

Don't Blame the Project Sponsor! How to Advance Project Sponsorship in Organizations

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Abstract

In recent years, a lot has been written about project sponsorship. Authors agree that effective project sponsorship strongly contributes to project success, and that in many organizations this role is still poorly developed. What makes it such a challenge to advance this role? And what are the basic elements of a successful approach?

Introduction

When discussing project sponsorship, most authors focus on defining the project sponsor duties and behavior, implicitly or explicitly assuming that ineffective project sponsorship is caused by “malfunctioning project sponsors” and that, if they could just be taught to pick up their role, the issue would be solved. However, project sponsors are often business managers who perform their project sponsor role on behalf of an organization and the way they perform should be seen in this context: They are part of a whole and have good reason to behave the way they do. This “malfunctioning project sponsor” approach is often ineffective, and not just because it isolates one factor instead of addressing the whole—it can also be counterproductive. Feeling blamed for being the cause of project failure can cause unnecessary resistance among business managers. In the end, the challenge is to close the gap between line management and projects and to strengthen project direction from a business perspective, which I see as a challenge for the organization as a whole.

Why Do Project Sponsors Behave the Way They Do?

Any business manager in a project sponsor role has to divide his or her attention between his or her operational duties (with a short-term impact on vital matters such as service delivery, customer satisfaction, or commercial result) and their project sponsor role (with a long-term impact on business success). It is only natural that, under pressure, the short-term operational interests tend to prevail. Sadly, in many organizations, most of the parameters used to measure management performance refer to the direct results of the line organization, thus reinforcing this natural focus on the short-term interests of one's own department. Hence, the company's performance management system—with a direct impact on a manager's income and career perspectives—simply tells them that their operational duties are far more relevant than their contribution to project success. From a wider perspective, one could say that performance management in many organizations has not yet been adapted to the needs of an environment where the capability to change has become a major success factor.

All this makes for a no-strings-attached attitude of business managers toward projects. If we then realize that the failure rate of projects is significantly higher compared to operational processes, then why would any sensible business manager put their career at risk by being associated with projects? In the interest of their own future, there can be only one conclusion: Stay away from projects, leave them to the project managers as much as you can! Indeed, what is needed to build a strong engagement from business management to projects is more than providing tips or training courses for business managers.

The Board of Directors: Reward Line Management Commitment to Projects

One of the factors that keeps business managers from taking full responsibility for their projects is the classical notion that the project manager is responsible for project success, which is firmly embedded in corporate culture. From a business perspective however, a project is an investment, hence only successful if its business case is achieved, including the realization of the proposed

benefits. So, who but the project sponsor, as the representative of the business, could possibly be held accountable for project success? And how can the project sponsor be accountable for project success if they do not take full responsibility in accepting the project manager, approving the project plan and change requests, and making the go/no-go decisions? A firm promotion of this insight—the ultimate line management responsibility for project success—is the foundation of any initiative regarding the advancement of project sponsorship in organizations. It is an essential responsibility of the board of directors to investigate the extent to which existing performance measurement and corporate culture drive business managers to avoid project-related responsibilities to develop and communicate a clear vision on the line management responsibility for project success and to reward line management’s commitment to projects.

In order to be in control, the board of directors should also understand the importance of establishing portfolio management functions that provide oversight of corporate investment governance and its effective implementation across the business.

Project Sponsors: More Strategic Control for Less Effort

When discussing project sponsorship with business managers, any attempt to put another burden on their shoulders will hardly generate enthusiasm. Approaches like “spend more time on your projects” or “follow this or that method” are bound to fail with a target group that is under great pressure and already lacks time. What business managers want is more effective strategic control of projects *and* more efficient ways to achieve this (i.e., “more strategic control for less effort”); and this is exactly what you should help them with. Four proven principles to achieve this are focused on results and responsibilities at the business and project level.

