

The Project Management Advisor – 18 Major Project Screw Ups and How To Cut Them Off at the Pass.

Project Management Screw-up #5: We Didn't Have the Right Sponsorship

By [Lonnie Pacelli](#). Sample Chapter is provided courtesy of [Prentice Hall PTR](#).

Some years back I was appointed the lead program manager on an initiative which had as its objective to consolidate a number of disparate order management systems into a single system which supported all of the company's order management needs. There were about five program managers working with me who each dragged in their respective customers to participate in the project. The project was sponsored by the IT organization with no sponsorship from the business owner. The project lumbered along for about two months with the customers continually questioning why they were working on a project that wasn't on their manager's radar. The business owner finally had enough and called IT management and the lead program manager (me!) into a meeting. The meeting started off with the manager saying to IT, "Who told you to go do this project?" Now, I'm no rocket scientist, but it was pretty clear at that point that this was not to be one of my shining project management moments. While the meeting was very uncomfortable, I learned an extremely important lesson: absolutely, without a doubt, secure sponsorship on a project at the beginning, or suffer the consequences.

For any project, it's crucial to get an appropriate level of project sponsorship. The ideal project sponsor for your project would possess the following characteristics:

- He/she directly experiences the pain of the status quo and would directly benefit as a result of doing the project
- He/she actively helped craft the project mission statement
- He/she has the decision making authority to secure or re-allocate resources to/from other projects as necessary to ensure that your project can be completed successfully
- He/she is willing to go to bat for your project with peer managers if you need help in getting something from another organization
- He/she is willing to meet with you on a regular basis to ensure that you're getting what you need to succeed
- He/she is willing to make difficult decisions that may be unpopular but are in the best interests of the business
- He/she has some "skin in the game" to ensure the project's success

Now, I recognize that as a project manager you only have so much control over your project sponsor. Nonetheless, it's important to diligently try to manage your project sponsor to ensure that you're getting what you need from him/her.

Depending on the scope of your project, it may be beneficial to have a steering committee in place in addition to the project sponsor. Your steering committee is typically comprised of key managers of your stakeholder organizations. The primary functions of a steering committee involve

- Being a decision-making body on key issues that cannot be resolved by the project team

- Eliminating any project barriers that the project team is running up against
- Being a supporter of any resultant change that the project will bring about to their respective organizations
- Providing counsel and guidance to the project team on key aspects of the design and implementation of the product
- Assisting the project manager in securing required resources for the project
- Providing recommendations to the project sponsor on major issues which are beyond the authority of the steering committee

You need to decide whether a steering committee is beneficial to the project. Some criteria that I have used on projects are as follows:

- There are multiple stakeholders that are directly affected by the outcome of the project
- There are internal or external subject matter experts that can provide functional, technical, or execution guidance to the project team
- The project sponsor has limited time to spend on the project and delegates some of the project decision-making responsibility to the steering committee

I've successfully completed projects with and without a steering committee depending on the criteria mentioned, but every successful project *always* had an engaged project sponsor.

HOW IT HAPPENS

The project sponsor is either too high or too low in the organization

Just because you have someone who is willing to sponsor your project doesn't mean that they are the *right* sponsor for the project. Optimally, your project sponsor should have decision-making authority over the in-scope project areas while at the same time being close enough to the work that they understand the implications of the issues that are raised. If your sponsor is too low-level, they're unlikely to be able to make decisions that will stick and will have to be getting authorization from their management before committing to decisions. If your sponsor is too high-level, you're likely to get decisions made but you're probably not making best use of management because others at lower levels could be making the decisions you need made.

The project sponsor is being inundated with issues that could be resolved by a steering committee

In deciding whether or not you need a steering committee, consider what you're going to need from your project sponsor and whether or not decisions can be made by others at lower management levels. If you are continually bringing issues to your project sponsor that can be addressed by other managers, you run the risk of exasperating your sponsor and being labeled as crying wolf. This will put you in a very difficult situation for when you really need help because your credibility with your project sponsor may be eroded.

You make the project sponsor work too hard to try to understand your project

In the environments that I have worked, I never gave a project sponsor anything other than presentation-type slides when it came to project reviews and requests for help. Typically,

your time with the project sponsor is limited and he or she has to understand where things are and what you need from him or her in an efficient manner. Be very conscious of what you share with the sponsor, how much detail you give him/her, and what you want him/her to do for you to help the project succeed.

You walk a fine line here of being credible with your sponsor and giving them the elevator pitch. If you've already established credibility with your project sponsor to the point where you're a trusted project manager, then you can possibly afford to be more high level in your communications because he or she is going to trust you with the details. If you're an unknown quantity or (gulp) have gone negative in the credibility column, you're going to need to be prepared for deep-dives on areas that the project sponsor will want to go. One technique I've seen and used is to have appendix slides which have supporting detail in areas where there's likely to be question. The appendix slides are only meant to be used in the event that a specific question arises to support your claims and would not even be seen if no question arises on the topic.

Being prepared to go through details is important, but there will be the occasional situation where you just don't know the answer or don't have supporting detail. Your best bet at that point is to simply say, "I don't know, and I'll get back to you on <put date here> with the answer." It's much easier to fess up quickly than guess at the answer and later be found wrong. Keep in mind as well that there are only so many "I don't knows" you can use before your credibility becomes an issue. More than a couple in a meeting can turn into a problem pretty quickly.

You don't tell the project sponsor what you need

Working with a project sponsor is a two-way commitment; you need to deliver what the sponsor considers to be important and they need to help you when you've run into an issue you can't resolve on your own. The issue could be with another organization, a need to change policy, a team member not participating as agreed, or a host of other reasons. It's super-important that you are very explicit with what you need the project sponsor to do for you. In your reviews with the project sponsor, it's helpful to have an "asks" slide that very explicitly lays out what you need the project sponsor to do and when you need it by. As I've discussed earlier, make sure that your requests are appropriate for your project sponsor to be addressing. If your requests are inappropriate, you run the risk of exasperating your project sponsor and losing credibility.

You meet either too much or not enough with your project sponsor

Depending on the criticality of the project, you may need to meet with the project sponsor either more or less frequently. I've been on projects where we've met with the project sponsor on a monthly basis for a one-hour update and have also been on projects where we've met weekly for an hour or more. You need to decide along with your project sponsor what the right frequency needs to be. I've found that meeting at least monthly is important to keeping the sponsor engaged and ensuring project success.