

The Role of a Project Sponsor

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The role of the project sponsor is a topic that is not specifically addressed in the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) and therefore may be an area that is potentially overlooked during project planning. It is ultimately the project manager's responsibility to provide the customer guidance on the need for this very important role and should be one of the first discussions that occur once the project manager is engaged.

Who should be a Project Sponsor? The ideal candidate would embody the following personas:

- An executive: Someone who has the ear of those in the C-suite and authority over many of the departments effected by the project
- An influencer: Someone who has earned respect in the organization and has the power to influence and enforce project requirements
- A spokesperson: Someone who understands the organizations culture, goals, and mission and can associate the project results with critical issues

The Project Sponsor roles includes being:

- A Communicator
- An Obstacle Remover
- A "Know-it-all"
- A Director
- A Cheerleader

Communicator: The first step to a successful project is to communicate the importance of the project, its strategic position in the organization's overall mission, and the need for cooperation and involvement of all stakeholders. This includes the executive officers, physicians, clinical staff, auxiliary department managers, and any other employees of the organization that will be affected by changes in the project methodology. Together with the help of the PM, the project sponsor can identify who these individuals and groups are and the vehicle and frequency of communication.

Obstacle Remover: A project sponsor helps the PM keep the work on track by ensuring that any obstacles to success, both on an individual team member basis or an overall project basis, are removed. Keeping team members accountable for their task completions is the responsibility of the PM; however, whether internal or external to the organization, the PM often does not have the authority to insist on the razor sharp focus of the team members, especially when the departments providing the resources are part of a matrixed organization (reporting in a functional alignment). The project sponsor would have the power to persuade, negotiate and enforce the use of these resources for the duration of the project.

Know-It-All: A project sponsor must be available and accessible along with being very well-informed. This means, not only attending meetings and reading status reports, but also participating in informal discussions with individual team members when needed. Face to face communication is

essential between the PM and the project sponsor. These formal and informal meetings are the key to keeping the project sponsor accurately informed in a timely manner.

Director: One of the criteria for success of a project is to ensure that the results of the project are in line with the strategic direction and goals of the organization. This can be a particularly difficult achievement if there is no project sponsor to help keep the project aligned and/or the project duration is long and the organization experiences major changes during that time. The project sponsor needs to monitor the internal organization and help plan, with the PM, to make project adjustments if the environment changes. Project finances also need to be made available at strategic points in the project and any scope changes must be evaluated for their financial impact. Should a change be required and additional finances need to be appropriated, the PM can provide the supporting documentation to justify financial challenges, however the project sponsor is the organization liaison responsible to acquire the additional funds.

Change management is one of the most difficult aspects of any project. It is the responsibility of the PM to monitor change requests and maintain the schedule and budgeting. The project sponsor has the political clout within the organization to achieve consensus on any impactful changes needed to be approved, such as a major timeline change or the inclusion or exclusion of large parts of the project.

Cheerleader: One of the most important roles of the project sponsor is as the cheerleader and reward-giver. As the project progresses, the customer team members will need to be recognized for their successes. In projects of long duration, this is particularly important, as a motivation, to continue a high level of activity and focus in order to achieve overall project success. Rewarding individual and team successes is also the responsibility of the PM, but in most cases it is the project sponsor's approval and acknowledgement (either through word or reward) that provides the most effective incentives when achieving major project milestones.

An example of how the Project Sponsor influences the success of a project is illustrated by a Cerner PathNet and PharmNet project at a regional hospital. With the guidance of a PM, one CIO learned her roles as a project sponsor and helped turn around a challenging project.

An implementation project was in the design and build phase when the customer determined that a PM was required to ensure the overall success of the project. Some of the issues that had already placed the project in jeopardy were lack of involvement of the customer's technical team; lack of a technical team lead; misunderstanding by the customer of their role in the project; scope creep; and most importantly, lack of a strong, involved project sponsor.

The CIO for this particular hospital was recently hired and relocated from another state. She began to get an overall understanding of the department, staff and start the process of vendor selection for an overall electronic medical record system. She believed that getting involved in any individual project on a day to day or regular basis was beyond her scope.

