



The Elusive Project Sponsor



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Introduction

All projects are risky ventures: the larger and more complex the project, the higher the risk of an unsuccessful outcome. It is generally accepted that a critical success factor for any megaproject (projects > \$1 billion) is the presence and participation of an effective project sponsor (Barshop, 2016). In fact, the Project Management Institute reports that the top driver of projects meeting their original business goals is an actively engaged executive sponsor (PMI, 2018).

According to the Association for Project Management (APM, 2006), the project sponsor is the primary risk taker and owner of the project's business case. The sponsor is tasked with ensuring that all benefits of a project are realised by the organisation's top management. The sponsor chairs the project steering committee, ensures that risks are properly managed, that obstacles faced by the project are dealt with, and is the person to whom the project manager is accountable. The project sponsor focuses on project effectiveness, while the project manager focuses on project efficiency (APM, 2006).

An average of 38% of projects do not have active executive sponsorship, which highlights the need and opportunity for executive leaders to be more involved in the realisation of strategy (PMI, 2018). Barshop (2016) maintains that the main reason why companies lacked strong project sponsorship was that senior management of these companies did not understand the project sponsor's role in project governance.

In this article, we consider several scenarios for the executive sponsorship of projects and suggest ways to deal with problematic or absent sponsors.

Four scenarios

Several books (Englund & Bucero, 2006; West, 2010), and many more articles (Christenson & Christenson, 2010; Schibi & Lee, 2016), have been published on project sponsorship which describe personality traits, required training, as well as the

role and responsibilities of project sponsors. Whilst it is true that an effective sponsor is essential for project success, it is also true that not all sponsors are equally effective.

Four scenarios regarding the effectiveness and availability of project sponsors are described, with ways to deal with potential problem. The scenarios are described in some detail in Figure 1.

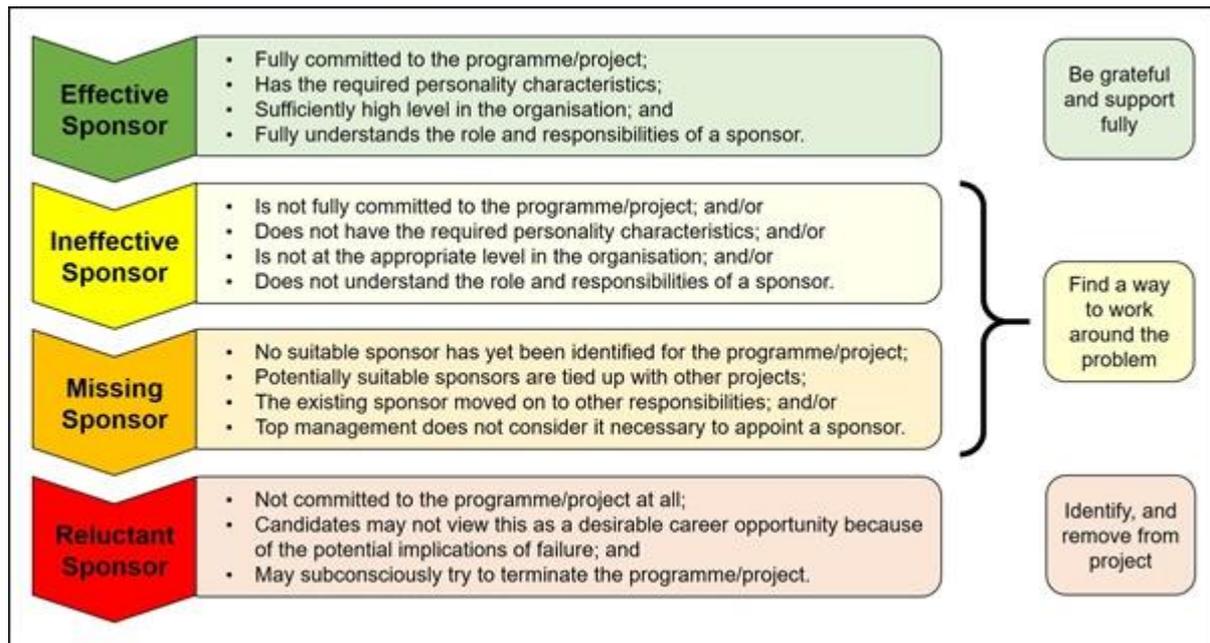


Figure 1: Four sponsor scenarios

The four sponsor scenarios are:

