensure that projects are properly aligned and resourced, as part of a prioritised and aligned portfolio for resource optimisation.

### **6.5 Professional Leadership and Ethical Conduct**

Professional leadership stands as a cornerstone of effective governance. Transparent, accountable, and ethical conduct are not merely aspirational values; they are fundamental requirements that cannot be compromised, particularly within the public sector where public trust and service delivery are paramount.

Ethical behaviour forms the foundation of public sector operations. Public servants are entrusted with significant responsibilities and resources, making it imperative that they uphold the highest standards of integrity and professionalism. Ethical leadership ultimately determines public trust, institutional credibility, and organisational performance.

Transparency and accountability are inseparable from professional conduct. When professionals operate transparently, they build public confidence and demonstrate that organisational decisions are made in the best interests of the communities they serve. Open communication, responsible decision-making, and accountability for outcomes are essential characteristics of mature and effective organisations.

Professional leadership extends beyond technical expertise. Effective leaders inspire teams, navigate complex policy and organisational environments, and make decisions that align with both organisational objectives and the broader public interest. Executive decision-makers significantly influence organisational culture and performance, creating environments where professional standards, continuous improvement, and ethical behaviour can flourish.

Leaders who champion professional development, engage with human resource functions, and support professional body initiatives help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. In doing so, they create organisations that remain competitive, ethical, responsive, and capable of delivering sustainable value to stakeholders and society.

## **7. The Role of the Professional Bodies**

Professional bodies are uniquely positioned to influence the development, knowledge, competence, and professional standards of a profession. As industry bodies, they have both the mandate and the ability to shape professional practice, establish competency requirements, and promote continuous improvement across the profession.

In the project management environment, professional bodies have an important role to play not only in the development of project managers, but also in supporting project sponsors, governance structures, and executive leadership. Through the establishment of professional standards, competency frameworks, professional designations, and continuing professional development requirements, professional bodies contribute to improved organisational performance and project success.

Project Management South Africa (PMSA), through a coherent and integrated approach to knowledge sharing, professional designations, competency development, and industry engagement, is uniquely positioned to:

- i. Promote higher standards within the project management profession and related industries;
- ii. Establish project management and governance performance benchmarks that contribute to improved organisational performance;
- iii. Promote structured professional competency in areas where formal competency frameworks may not yet exist; and
- iv. Develop an Africa-relevant body of knowledge informed by SAQA-recognised standards, professional competency requirements, and a structured Continuing Professional Development (CPD) framework.

The professionalisation agenda of PMSA includes, amongst others, the following focus areas:

- i. Project professionals;
- ii. Project sponsors;
- iii. Governance;
- iv. CPD and knowledge as a differentiator; and
- v. Ethical behaviour and leadership.

Professional bodies are therefore uniquely positioned to improve industry standards and organisational practices by advancing knowledge, influencing human resource and executive decision-making, and linking professional standards to real-world practice.

The importance of governance maturity in achieving organisational success is well established. The Project Management Institute's Pulse of the Profession® report identified project governance maturity as a significant contributor to project success and the achievement of strategic objectives (PMI, 2021). Professional bodies play an important role in supporting this maturity through the development of standards, competencies, and professional leadership.

As the PMI Pulse of the Profession report (2021) indicated, the maturity of project governance as a key driver of project success, is at the centre of the effective performance by organisations, in order to achieve their strategic desired outcomes.

## **8. Conclusion**

Projects are increasingly being viewed as investments, to create business and economic value, stakeholder and other strategic returns. As a result, it can no longer be viewed purely as a tactical or operational task that is to be delivered by project managers or operational project teams.

Project success must now also include active executive accountability and as such, governance as a control and performance metric, and discipline must be properly planned for and executed, to ensure that projects drive value.

Strengthening Sponsorship as well as improving executive accountability must be some of the fundamental levers to improve project performance and value.

In Africa, where projects are at the centre of transformation and economic development, governance and executive engagement can no longer be an afterthought.

In other words, as an operational executive sponsor and Project Governance enabler for the organisation's strategic execution, is as much a "profession" as that of the project manager is perceived to be.

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## Transparency Note

*Artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this article to assist with language refinement, structural editing, and readability improvement. The conceptual framework, arguments, and professional perspectives presented remain those of the author. AI tools were used solely as editorial support to improve clarity and style and not to generate original concepts or research findings.*

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