

PROJECT SPONSORSHIP

The secret the project success



*Leveraging your
leaders to create
project success*

Problems with project delivery are persisting

Project delivery itself isn't rocket science, yet time and time again it appears that lessons are not learnt-about what worked, and what didn't.

A study of 5,400 large scale IT projects (projects with initial budgets greater than \$15M) found that the well known problems with IT Project Management are persisting.

Among the key findings quoted from the report:

- 17 percent of large IT projects go so badly that they can threaten the very existence of the company
- On average, large IT projects run 45 percent over budget and 7 percent over time, while delivering 56 percent less value than predicted

Source: McKinsey & Company in conjunction with the University of Oxford. Study on large scale IT Projects 2012

So what's required to ensure successful project delivery?

In the past there had been an expectation that it is up to the project manager to make a project happen. That may still be the case in some organisations however it is now more common to expect a project to be sponsored by a non project resource.

Now project sponsor engagement is critical. Projects with a highly engaged sponsor deliver significantly better business outcomes and on-time, on-budget performance than those that don't. The effectiveness of the project sponsor role is the best way to predict project success or failure.

When we talk about 'sponsors' we mean senior executives who are prepared to actively involve themselves in the project and commit to its success.

A sponsor is expected to understand the project's objectives and outcomes and be able to influence key stakeholders to support or resource the project. They will have a sound understanding of the context in which the project or its outputs will operate.

Being a sponsor

As quoted by Rob Thomsett,
Thomsett International:

"the one common theme shared by virtually all 20,000 people who have participated in our project management workshops, it is their relationship, or lack of, with their project sponsor...is the best predictor of project success or failure"

The oxford dictionary defines a sponsor as simply someone who "makes himself or herself responsible for another".

For a project, this means taking on responsibility for the success of that project. It means commitment to project outcomes, the associated benefits and to the people involved in delivering these.

A sponsor isn't expected to understand the ins and outs of project management – that's what they have a project manager for. They are required to build a trusted relationship with the project manager and project team; be available to escalate issues when they arise; and create the vision for the project (understanding why they need to do this work).

As sponsors are usually from the business, the expectation is that the PMO (Project Management Office) will provide guidelines and techniques to help a sponsor understand their role, the critical activities they should focus on during each project phase and the key questions that they should be asking at each stage gate.

The way I see it, there are three big challenges for project sponsors

Challenge # 1

Leaders feel they don't have time to invest in project sponsorship and they may believe it's someone else's responsibility.