- Effective sponsor:** The effective sponsor knows what to do and has the executive power and resources to do it;
- Ineffective sponsor:** The ineffective sponsor can have gaps in his training and/or may be at a too low level in the organisation;
- Missing sponsor:** The missing sponsor has either left the project for other responsibilities or has not been appointed yet; and
- Reluctant sponsor:** The reluctant sponsor may meet all the requirements, but doesn't want to accept the responsibility.

Each of these scenarios is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

The effective sponsor

According to West (2015), the value of an effective project sponsor is the product of the value of the project to the organisation, and the role that the project sponsor plays in a successful project. He states that above all else, it is the effectiveness of the project sponsor that is critical to a successful project.

Truly effective sponsors are hard to find and should be nurtured by their own organisations and appreciated by the project manager and project team. The effective sponsor will be of appropriate seniority in the organisation, work closely with and mentor the project manager, understand the basics of project management, negotiate support and resources for the project, and be able to make decisions based on facts. Depending on the size and complexity of the projects, the effective project sponsor may be able to sponsor more than one project. In most organisations the project sponsor will have other responsibilities which may lead to time constraints. The effective sponsor will be able to manage his/her time properly and obtain assistance when required.

An effective sponsor has some key requirements that must be met by the project management team. They have a need to feel involved in the project process, require a constant stream of timely information, must be able to trust the project manager (and vice versa!), need help with managing their project commitments, and assistance with the preparation for meetings with stakeholders.

An effective sponsor will also be able to stop a project when there is no real justification to proceed, in other words when the intended business objectives are no longer achievable. Stopping a project in the front-end loading phase, when there is no longer any justification to proceed, does not constitute a failure, but rather shows strength of character and a keen business sense on the part of the sponsor and his project management team.

The ineffective sponsor

As mentioned before, an effective sponsor is essential for successfully completing a megaproject. The direct corollary is that an ineffective sponsor greatly increases the probability of an unsuccessful project in the form of schedule and cost overruns, and not delivering on the organisation's strategic objectives.

Project sponsors may be ineffective for several reasons, some of which are listed below:

- Uncertainty on the actual role of the project sponsor on a project;
- Insufficient training in, or experience with, project sponsorship;
- The sponsor may be unwilling/unable to make decisions;
- The sponsor is at too low a level in the organisation to be effective;
- Too busy with other management obligations and not available to project team;
- Deliberately wasting time on less important matters to avoid sponsor responsibilities
- Preoccupation with personal matters which takes focus off the project; and
- The sponsor may be reluctant to take on the role of sponsor (more later);

Some of these causes are relatively simple to overcome. For instance, a sponsor who is insufficiently trained on the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of sponsorship, and is willing to learn, can be trained. Training can involve formal courses, or on-the-job training by other experienced sponsors. Very experienced project managers can also lead and assist the ‘inexperienced’ sponsor, as illustrated in Figure 2.