The role of the PM in this situation extended to training and explaining to the new CIO what the expected roles and responsibilities during the project life cycle of a committed project sponsor should be. The initial meeting for the PM was to make a connection with the CIO and begin forming a good project relationship. Once the CIO understood the value of her input and contribution to the

project she was anxious to receive accurate and specific information about the project progress. It was decided the new PM would investigate project status and report back. Once the investigation was completed, a follow up meeting was held with the CIO to identify and communicate with her assuming the role as the project sponsor. The customer team leaders also attended. There were two deliverables for this meeting: a list of project goals and an organizational chart.

The first deliverable was a list of the project goals as identified by the project charter. This was presented to the CIO in order to ensure that all project leaders and the sponsor had the identical understanding of the project purpose, goals and value. Once the project goals were achieved, there would be unanimous agreement the project was a success. The content of this document initiated a lengthy discussion that clarified the mission and defined the stakeholders. The conclusion of this part of the meeting resulted in a required revision and re-publication of the project charter to all stakeholders. The PM was assigned this task, along with the customer project team leaders, and this was completed in a timely manner.

The second formal document was an organizational chart showing the names of each person and the role they assumed in the project. There were several “holes” where project responsibilities were not owned by a specifically named individual. In particular, there was no name next to the technical team lead and the project sponsor roles. The purpose of this document was to persuade the new CIO to become more actively engaged in the project. She was unfamiliar with project management as a formalized methodology and the role of the project sponsor as an important member of a successful team. The remainder of the meeting was spent providing an explanation of what a project sponsor role is and what tremendous influence she, as the project sponsor, would have on the success of the project.

Following this meeting, the CIO had a better grasp of her role as a project sponsor. Her interpretation led to several activities that greatly enhanced the success of the project as a whole. In her role as a communicator, she began attending Steering Committee meetings. It was at this meeting that she introduced herself as the Project Sponsor. There was general agreement that this addition to the project team was essential. Communications between the team and the stakeholders became more formal, accurate and frequent. As an example of the effectiveness of this approach, during the testing phase it was determined the design of the build did not take into consideration a new Pharmacy robot that was being purchased (a decision that was made in a silo situation). Once the Steering Committee became aware of this disparity, a re-design was authorized and the project time line change was agreed upon. Change management became a very important tool for keeping the project on track and the participation of the project sponsor was invaluable to support the timeline change approval.

As an obstacle remover, the new Project Sponsor assigned the Director of IT to identify the Technical Team Lead from within his organization. This new team member joined the project within one week. Because the new project sponsor was trying to stay well informed, she would often stop team members in the hallway to get a quick update on parts of the project and get an understanding of the overall morale and focus of the individual team members. This was a tremendous motivator to keep the project on schedule. As the project cheerleader, the CIO attended the project go live planning meeting and congratulated the team on their success. It was a great motivator for them to close the project effectively and efficiently.

Once the CIO understood her role and the effect she would have on project success, issue resolution became a much smoother and effective process. Personnel that were required to work within the



project framework were assigned. The technical project leader and his team were engaged and subsequently achieved the level of training required for them to independently manage the hardware and software installed for the project. Once there was an executive voice included in the project execution, scope became more manageable, schedules and budgets were more easily maintained.

The project completed according to the new time line and budget and the conversion went smoothly. The Pharmacy Director and the Lab Director, also members of the Steering Committee, were extremely satisfied and content that the project results were in line with their expectations and the goals as outlined in the project charter. Without the leadership of the Project Sponsor, this project could have gone off track with less desirable results.

The success of the project resides on the affirmation of the project goals and the acceptance of the PM and the project management methodology. Project success also resides with the resolution of conflicts both internal and external to the project team and the communication to the stakeholders. The role of the project sponsor is the key component for a project to achieve the desired results. One of the most important aspects of a PM's job has expanded from the typical initiating, planning, executing, controlling and closing to now include the mentoring of project roles and responsibility with an emphasis on the importance of a project sponsor.

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