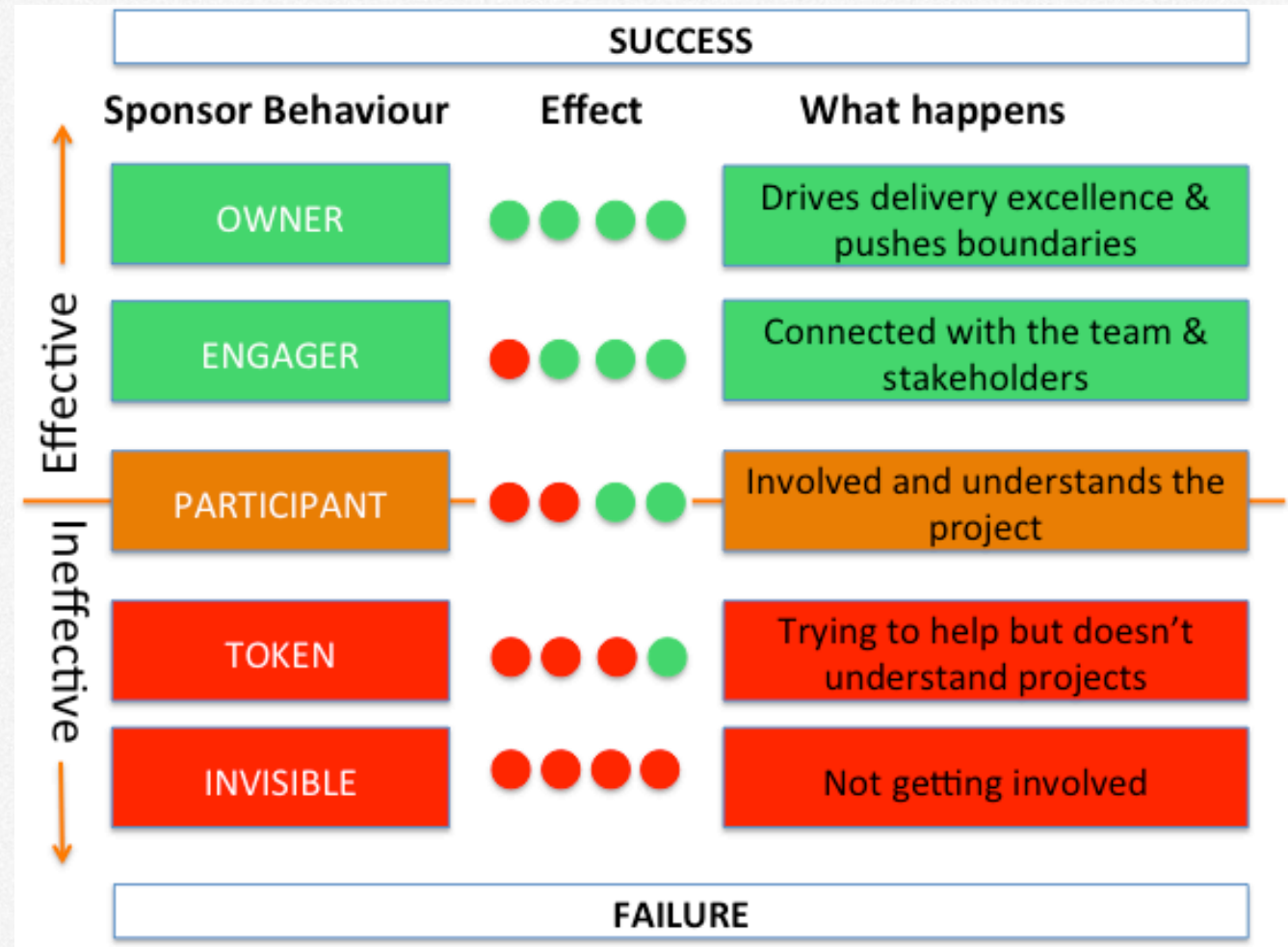
Challenge # 2

Leaders often place themselves in a passive sponsor role and find out about project problems too late.

Challenge # 3

Leaders don't see the value they can add to a project and are often frustrated as they are expected to understand technically challenging project reports

Figure 2. The 'sponsor' ladder shows a significant difference between a sponsor who assumes ownership for a project to drive delivery excellence, to a sponsor who is invisible and doesn't get involved.



Having the sponsor assume project ownership, drive delivery excellence and push the boundaries; develops a strong relationship with the project team and the stakeholders, means there is a high certainty for success of a project.

When a sponsor is ...

Owner

*At the top of the ladder, when a sponsor really **owns** a project, they are driving delivery excellence, engaging with critical and essential stakeholders and willing to push the boundaries to achieve project success.*

Invisible

*At the other bottom of the ladder, an **invisible** sponsor is not around, doesn't engage with stakeholders, and doesn't necessarily understand the project they are sponsoring. They may even actively avoid engaging with their Program and Project Managers. The project team doesn't feel supported or trusted which may lead to team infighting.*

The extent a sponsor participates in their project ... can influence the degree of success the project experiences

Being **a token** means the sponsor is doing the bare minimum of what is required. They turn up to the main project meetings but little more. The sponsor does not engage with the project manager or project team, which leads to the project becomes directionless, or worse, heading in the wrong direction. There is very little innovative thinking.

When the sponsor **participates** they involve themselves in planning sessions and project meetings. The project team is likely to be industrious and pull together to deliver the expected outcomes for the project. They are all in the communication loop and work collaboratively. The sponsor is more active in including stakeholders and there is clear direction.

When the sponsor **engages**, they support the development of a high performing project team. They engage the team and stakeholders in problem solving and planning. There is a focus on team development and learning, and project outputs and outcomes are linked to organisational performance.

Project success

In today's rapidly changing environment, a project sponsor is required to provide leadership, accountability and agility, otherwise projects are doomed to fail.

A project with an effective sponsor is more likely to succeed and move the business towards its key strategic objectives, creating a more profitable business. It can also assist in progressing the sponsor's career.

Figure 3. Describes the relationship between leadership, agility and accountability.