1. The first principle, regarding the business result, is to **share the business case**. This assists in coming to a shared understanding of the reasons behind (the why) and the goal of the project, so that stakeholders can connect with it. It also shows how to use this as a foundation for project decision making and as a framework for all project communication.
2. The second principle, regarding business responsibilities, is to **organize ownership**. This shows how to get stakeholders (such as members of the steering group or users) to feel an individual responsibility to deliver a specific contribution to the shared goal—based on clarity about who makes what decisions and why—so that, as a project sponsor, you don’t carry the weight of the project on your shoulders alone.
3. The third principle, regarding the project result, is to **focus on deliverables**. This helps to encourage a focus on deliverables as the backbone of the project, and shows how to get the project to deliver those tangible results that will enable you to achieve the intended business results, with the required quality, and in a way that, as a sponsor, you don’t have to check the deliverables yourself.
4. The fourth principle, regarding project responsibility, is to **empower the project manager**. This helps to create the optimum conditions for the project manager to manage the project team and shows what control mechanisms (such as stages and reporting) to agree upon in order to get the project result delivered against minimum effort, in a controlled way, and with enough flexibility.

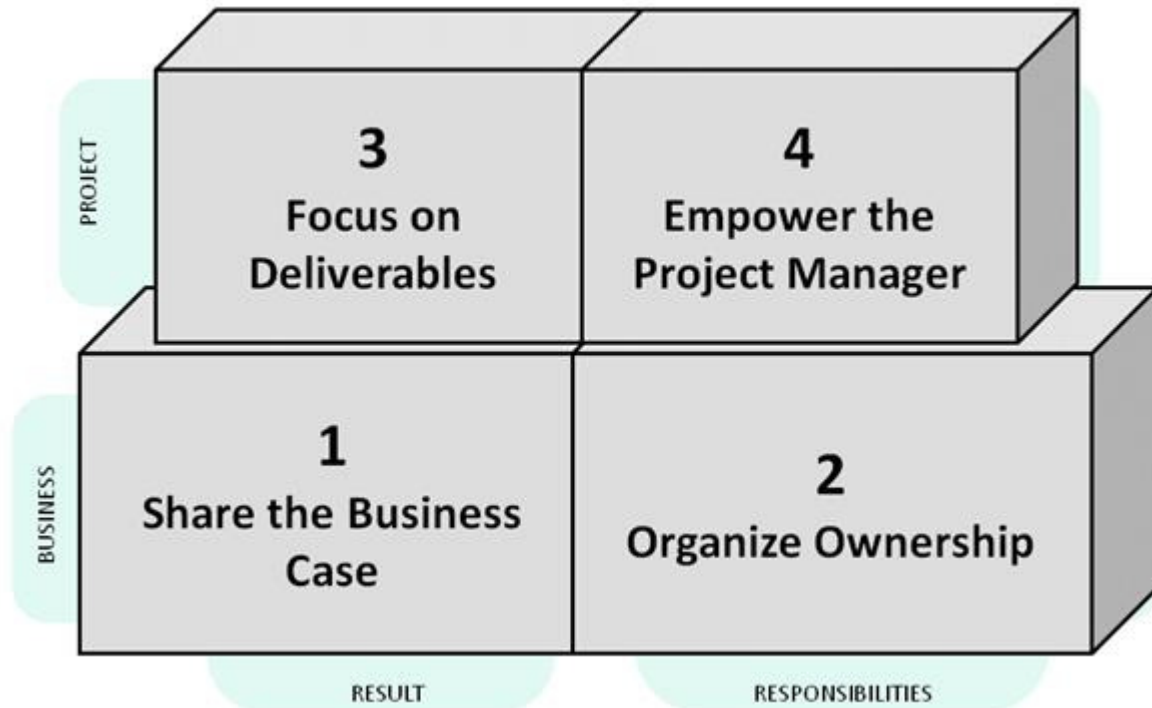


Figure 1: The four principles of successful project sponsorship (Van der Molen, 2015).

In short, project sponsors should be helped to come to a full understanding of project success, rethink the conviction that project managers are responsible for it, analyze the impact of performance management on line management’s involvement in projects, and discuss this when necessary in order to take responsibility for their projects in the most effective and efficient way. Professional project management should firmly support this.

