

Effective project sponsorship – turning the vision into the reality of success

This is the first of four articles by **Bob Buttrick**, focusing on the role of the project sponsor. For too long this role has been either ignored or paid mere lip-service. However, new research is now pointing to the lack of effective sponsorship as being a prime cause of project failure.

The project sponsor as leader

All organisations have to change at some time: some more frequently than others. There is always something, somewhere, needing to be created or improved. Many leading organisations are now directing and managing change by using business-led, project management techniques. As organisations have become more integrated through the use of complex systems and processes, the effectiveness of managing change through the traditional functional hierarchy has diminished.

Projects, in the modern sense, are now strategic management tools, ideally suited to the complex organisations of today, and business leaders ignore the newly reborn discipline of enterprise-wide project management at their peril. It is no longer the preserve of specialists in the engineering or IT sectors, but something for every director and manager to have in their 'tool box'.

Well directed and managed projects will enable an organisation to react and adapt speedily to meet the challenges of the competitive environment, ensuring the organisation drives towards attainable and visible corporate goals. Effective business-led project management will increase the likelihood of business success by ensuring visibility, accountability and control over business change activities. In particular by:

- linking business needs directly to visible actions plans;
- enabling you to manage across every department in your organisation;
- ensuring accountability can be assigned, safe in the knowledge any gaps are covered;
- providing a flexible and responsive method to respond to changing needs;
- focusing on priorities;
- enabling you to track progress toward your business objectives.

All senior executives should be leaders of change within the organisation. For some, still ascending the corporate ladder, this may be a new experience. They will be in the position of advocating a new order, acting in the interest of the wider company needs rather than those of the department or line director they serve. For the first time, they may be operating outside their own departmental or functional structure. They will have to work with people they don't have direct authority

over and they will require all their influencing and leadership skills if they are to achieve their aims.

In summary, the project sponsor is the business advocate who is accountable for directing a project to ensure the business objectives are met and benefits realised. The role is now referred in the UK public sector as the 'senior responsible officer'; it is also known as 'project owner' or even 'project director'. He or she may be supported by a project board or steering group, who help the project sponsor ensure that the needs of the customer, operational organisation or other key groupings are represented. (There is no formal glossary, so never assume one person's 'sponsor' does the same as one in another organisation. Always check the detailed accountabilities. See next article in September.)

Current research is now pointing at the lack of effective project sponsorship as being a prime cause of project failure. In other words, despite the best efforts of many project managers and their teams, projects have a tendency to fail 'top-down' and yet most benchmarking concentrates on project techniques and methods. Good project management alone does not lead to a successful project!

The project sponsor role differs from that of the project manager, who is accountable for the day-to-day management of the project, defining and delivering a suitable solution: The project sponsor *directs* the project; The project manager *manages* the project.

In some organisations the project sponsor role is well defined and established. Potential sponsors will find their accountabilities detailed in process documentation, usually associated with a project management methodology. In other organisations nothing will exist and each sponsor will have to create their own role and accountabilities for themselves. They will also need to work harder to influence those around them who undertake complementary roles, such as the project manager or project board. There is little point in someone acting as a perfect project sponsor when the project manager he or she is relying on does not understand the approaches being taken and the demands being placed on him or her. Similarly, the project sponsor will have to set the expectations of his or her peers

and the executive team to whom he or she either reports or relies on for resources and expertise. The project sponsor has to agree with them the degree of freedom they have and the formal authority they have vested in return.

The more mature an organisation is with



regard to project management, the easier it will be for an executive to exercise the role of project sponsor. Conversely, the less mature an organisation is, the more difficult that role will be, but, as a leader, any executive will relish that challenge!

Summary

- The fact that the status quo is untenable means change is inevitable for all organisations. The key is making sure change represent progress, rather than change for change's sake.
- Projects are vehicles by which change can be effectively implemented, increasing the likelihood of meeting the business objectives.
- The role of the project sponsor is to lead change and direct projects with the benefits in mind, as opposed to managing projects with delivery in mind.
- The effectiveness of the project sponsor role is related to the maturity of the whole organisation in project management.

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