

## Project & Program Sponsorship



Effective sponsorship is a key element in the successful delivery of projects and programs; the way a sponsor interacts with the project and other managers can create or destroy value. ‘*Sponsoring Change*<sup>1</sup>’ describes the role of the sponsor as the link between corporate direction and accountability and the management of programs and projects. This is a key management role that supports effective project governance<sup>2</sup>; the sponsor transmits management information and decisions *downwards* to the project and represents the project in senior management circles, communicating important information *upwards*.

The sponsor will normally be a senior manager with a relevant area of responsibility that will be affected by the outcome of the project. The project manager needs an effective sponsor to have a chance of delivering the designated project effectively but the sponsor should typically have a wider ‘through life’ responsibility for the overall initiative starting with the feasibility/business case (can we and should we do the work) through to seeing the benefits realized to generate the expected value defined in the business case and is consequently involved with a project or program for far longer than the appointed managers.

The sponsor has a ‘continuity’ role, firstly engaging with the people responsible for the inception of the project, including defining the benefits to be realised and the scope of the project. The sponsor then commissions others to deliver the project and champions their cause throughout the life of the project. Once the project has been launched, they should ensure that it is actively reviewed and where appropriate projections and assessments made by the project team should be questioned and validated. The Project Sponsor is also usually the one who has to negotiate a path through any tricky diplomatic areas impacting the project! Finally, the sponsor works with the operational aspects of the organisation to ensure the intended value is fully realised. A good project sponsor will not interfere in the day-to-day running of the project, that’s the role of the project manager, but should help the project manager and facilitate the necessary organizational support needed to make strategic decisions and create a successful project.

Sponsors may be at different levels in the organisation. Where programs exist, a senior manager should be the program sponsor but it would be quite usual for the program manager to act as sponsor for the projects he/she creates to deliver the outputs needed to facilitate the overall outcome of the program.

### Key Roles

The sponsor:

- Acts as champion of the project, supports the project (or program) manager, and takes ultimate authority and responsibility for the project.
- Creates alignment, the Sponsor helps keep the project aligned with business and cultural goals.

<sup>1</sup> **Sponsoring Change, A Guide to the Governance Aspects of Project Sponsorship:**  
The Association for Project Management, UK.

<sup>2</sup> For more on **governance** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1033\\_Governance.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1033_Governance.pdf)



- Ensure that a real need or opportunity is being addressed by the project, is accountable for the delivery of planned benefits associated with the project<sup>3</sup> and builds durability by ensuring that people and processes are in place to maintain and sustain the change once the project completes its handover.
- Is responsible for, and ‘owns’, the original business case and for ensuring that the business case is kept in alignment with the organisations strategy and portfolio direction (but the sponsor would not normally write the business case, other technical experts would do this).
- Ensures that the project remains a viable proposition<sup>4</sup>.
- Has ultimate authority and responsibility for the project and leads the Project Steering Board or ‘Project Control Board’ (if one is created/used<sup>5</sup>).
- Appoints the project manager and facilitates the appointment of team members (or ensures this is done in a timely manner).
- Supports the project manager by providing mentoring, coaching and leadership when dealing with business and operational matters (Note: the sponsor is a business executive not a project manager; other managers should be responsible for helping develop project management skills and capabilities<sup>6</sup>).
- Works with the project team to optimise the project delivery strategy<sup>7</sup>
- Makes key organisation/commercial decisions for the project and provides decisions in a timely fashion<sup>8</sup>.
- Facilitates problem solving by ensuring issues escalated from the project are solved effectively at the organizational level so that project’s work can continue with minimal interruptions. This includes decisions on changes, risks, conflicting objectives and any other issue that is outside of the project manager’s designated authority.
- Promotes ethical working<sup>9</sup>.
- Governs project risk and has responsibility for top level contingences (management reserves).
- Approves the budget and decides tolerances.
- Manages the change approval process, particularly scope changes, either as the authority, or as part of a Change Control Board that includes the client.
- Ensures resolution of issues escalated by, or that are outside the control of, the Project Manager.
- Assures availability of essential project resources and ensures the projects benefits are fully realized by arranging the resources necessary to initiate and sustain the change within the organization.
- Sponsors the communications programme and communicates the project or programme’s goals to the organisation as a whole. Effective Sponsors communicate their personal commitment to the project’s success on multiple occasions.
- Supports and is actively engaged in stakeholder management, particularly with the client.
- Gains commitment for the project from other key stakeholders and “walks the talk”.

