

# A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide: Improving project performance

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## Appendix A – Role of project sponsors

This appendix describes what project sponsors are responsible for and how that work provides value to the project<sup>1</sup>. The role of project sponsors is essential and not trivial. Projects are more successful when the project sponsor is willing and engaged. Projects should never start without a project sponsor who:

1. Believes the project business case is sound.
2. Believes the project goal aligns with and adds value to the organization's business strategy.
3. Is available and has been oriented about the role.
4. Has a clear view of their own role in the project.

Projects risk failure when project sponsors:

1. Do not take their role seriously.
2. Are hesitant about their actions due to a lack of experience with the role.
3. Are distracted from fulfilling the role.
4. Become unsure about their role when they recognize their lack of direct technology expertise or experience.
5. View the role as being a figurehead.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please read this PMI In-Depth Report listed in the Resources section. Executive Sponsor Engagement: Top Driver of Project and Program Success

### 6. Interfere with the work of the project manager<sup>2</sup>.

If you're feeling overwhelmed by the role of the project sponsor or being sucked into too many issues that you think should be handled by the project manager or the team, please read Appendix B – What project sponsors don't do.

The role of project sponsors in projects includes the following significant elements.

#### Is accountable for project business results

The project sponsor validates the project business case. It doesn't matter how valuable the project manager thinks the project is to the organization or what other executives believe. There is no project if the project sponsor doesn't believe in the business case.

For example, if the business case is about slicing days or weeks out of the supply chain, the project sponsor must believe it's achievable and valuable.

The project sponsor ensures alignment between the project's business goal and the organization's strategic goals.

The project sponsor is accountable to the CEO and other senior executives for achieving the business goal of the project.

Given this significant role, the project sponsor chairs the project steering committee.

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<sup>2</sup> This appendix and Appendix C – Characteristics of a successful project manager can help to clarify potential misunderstandings and ambiguities between the roles of the project sponsor and the project manager.

### Provides project resources

The project sponsor provides budget dollars, business staff, and facilities. Without these resources, no project can proceed and has no hope of finishing successfully. Therefore, the project sponsor must be high enough on the organization chart to allocate resources.

For example, VPs or Executive VPs make great project sponsors because their authority to allocate staff and budgets is a critical success factor for projects. Managers and supervisors do not because their authority is insufficient. Presidents are not good project sponsors. They are involved in too many moment-to-moment issues to focus on the role of the project sponsor. As a result, the team will feel directionless and abandoned.

Typically, the team:

1. Engages consultants and contractors.
2. Signs contracts with suppliers for required products and services.

### Champions project benefits throughout the organization

The project sponsor and the other steering committee members must enthusiastically communicate, sell and defend the project benefits in informal discussions throughout the organization. They remind the organization of the project's value proposition and maintain its commitment to the project. If these individuals fail to champion the benefits or, worse, challenge the benefits or criticize the project, the project is doomed.

For example, the project sponsor must reference the project status in meetings with other senior managers and remind them of its value proposition.

### Provides support and guidance for the project manager

The project sponsor provides support and guidance for the project manager<sup>3</sup>. The project sponsor offers organizational insights to the project manager, who often does not have enough seniority and reputation for the organization to accept necessary but unwelcome recommendations.

For example, the project sponsor may say, “Thanks for indicating that the support of the South American Division seems tepid. I’ll go with you to approach the VP about the staffing shortage issue we’ve been discussing.”

The project sponsor:

1. Commits to a firm schedule of meetings with the project manager. The frequency is usually weekly or bi-weekly.
2. Respects the project manager’s mandate and delegation.
3. Provides open, frank feedback to the project manager on project observations and how improvements could be made.
4. Demands honest opinions from the project manager about project status and issues.
5. Guides the project manager in helpful areas such as internal politics<sup>4</sup>, corporate history, and prejudices held by various stakeholders.
6. Does not create pressure to provide a false, overly optimistic project status.
7. Operates the project manager relationship based on mutual trust.
8. Ensures the project manager receives leadership coaching if needed.

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<sup>3</sup> Because the project sponsor/project manager relationship is an asymmetric power relationship, the project sponsor should be careful not to inadvertently intimidate the project manager. Read section 12.2 for more detail.

<sup>4</sup> See the Glossary entry for Internal politics.

Conversely, if the project sponsor loses confidence in the project manager, the project sponsor must replace the project manager.

### Supports the team at a strategic level

The project sponsor gives meaningful guidance to the team on quality vs cost vs schedule trade-offs as these arise. The team documents the conclusion in the issues log. The project sponsor enforces ethical standards.

For example, the project sponsor clarifies team questions about the organization's strategic plan and how the project best aligns with the plan.

### Encourages the team

The project sponsor occasionally speaks to the entire team to publicly provide kudos, encouragement and boost morale. On these occasions, the project sponsor strongly supports the project and the team's work.

For example, the project sponsor can share some senior management scuttlebutt that would be good for the team to hear to reinforce the importance of the team's work for the organization.

Occasionally, the project sponsor meets individually with team members to confirm morale and address issues team members will be reluctant to share in a public forum.

### Ensures resource commitments are fulfilled

When the project was approved, various stakeholders accepted resource commitments to work with the project. However, as the project proceeds, the business departments are typically hit

with new resource demands and gradually de-commit from the project. Only the project sponsor can reverse this trend.

It's up to the project manager to point out this failure to fulfill commitments to the project sponsor for resolution.

For example, only the project sponsor can effectively glare at the managers or VPs to rebuild the commitment. Project managers can't do that and survive.



We find it odd that most organizations do not include a cost for internal staff effort in the project budget. These individuals fill an essential role in detailing requirements and participating in deliverable review tasks. But because they aren't project team members, they are usually seen as magically free.

This disconnect sets up the need for the project sponsor to ensure resource commitments are fulfilled. An excellent solution to ensure resource commitments are fulfilled is hiring a person in the stakeholder department to back-fill for the person moving to the project team and charging the back-fill person's cost to the project budget.

### Resolves issues that the project manager cannot resolve on their own

Every project develops issues related to scope, priorities and approach. Only the project sponsor can resolve or lead the resolution of the more significant issues that tend to cross organizational lines. It's up to the project manager to raise these issues with the project sponsor for resolution.

For example, the project depends on manufacturing data, and the data quality is low. Only the project sponsor can march into the office of the VP of Manufacturing and ask that the data be cleaned up and extract a commitment that the data will remain high quality into the future.

To the greatest extent possible, the project sponsor shields the team from distracting and harmful internal politics<sup>5</sup> and plays defence for the project.

### Monitors the team's performance

Through discussions and reports, the project sponsor monitors the team's performance at a high level. The project sponsor makes a determined effort to support the project manager and the team. However, if the project sponsor loses confidence in the performance of some individuals, changes must be made. Allowing non-performance to fester only adds risk to the project.

### Needs no technical expertise or experience

Executive management selects project sponsors for their significant business experience and senior leadership credibility within the organization.

Project sponsors do not need technical expertise or experience related to the project deliverables. For example, project sponsors do not need to know about metallurgy, software development methodologies or specific consumer product-design considerations.

The technical expertise and experience that projects require come from the following sources:

1. The project manager.
2. The team.
3. The supporting departments in the organization.
4. Vendors and service providers contracted by the team.

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<sup>5</sup> See the Glossary entry for Internal politics.