

Think of projects as an hourglass.

“At the neck of the hourglass sits the project sponsor and project manager,” says David West, senior technical director, WSP UK, a construction, engineering and environmental management consultancy in Swindon, England. In many cases, “the project manager faces the bottom half of the organization, orchestrating the input of all consultants, suppliers and contractors. The project sponsor faces the upper half of the hourglass, dealing with all relevant departments of the client organization and associated stakeholders. The project sponsor is responsible for the project business case, whereas the project manager is usually responsible for delivering a project with defined outputs to a timescale and budget.”

Together they bring the project to a successful close and everyone lives happily ever after, right?

If only it were that simple. Not every sponsor is created equal. And not every project manager knows how to most advantageously work with a sponsor.

The first step to building an effective relationship between a project sponsor and project manager is to understand where one job ends and the other begins.

The sponsor is there to provide the financial resources for the project and champion it when it's first conceived. That means serving as a spokesperson to higher management to get organizational support as well as promoting the project's benefits.

The sponsor should also help strategically direct the project, and provide guidance and senior management support to the project manager as needed, says Štefan Ondek, PMP, managing partner of POTIFOB (Projects on Time in Full on Budget), a project management consultancy and training firm in Malinovo, Slovakia. Project sponsors can also help overcome obstacles and obtain the resources, including human resources and financial support, that project teams need.

PLAN THE RELATIONSHIP

Some sponsors overstep their bounds, however, and try to micromanage a proj-

ect, failing to delegate responsibilities to the project manager. To curb this problem—and others down the road—project managers need to ensure they see eye-to-eye with the sponsor from the start. That requires proper planning:

› **Understand what the sponsor expects in terms of value.** “Each project should have a clear business case that will allow it to be aligned with the larger strategic objectives of the company,” says Jessica Janko Prior, PMP, a senior project manager at athletic footwear and apparel company New Balance, St. Louis, Missouri, USA.

› **Develop a partnership agreement.** This written document can be a formal document that is part of the project charter or a separate conversation between project manager and sponsor. It should include the roles and responsibilities of all project team members, suggests Neil Love, coauthor of *The Project Sponsor Guide* [PMI, 2000]. It should also define what the sponsor needs from the project manager and vice versa.

“A good starting point is for the project manager to ask the sponsor what really worked and didn't on projects from their past,” he says.

› **Take the hands-on approach.** For project managers, that means asking sponsors about their goals for the project. Understanding such details will improve the sponsor's confidence in you—a lesson Mr. West learned early in his career while working as a project manager for the design and construction of a new laboratory.

“After the initial meetings, I asked the project sponsor, who was a pathologist, to take me around the existing laboratory and show me how it worked and what was wrong with it,” says Mr. West, author of *Project Sponsorship: An Essential Guide for Those Sponsoring Projects Within Their Organizations* [Gower, 2010]. “Then I asked if he could take me around what he considered the finest, state-of-the-art laboratory. With those tours I had a really good appreciation of what was required of me that transcended anything written in the project brief.



› TIP

We need to help sponsors understand best practices and processes, and why those processes are for the benefit of their project.

—Jessica Janko Prior, PMP,
New Balance, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

“What’s more, the sponsor knew that I had a good understanding of what he wanted. I had gained his support.”

› **Establish an effective communications plan.** Create this with the sponsor and implement it at project initiation. Be sure to lay out the terms for the frequency and type of communication and determine in advance when an issue needs to be brought to the attention of the sponsor.

Problems can also stem from a sponsor’s lack of technical knowledge or a project manager’s lack of organizational knowledge. Opening up those lines of communication gives the sponsor and project manager a chance to coach each other from the beginning.

› **Have your sponsor attend the first team meeting and talk about the project goals.** That way team members can ask questions as well.

It is a sponsor’s job to support the project manager—and, in turn, the project team. “The sponsor needs to say, ‘I’m here to knock down barriers to what’s getting in your way,’” says Mr. Love, who also serves as managing partner at organizational consultancy Productive Enterprises in San Jose, California, USA.

But the sponsor can’t do that alone: It takes a sense of openness on the side of the project manager. “It’s up to the project team to say what the problems are,” Mr. Love says. From there, the sponsor can take the lead on finding solutions—with or without the help of the project manager.

› **Educate the project sponsor.** The easiest sponsors to work with are those with a good understanding of project management, Ms. Janko Prior says. “If we are working with a project sponsor who does not understand project management processes, it is part of our job to educate our sponsors. We need to help them understand best practices and processes, and why those processes are for the benefit of their project,” she says. “It is extremely important to gain the buy-in of our project sponsors and

to have them understand, at least at a high level, why those processes are used.”

WHEN THE PRESSURE-COOKER HEATS UP

Even with all that planning, project managers and their sponsors may still disagree. If that happens, each party should spend some time listening to what the other has to say.

“Projects are real pressure-cooker environments, especially in the current economic climate, and emotions can run high,” Mr. West says. “Often when we are in this situation we don’t really listen to the other person. We are just waiting for our turn to speak and get our side across.”

If both sides take that approach, neither will understand the other’s needs and complaints. That’s when you should bring in a third party to help solve the matter.

In a mature project management environment, there should be a defined formal procedure for such situations, Mr. Ondek says. “The most sensible place to ask for help if needed would be, depending on the organization’s structure, the corporate project management office and/or the project manager’s line manager,” he says.

“That third party needs to be a good listener and experienced in the project environment,” Mr. West says. “It’s a bit like marriage counseling. The project sponsor and the project manager may expect the third party to side with them and come down in judgment against the other party. But that’s not in either of their interests and certainly not the project’s interest.”

It always pays to remember that whether you are the project sponsor or the project manager, you are both on the same team and are working toward the same goal: a successful outcome. PM

In an Ideal World

Project managers don’t get to choose who sponsors their projects. But if they had their way, here’s what project professionals say they want out of the perfect sponsor:

DO: Offer your support. Serving as a project sponsor can often be a difficult balance. Be involved without overstepping your role. “Get clear on your value,” says Neil Love, Productive Enterprises, San Jose, California, USA. “Get clear on what support the team needs, and find it.”

DO: Play cheerleader. “Champion the project to the outside world,” says Štefan Ondek, PMP, POTIFOB (Projects on Time in Full on Budget), Molinovo, Slovakia. Obtaining stakeholder buy-in is often crucial to securing the necessary resources and acceptance.

DON’T: Do the project manager’s job. “Having two people carrying out the same project management role will cause confusion amongst the team and be detrimental to the project,” says David West, WSP UK, Swindon, England.

DON’T: Forget about the bottom line. “The project sponsor owns the business case, and any trend to overrun schedule or budget is highly likely to be damaging to the business case,” Mr. West says. “The sponsor will need to work with the project manager to correct any such trend or consider radical options, including cancellation.”