<sup>3</sup> For more on **Value Delivery** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1023\\_Benefits\\_and\\_Value.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1023_Benefits_and_Value.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> If the project is internal to the organisation, the benefits are normally driven by the strategic intent; in a contracting organization, the benefits will usually be determined by the revenue and profit made for undertaking the work and the options open to the sponsor may be limited by contractual obligations.

<sup>5</sup> Project Boards as defined by methodologies such as PRINCE2 are effectively a part of the project management process (rather than directly supporting project governance). The function of a typical project board primarily focuses on making management decisions the PM is responsible for implementing. In other methodologies these decisions are the responsibility of the project manager (often in consultation with the Sponsor). Where a Board exists, the Sponsor Chairs the meetings and fulfils both a governance support role and a project management role. An effective Board provides a forum for assisting with strategic, cross-functional decisions, removing obstacles and for resolving issues.

<sup>6</sup> See **A Project Manager's Managers**: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1055\\_The\\_Managers\\_of\\_PMs.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1055_The_Managers_of_PMs.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See **Project Strategy**: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1038\\_Strategy.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1038_Strategy.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> For more on **decision making** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053\\_Decision\\_Making.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> For more on **ethics** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1001\\_Ethics.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1001_Ethics.pdf)



- Ensure that the delivered solution matches the current needs of the organisation, and monitors and controls the progress of the business change at an operational level<sup>10</sup>.
- Initiates project reviews<sup>11</sup>.
- Approves key project deliverables.
- Formally closes the project and ensuring that the lessons learned are documented.

From the above list, some of the more important management functions / behaviours the Sponsor should perform at different phases of the project, directly aligned to achieving value from the project are:

- Initiation phase
  - Defining the expectations of performance expected from the project manager
  - Prioritising what should be done first from both a work perspective and a conflict management perspective.
- Planning phase
  - Clarify the outputs expected from the project
  - Establish robust stakeholder relationships
  - Ensure proper planning is done!
- Execution phase
  - Ensure effective communication takes place
  - Continue building stakeholder relationships
- Closing phase
  - Ensure that projects that should be terminated before completion (ie, those that are no longer contributing value or are no longer wanted) are terminated quickly, directly and effectively.
  - Ensure the client / end users make effective use of the deliverables to fulfil the value proposition in the business case.

## Attributes of a Sponsor<sup>12</sup>

The sponsor:

- Must understand the role, its significance and the project context.
- Must be competent to fulfil the role including having the requisite knowledge, skills and personal attributes.
- Must have credibility and be accepted by stakeholders as being suitable for the role.
- Must give the role the personal time and priority necessary to fulfil its duties and responsibilities.
- Must be willing to take personal ownership of the project and its outcomes.
- Must be able to influence and lead people and ensure effective communications are in place.

Research published in the PMJ<sup>13</sup> shows a strong correlation between the realisation of project/program value and the role of the sponsor. Best results are achieved when the position and role of the sponsor is properly

<sup>10</sup> For more on **organisational change management** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1078\\_Change\\_Management.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1078_Change_Management.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> For more on **Project Reviews** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1080\\_Project\\_Reviews.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1080_Project_Reviews.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> For more on the competencies needed by a project sponsor, download the **GAPPS (2015) A Guiding Framework for Project Sponsors**: <https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/PDF/GAPPS-Sponsor-Framework.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Project Management Journal Vol. 46, No.5, 46-61. *Does Project Sponsorship Matter for Realizing Project Management Value?* Dawn E. Chandler, Janice L. Thomas.



formalised and training is provided to sponsors to help them fulfil their responsibilities. Conversely, not having a committed sponsor with the necessary time and skills to fulfil the role properly more than doubles the probability of project failure<sup>14</sup>.

## Linking program and project sponsorship

The relationship between the program sponsor and any project sponsors is a critical governance issue. Depending on the type of program<sup>15</sup>, it may make sense to nominate the program sponsor as the sponsor for each of the projects commissioned within the program. Alternatively appointing separate sponsors with a specific management interest in each of the projects may make more sense. If the later option is selected, the relationship between the project and program sponsors, and their respective areas of responsibility need to be clearly defined. There may be merit in each of the project sponsors becoming part of the overall program steering committee, alternatively the program sponsors' role must include oversight and liaison with the project sponsors to ensure all of the managers are working towards a common set of objectives.