Project Practitioners: Scrutinize Our Own Role

A pitfall for project managers is to compensate for the lack of project direction by taking over part of the project sponsor role (“if they don’t mind the business impact, I will,” the so-called complementary behavior). Instead of asking “Who wants this anyway?,” some project managers are even willing to start a project without anyone being assigned as a project sponsor. In the short term, this may partially close the gap between business and the project (partially, because a project manager can never fully take over the project sponsor role). In the long term, however, the impact of this behavior of project managers acting as project owners is potentially negative because it tends to confirm the lack of ownership of the project sponsor. A major challenge for project managers is to break this circle of mutual confirmation of counterproductive behavior in order to get the real owner to accept full ownership.

Part of this challenge is to be clear about responsibilities. The claim sometimes heard is that the project manager can be responsible for project success—this effectively sends the project sponsor (and business management, in general) to sleep. A project manager can only be responsible for “project management success” that is delivering the agreed-upon project result with the required quality, within the cost and time constraints agreed upon, and only under the condition that the project sponsor meets the agreed-upon conditions, such as availability of information and resources and timely decision making. As previously said, from a business perspective, project success implies realization of its business case. If we want to entice business management to engage themselves to projects, then we need to be very clear about the limits of our own responsibility. Instead of claiming that we can make a success of any project, we should invite the project sponsor to face this challenge together, with each one of us in our own role.

Traditionally, the project management profession has been shaped by a practice of project managers focusing on how to manage their projects as an activity in itself, rather than aiming to create transparency for project sponsors and other business managers involved, thus enabling them to provide strategic direction effectively and efficiently. This is another challenge for project management today. This requires that we, as project practitioners, are willing to scrutinize our own role in the whole system of stakeholders and—instead of waiting for others like the project sponsor to change—find out how changes in our own way of working can contribute to the advancement of project sponsorship.

Other Target Groups

Other relevant target groups to be involved in the advancement of project sponsorship are:

- Project auditors: to help them see that the driving factors of project success do not only not lie in the proper application of a project management method by the project manager, but also in business management accepting its responsibilities and acting accordingly
- Project controllers: to help them broaden their attention from costs toward benefits and from financial to nonfinancial achievements, enabling them to focus on project success instead of project cost, and to support project sponsors in understanding the drivers of project success
- Members of a portfolio board or investment committee: to help them to assign clear accountabilities to the realization of business cases
- Members of a Project Management Office (PMO): to help them to coach and facilitate project sponsors and steering groups
- Those responsible for management development: to help them integrate project sponsorship in the company's management development program

Steering Group Start-Up Meetings

In addition to the above, business managers involved in projects need support at crucial moments, especially at the beginning of new projects (or stages of large projects). A steering group start-up meeting, led by an experienced facilitator, is a very powerful aid in achieving professional project direction. It is a workshop with the members of the steering group, plus the project manager, to make sure that the project sets off in the right direction, with the right focus on business and project results and business and project responsibilities, and creating the right commitment and team spirit in the steering group.

Conclusion

In the end, the advancement of project sponsorship in organizations is all about the strengthening of business management engagement with projects. While many organizations striving to advance project performance still focus exclusively on the project manager's role and the corresponding procedures and methodology, my experience is that the closer engagement of business management with projects is precisely what speeds up and deepens the change process toward improved project performance. Only a joint effort, including all stakeholders involved, can achieve this.

This article was reviewed by Ross Garland (author of Project Governance – A Practical Guide to Effective Project Decision Making) and Henny Portman (author of PRINCE2 in Practice – A Practical Approach to Create Project Management Documents).

References

1. Van der Molen, M. (2015). Successful project sponsorship: A time-saver for the busy executive. London, UK: Kogan Page.

About the Author

In 2002, Michiel van der Molen, at the time working as the head of a PMO for a large IT company, wrote a book about project sponsorship, essentially to support his customers. This book (in Dutch) sold over 12,000 copies. He was surprised by the amount of requests for training and support the book provoked and soon decided to make this his core business. In 2015, based on his experience in numerous project sponsorship advancement programs in various industries, he prepared a revised international version of his book, published by Kogan Page as Successful Project Sponsorship - A Time-Saver for the Busy Executive. This article is based on Chapters 12 and 13 of this book. Michiel van der Molen, MSc, is an expert in project governance, business case development, and benefits management and is a cofounder of Molen & Molen (michiel@molenmolen.nl).