Managing the Project Sponsor

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Overview

What do you do when the Sponsor is not at home? Many projects have a Sponsor appointed, and that is the last you ever see of the person. They are possibly a senior executive in the organisation and never actually participate. What do you do then? This white paper explores a couple of strategies to use.

The Role of Sponsor

First you need to determine the role of the Sponsor. In any project, there are responsibilities that typically reside with the Sponsor. These include such things as:

- Allocating funds

- Agreeing to proceed to the next stage

- Being the ultimate owner of the deliverables

- The ultimate decision maker when it comes to issues

- Making business users available.

Make a list of the responsibilities you feel reside with the Sponsor as a starting point. Make sure you put performance parameters around relevant responsibilities.

For example:

> "Making decisions that cannot be made by the project team"

Is not performance related.

> "Being available within 24 hours to make decisions that cannot be made by the project team."

Is more likely to gain a result.

Gain Commitment

Once you have your list of responsibilities, talk directly with the Sponsor to determine if they are prepared to accept the responsibilities. There is no point in emailing an attached document and asking for agreement. With a bit of luck it will receive a cursory glance. Probably you will never hear anything again about it. It is better to have a face to face meeting and go through each item explaining the reason why.

For example, if you want a decision in 24 hours, explain that you will only escalate significant issues that are holding up the project to the sponsor. Talk about how it will work. Perhaps something as simple as a conference call will suffice. Make it easy. Talk about bringing options and a recommendation with each issue. Make sure you do your homework before you call on the Sponsor.

Delegation

If the Sponsor will not agree, there is a plan B. If the responsibility is important but the Sponsor will not take it on, suggest to the Sponsor that it should be delegated and the Sponsor should appoint someone.

Perhaps you invent a new role of Business Owner and nominate a person for that role. If one of the Sponsor's responsibilities is to sign off the requirements, and the Sponsor does not have the time, suggest the Business Owner have sign off authority. The Sponsor may only end up with only funding responsibility for the project.

When presenting your responsibilities, present in the context that you have split up the work, and assigned it to people. This is what is assigned to the Sponsor. If it is not a good fit, it needs to be re-assigned to someone else.

The Sponsor will say Yes but…

What if you know the Sponsor will agree to everything but not deliver? If it were someone else in the project that constantly failed to meet deadlines, you would consider replacing them. Unfortunately it is not so easy with a Sponsor. Here is another suggestion I have used.

On one project I had a steering committee chaired by the Sponsor. The Sponsor usually turned up to chair the meeting, but did little else. I put an item on the agenda to review roles and responsibilities. By identifying those responsibilities that were not being met across the project, it was clear that the Sponsor was slipping. I made a number of recommendations about additional staff, and re-assigning responsibilities to cover those under my control and put the issue of the Sponsor to the Steering Committee with a number of options. In the end the Steering Committee volunteered one of their own to handle many of the Sponsor's duties.

Steering Committee

A steering committee can be a multitude of things from impediment, to cross divisional advocate, to decision making body. Sometimes you can use it to be a support for the Sponsor. Decide before you propose responsibilities if you need to stack the committee in such a way that they become an extension of the Sponsor. Perhaps the Sponsor has an Assistant who has the confidence of the Sponsor on all matters. Can they be assigned some of the Sponsor's duties?

What Motivates the Sponsor

I had one Sponsor who was best described as a "show pony". He loved performing in front of a crowd. I made sure his responsibilities included branch briefings. He loved "talking to the troops" as he called it. In order to do this he had to be prepared, and we made a point of ensuring he was able to answer any questions. All this meant he had to become much more involved with the project than he would ordinarily have been. This was great from our point of view as he became a real Sponsor. He made decisions, and it became his baby. His credibility came to be intimately bound with the success of the project.

You need to understand the Sponsor. You need to know what motivates them, and where their interests lie. You need to be aware of how they like to work. Is it a one on one briefing, or would they prefer a one page report each week? How do you get feedback from them? What level of detail do they want to get down to? This may require you to have a discussion at the start of the project with the Sponsor and drilling down to tailor your responsibilities to suit their needs.

