

Sponsors Play a Vital Role in Projects

Project sponsors don't get much applause—in research literature or on the job. Yet there is convincing evidence that a project's success or failure often relies on top management support.

Researcher Lynn Crawford, of the Lille School of Management in France (ESC Lille) and Bond University, Australia, and her international colleagues recently conducted over 108 interviews relating to 36 projects in five different regions: Australia, China, Europe, North America and South Africa.

The researchers were looking for data that would make sense of—and define—the sponsor's true role. They discovered that project sponsors do play a pivotal role, both in influencing a project's success and overseeing its governance requirements.

"Sponsors are often the critical link between corporate and project governance," says Crawford, "ensuring that governance requirements are met and that projects receive the support they need."

Sponsors act as the bridge between the organization and the project, she says, and must have experience, knowledge, perspective, credibility and authority. They should also be excellent communicators, passionate about their cause and capable of handling ambiguity as well as managing their time and stress levels.

A sponsor's governance role, Crawford and her colleagues say, can be structured around six dimensions:

- Governing the project
- Taking accountability for business case and benefits
- Giving direction and making decisions
- Critically reviewing progress
- Managing internal and external interfaces
- Representing the project to the organization.

The sponsor's support role has four dimensions:

- Having credibility and using networking ability
- Providing leadership
- Maintaining effective relationships
- Being available and providing timely support

Some projects, says Crawford, will have a greater emphasis on governance while others will require more support from a sponsor.

Generally, she says, governance will be more important in those projects where there is:

- High-risk exposure for the organization if the project fails

- Persistent under-performance of the project
- Rapidly changing market conditions
- Attention drawn to corporate governance (e.g. Sarbanes-Oxley)
- Suspected illegal or non-compliant behaviour in the project
- Project is mission-critical
- Need to realign project to new strategy or organizational context

Projects exhibiting a greater need for support include those where:

- The organization fails to provide sufficient resources for the project
- Some parts of the parent organization are resisting the project's implementation
- Different stakeholders in the parent organization are seeking to impose conflicting requirements on the project
- The parent organization is failing to provide the project with decisions necessary to maintain planned progress
- The project manager is inexperienced or weak
- There are early signs of difficulty within the project, such as a possible shortfall in benefits

The researchers have created a two-by-two model of sponsor roles. This model suggests that:

- 1) A project with a low need for support or governance can be successful with a guardian sponsor
- 2) A project with a low need for support and a high need for governance needs a judge
- 3) A project with a high need for support and a low need for governance needs a mentor
- 4) A project with high needs for both support and governance needs a Professor Dumbledore — someone wise and powerful.

The bottom line, says Crawford, is that it is a difficult job to be a good project sponsor. As one of her interviewees says:

"You're a bit removed from the detail.... So you have to just spend the time talking to people, trying to understand what they are saying... and that's a real challenge for a sponsor when you've got so many other things to do."

"While the project sponsor role has often been taken for granted, the new emphasis on corporate and project governance is now highlighting the role's importance, as well as its complexity and variability," says Crawford. "We'll continue to examine our data for more information that can synthesize and capture the richness of the sponsor's role and commitment."

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PMPerspectives.org is a website which connects project managers and sponsors with project management researchers. Our mission is to understand and improve project management practices. The research team comprises Dr. Blaize Horner Reich and Dr. Andrew Gemino from Simon Fraser University, Canada and Dr. Chris Sauer from Oxford University, UK.

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