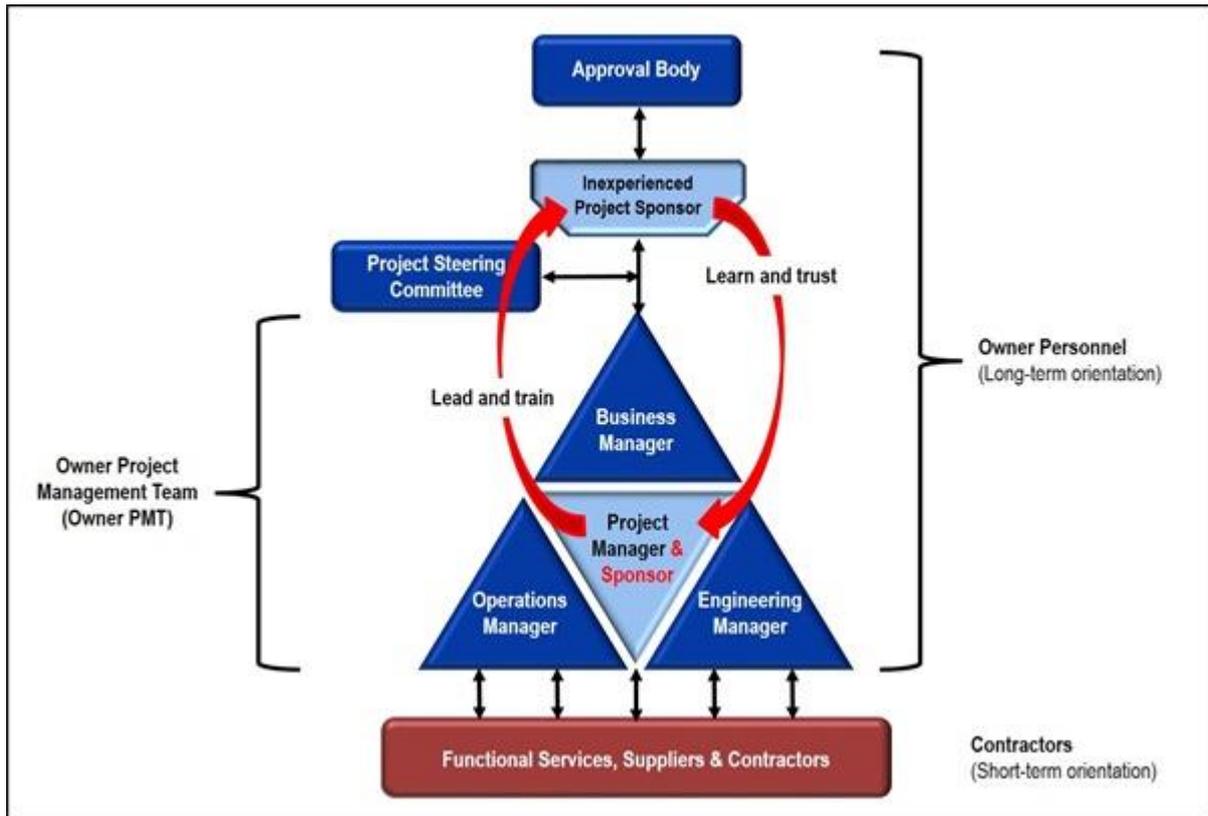


Figure 2: Assisting the ineffective sponsor (Adapted from van Heerden et al, 2015)

Sponsors who are unwilling to make decisions, may also be too low in the management hierarchy. The project manager can attempt to deal with the problem by using a formal scope management procedure and taking the inexperienced sponsor through the motivation in detail. If this does not deliver the desired results, or the sponsor is at too low a level to have an impact, the project manager will have to approach a trusted member of the organisation’s management team to discuss the concern and the potential negative consequences on the project.

Sponsors with insufficient time to deal with the project related matters can be addressed by discussions between sponsor and project manager. If the reason is that the sponsor wants to remain in his/her comfort zone, training may be the answer. If not, the project manager can offer to temporarily take on some of the sponsor responsibilities while the sponsor delegates some of the other responsibilities. Sponsors who are preoccupied with personal problems can transfer some of the sponsorship responsibilities to the project manager or other subordinates.

Lastly, sponsors who are reluctant to take on the role of sponsor will be discussed under a separate heading.

The missing sponsor

'Missing' sponsors are unavailable to meet project responsibilities (sometimes right from the start, or at some later point in the project) because nobody has been appointed to the position or they are otherwise occupied. Sponsors can be 'missing' from the sponsorship function for any of the following reasons:

- No sponsor has yet been appointed for the project;
- An existing sponsor was moved or promoted to another function;
- An ineffective or reluctant sponsor was removed from the position;
- Top management does not consider it necessary to appoint a sponsor;
- Medical or family emergencies, resulting in time away from the office; and
- The sponsor may be overloaded with other projects and/or responsibilities.

There are ways to overcome the gap left by a 'missing' sponsor, although it places an additional burden on the owner project management team. Several members of the project management team can act as project sponsor, as shown in Figure 3.