What the Sponsor Feels

One Sponsor said to me that they were totally out of their depth when they sponsored their first project. They had no idea of the process to run the project. They had little idea what was needed from them. This particular person was a very experienced business manager but had little idea what an IT project entailed. Out of a combination of naivety and embarrassment, she swang from hands off to diving into the detail. After a few projects, she started to find her role and knew when to get involved and when to stay out. In the end she proved to be an excellent sponsor.

The lesson I took away from that conversation was that you should not expect every Sponsor to know as much about projects as you do. Sometimes you need to go through how the project will work, and what to expect. Some change management may be required for the Sponsor. If you are undertaking particular activities tell the Sponsor why. For example:

> "We would like you to attend a risk mitigation workshop. What we will do is use a structured approach to identify risks to the project. We will then rate them for impact and probability. For those with a high impact and high probability, we plan to look at what we can do to reduce or mitigate the risk.

> It would be valuable to have you present because you have a much broader view of the risks across divisions than any of us do. You view on the feasibility of what we might do to reduce the risk would also be valuable. Some of that mitigation may involve you so we would not want to waste time coming up with recommendations that are not the best options.

> Risk mitigation is a critical element in reducing the risk, and ensuring the success of the project. If we can identify and reduce risk early, there is less chance of things going wrong later. Your input would be a significant contribution to ensuring success."

Now, is that better than receiving an invite to a meeting in Outlook?

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One PM I know was running an ERP implementation. He started the Sponsor Barometer. Each week the Sponsor provided a rating on his degree of comfort. It usually hovered around 8 or 9 out of 10. The number was published to the project team. If it dropped, it provided a trigger for the project manager to open a discussion with the Sponsor.

Team members started talking to the Sponsor about the barometer. This opened a number of conversations that would not normally have taken place, and dragged the Sponsor more into the project. There is nothing like a Senior Executive appearing to be out of line with the rest of his organisation to motivate action. If the Sponsor rates the barometer 9 and the team see a major problem, the Sponsor is going to look foolish for not knowing. Someone will tell him sooner or later. He or she will quickly take steps to make sure they are informed. This will involve them more in the project which is what you want.

Options

Finally, in managing the Sponsor, never take a problem to the Sponsor without thinking it through, and having options. Always ensure you have a solution to

recommend or a path forward. If you do not have a proposal, you are wasting everyone's time. Think from the Sponsors point of view.

"You have told me about the problem. What do you want me to do?"

Project Reviews

If it suits the Sponsor arrange project reviews. They don't necessarily have to be every x weeks. Build them into the plan at key points such as mid phase, or end phase. Perhaps when you are sitting down to plan the next phase, or when the implementation plan is due. Book them months in advance if necessary. Make sure the Sponsor know about them well in advance and understands why they are important.

Conclusion

Dealing with a Sponsor is a matter of developing a trust and understanding between the Sponsor and the team. The project Manager is the lynchpin in the relationship. They need to involve the Sponsor in a productive way. Not useless briefings that tell the Sponsor all is going to plan, but productive meetings that set clear objectives and achieve them.

Success breeds success. If the Sponsor finds the meeting with the team are productive and necessary, he or she will be more willing to be involved. They will skip other talk-fests to make time to sit down with the project team when they are needed.

The key to all this is not to nominate the Sponsor for duties the Sponsor will not be able to undertake. Understand:

- How much time is the Sponsor going to devote to the project today

- How much time can I reasonably expect the Sponsor to contribute tomorrow

Tailor the Sponsor role to suit and use the time productively.

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Project Perfect sell "Project Administrator" software, which is a tool to assist organisations better manage project risks, issues, budgets, scope, documentation planning and scheduling. They also created a technique for gathering requirements called "Method H"™, and sell software to support the technique. For more information on Project tools or Project Management visit www.projectperfect.com.au