Leadership

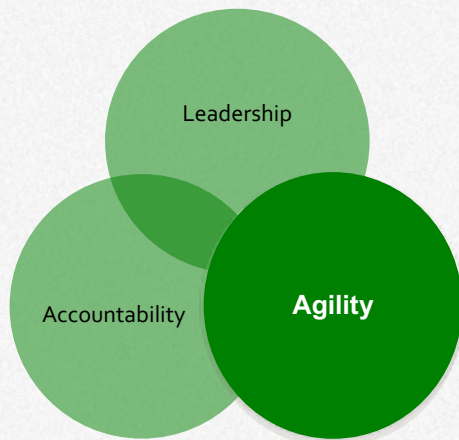


When projects are sponsored effectively, they are more likely to succeed in reaching their outcome and realising their benefits more often.

Leadership from a sponsor's perspective requires

- ☐ Active participation in the project from inception, and being willing to be involved in planning the project and understanding and communicating the vision (the 'why') behind it
- ☐ Building a trusting relationship with the project manager and being available to step in when conflict and disputes arise with stakeholders
- ☐ Being aware of key project variables and changes to them
- ☐ Owning the whole of life of the project through to realisation of its benefits.

Agility



A dictionary definition of agility is: *the ability to think and draw conclusions quickly; with intellectual acuity.*

In today's environment the business landscape is fast and competitive and will continue to become more so. There is often a short product life cycle and ongoing pressure to maintain or reduce costs.

Businesses need quick decisions with incomplete information and uncertainty which leads to frequent changes to project requirements.

A sponsor's ability to embrace and support an agile environment, where change is the only constant, is crucial to a project's success.

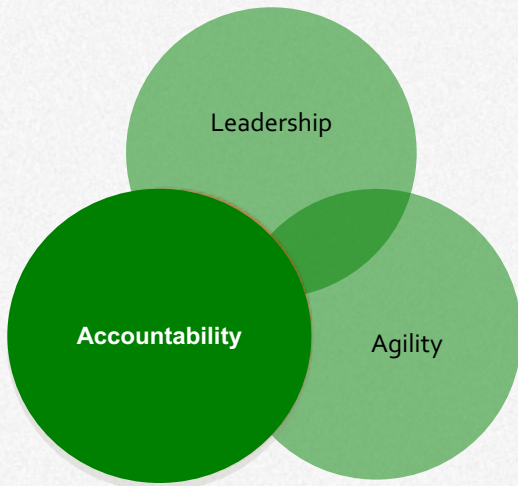
Accountability

Accountability is a key component to project success. The project manager is not the decision maker; the project sponsor is, so the ultimate responsibility and accountability lies with them.

It is up to project manager to provide the necessary information to the sponsor so they can make informed decisions and be aware of the downstream impacts.

The sponsor needs to understand project health and spot signs of project trouble, and recognise the pitfalls to avoid. They are accountable for:

- ☐ Setting expectations with stakeholders and the project team and think through the potential conflicts, determine priorities and communicate these clearly upfront
- ☐ Monitoring project progress: knowing how the project is doing, and knowing what to adjust if needed
- ☐ Understanding and being involved in driving end-user adoption of new systems or processes.



Putting it all together and questions to consider



The 'sponsor' ladder shows a significant difference between strong leadership and weak leadership and whether a project is a failure or success.

Where are the sponsors' in your organisation on this ladder and where do you want them to be?



This diagram describes the components required for effective sponsorship and hence project success.

What does your organisation need to do to ensure your project sponsors understand and have the level of leadership, agility and accountability required?

Next Steps

As stated earlier the effectiveness of the project sponsor role is the best way to predict project success or failure.

Leverage the activities your organisation already has underway to develop and support sponsors in sponsoring projects. Work with the leaders in your organisation about their role in being a sponsor.

Lead by example and expect others to follow.

The success and future of our projects depends on it.

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About the author

Maree Burgess

Maree is focussed on working with organisations who are interested in improving project delivery and increasing their chances of realising benefits.

She works with executives who are charged with sponsoring projects and are looking to create best practice.

Maree brings a customer focus to projects. She is not constrained by rigid project thinking and can be creative about how she supports sponsors to achieve their business outcomes.

As a speaker, trainer, facilitator and coach Maree splits her time between working with sponsors, facilitating sessions, coaching women to step up, delivering keynotes and running training sessions on making change work.



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