The governance imperative is to ensure there are clearly defined lines of authority, responsibility and accountability focused on maximising value from the overall program.

## Managing your sponsor

The relationship between a sponsor and project manager is critical to the success of a project; the nature of the relationship between them largely determines project success. They each have a role to play and should respect the effort and capability they each bring to the project's success. Together their vision and access to the organisation and its decision makers can steer the project to. It is the degree to which these vital people in the project work together, utilise each other's knowledge, exposure and experience, and share information and decision making that drives project success.

Unfortunately, some organisations appoint the project sponsor with little regard to the person's experience, capability or capacity. The Project Manager should evaluate the sponsor and complete, in a subtle way, a 'Strengths and Weaknesses' assessment so that the PM can adapt his/her approach and communication methods<sup>16</sup> to maximise their sponsorship support for the project that you now manage.

If you can get to speak with your sponsor, at your first meeting ask softer, more open questions: 'What are your hopes for this project? What are your fears about this project?' – You will learn a whole lot more than by asking direct, closed questions<sup>17</sup>.

Based on understanding the requirements of this key stakeholder, you can then develop an effective strategy for *Advising Upwards*<sup>18</sup> to optimise the support you receive. Some additional positive reinforcements include:

- Expanding the defined roles and responsibilities for the project to include the sponsor's roles and responsibilities. Then seek their agreement to the role definition.

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<sup>14</sup> See PMI's **Executive Sponsor Engagement**: <https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/PDF/PMI-Pulse-Executive-Sponsor-Engagement.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> For more on **program typology** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1022\\_Program\\_Typology.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1022_Program_Typology.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Advising Upwards is a key skill for project managers. For more on this see our workshop: **Communicating for Effect**: <https://mosaicprojects.com.au/Training-WS-Comms.php>

<sup>17</sup> See WP1012 **Effective Questions**: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012\\_Active\\_Listening.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> See **Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders**: <https://mosaicprojects.com.au/shop-advising-upwards.php>



- Showing the person what it really means to be a great sponsor of change, there's plenty of data that clearly demonstrates the value of good sponsorship.
- Helping them build their sponsorship competencies by framing possible solutions to the problems you escalate and explain the options.
- Asking them to undertake specific activities but ensure the reasons and the value are clearly defined and are linked to the sponsor's self-interest as well as the project and the organization as a whole.

If the sponsor simply refuses to see you or refuses to help, then it is important to flag the lack of effective sponsorship as a key risk to the project. It may not make you popular but you have an ethical responsibility to clearly define risks that need management attention.

## Conclusion

Ultimately the organization's executive management is responsible for training and appointing effective sponsors and surveys have consistently shown a strong positive correlation between the effectiveness of sponsors and the success of projects and programs.

Therefore, improving project and program sponsorship will directly contribute to improved outcomes for the organisation. However, sponsorship does not exist in a vacuum, the organisation needs to ensure that their sponsors have appropriate support in terms of training<sup>19</sup>, clear authority, access to decision makers and adequate resources. There should be continuity of sponsorship through the life of a project or program with effective handovers if the sponsor has to change.

Sponsors need to understand their central role in the overall governance of projects and programs and act in the long-term interests of the organisation<sup>20</sup>, providing ethical leadership consistent with the organisations culture and values. There are many decisions a project manager should not be authorised to take including determining the purpose and objectives of the project, the projects priority relative to other aspects of the organisations work and whether the project should continue, be deferred or terminated. These aspects of governance sit with the sponsor and other senior managers.

The role of sponsor is intensive. Project managers focus on the work of the project, they are (or should be) skilled in the management of projects and the technology being used. Sponsors provide the critical linkage between technical excellence at the project level and the organisations objectives and strategies. Success is created by the partnering of the sponsors senior management skills with the project manager's technical knowhow.

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<sup>19</sup> See: ***Successful Project Sponsorship, the critical role of the Senior Responsible Owner.***  
<https://mosaicprojects.com.au/Training-WS-Sponsor.php>

<sup>20</sup> For more on the ***overall management of project management*** see:  
[https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1074\\_PPP\\_Taxonomy.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1074_PPP_Taxonomy.pdf)





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