

Guidelines for securing project sponsor support

The relationship between the project manager and sponsor is a partnership. The sponsor is responsible for creating an environment in which the project can operate successfully and delivering the project benefits. The project manager is responsible for that successful operation and delivering the project results. This partnership is facilitated by an agreement between the project manager and sponsor on the project's nature and expected results - they must hold the exact same perspective on these two points.

The sponsor must invest sufficient time to understand the project details - he/she not only initiates a project with an "idea" but spends the required time during the project initiation phase to ensure that idea is turned into a viable project. Initiating a project requires investing the company's capital, human and physical. There are specific responsibilities a sponsor takes on to ensure that investment yields a solid return. It is the project manager's responsibility to ensure the sponsor understands a sufficient level of detail about both the managerial and developmental aspects of the project in order to be effective in providing guidance, resources, and advocacy. This is the project manager's investment in the partnership.

The following are guidelines on how to maintain the sponsor's support of a project:

- Make sure the project has the right sponsor. The nature and scope of the project may require sponsorship to be shifted upward in the organization, or be shared horizontally by more than one functional manager. The right sponsor has effective influence and the ability to use consequence management with all the project's stakeholders.
- Ensure the sponsor understands his/her role and responsibilities. Use your project roadmaps to show graphically where in the project's life a sponsor must participate, and agree on the level and nature of this participation. Reinforce the sponsor's key responsibilities to continuously communicate the project's vision and how this will help move the company forward.
- Establish a written agreement between the sponsor and project manager. This agreement defines expected project results, defines roles and responsibilities, and clarifies levels of authority. If conditions change, go back to the original statement to either re-focus the agreement or make amendments to it.
- Be willing to define for the sponsor the risks to the project can be generated from a lack of sponsorship at critical points in the process.

- Initiate the project with the sponsor at the head of the table; ensure he/she is clear on the importance of a strong project kick-off.
- Establish an effective and ongoing working partnership - respect the sponsor's position in the organization in that it can enable a project manager to be successful, but don't be intimidated by it or let it get in the way.
- Demonstrate leadership and a willingness to ask hard questions; act like a partner, not a subordinate.
- Projects are marathons. Do not agree to "run the 3-minute mile"; rather, agree to schedule, budget, and quality expectations that are based on data, not desire. Working within unrealistic schedule and budget parameters compromises a project manager's credibility and sets the project team up for failure.
- Discuss the project in terms of its benefits to the organization – think and act strategically – like your sponsor.
- Show results.
- Report status openly and honestly regardless of its content; all project information belongs to the sponsor.
- Ensure a proper escalation path exists to communicate risks and issues that require the sponsor's attention. Use the Project Management Office (PMO) to influence and provide support for the environment.

Establish clear sponsor responsibilities early in the project. These include providing strategic context and guidance for the project (business strategy, business case/rationale, reviews of major events/deliverables), providing sufficient resources (committed people, funding, etc.), and advocating the project to its stakeholders. The sponsor's role is similar to the chairman of the board, in that he/she enables and directs the project at the senior levels of the company. The project manager has day-to-day responsibility for the conduct of the project.

The specific roles of the project sponsor typically include:

- initiating the project
- funding the project
- presenting the definition of the project (vision, mission, goals, values)
- selection of the project manager
- establishing the steering committee
- creating the project charter
- participating in phase reviews
- reviewing project status
- approving vendor selection
- creating awareness of the changes the project will make to existing operations

- participating in development of the implementation strategy
- participating in the final project review

The sponsor is very involved in the initiation phase, since that phase requires making strategic decisions and developing the project's overall concept of operations. Throughout the project life cycle, the sponsor will be called upon to assist in resolving any issues that require his/her influence, knowledge, and negotiating skills. In successive phases, the sponsor will be involved primarily in major milestone reviews and decisions, as determined by the project manager, and in the presentation of the project's results and benefits to those who will be affected.