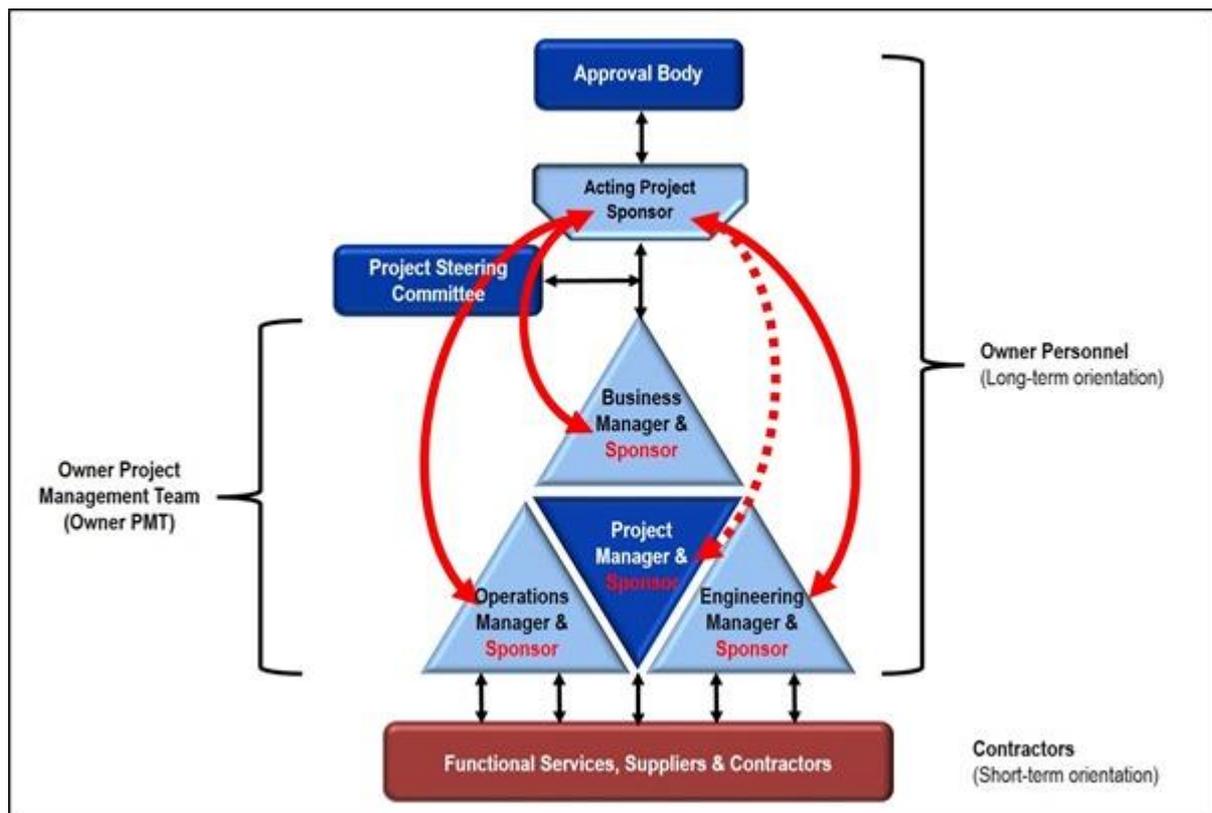


Figure 3: Filling the gap of a missing sponsor (Adapted from van Heerden et al, 2015)

There are typically four key players in the project management team of any megaproject, namely the project manager, the business manager, the operations manager and the engineering manager. Any one of these should be able to act as project sponsor. When the sponsor post is expected to remain vacant for an extended period, the sponsor responsibilities can be divided up amongst the different managers. Alternatively, each of the managers in the project team can rotate to the position of acting project sponsor for a specific period, say a month at a time. Keep in mind that an acting sponsor in the place of a 'missing' sponsor can keep the project moving along, but can never be as effective as a dedicated and committed sponsor.

The structure for a programme is depicted in Figure 4, with similar acting arrangements as before. Programmes are typically larger, more complex and subject to more uncertainty than projects, which implies that the need for a full-time sponsor is even greater if a successful programme is desired.

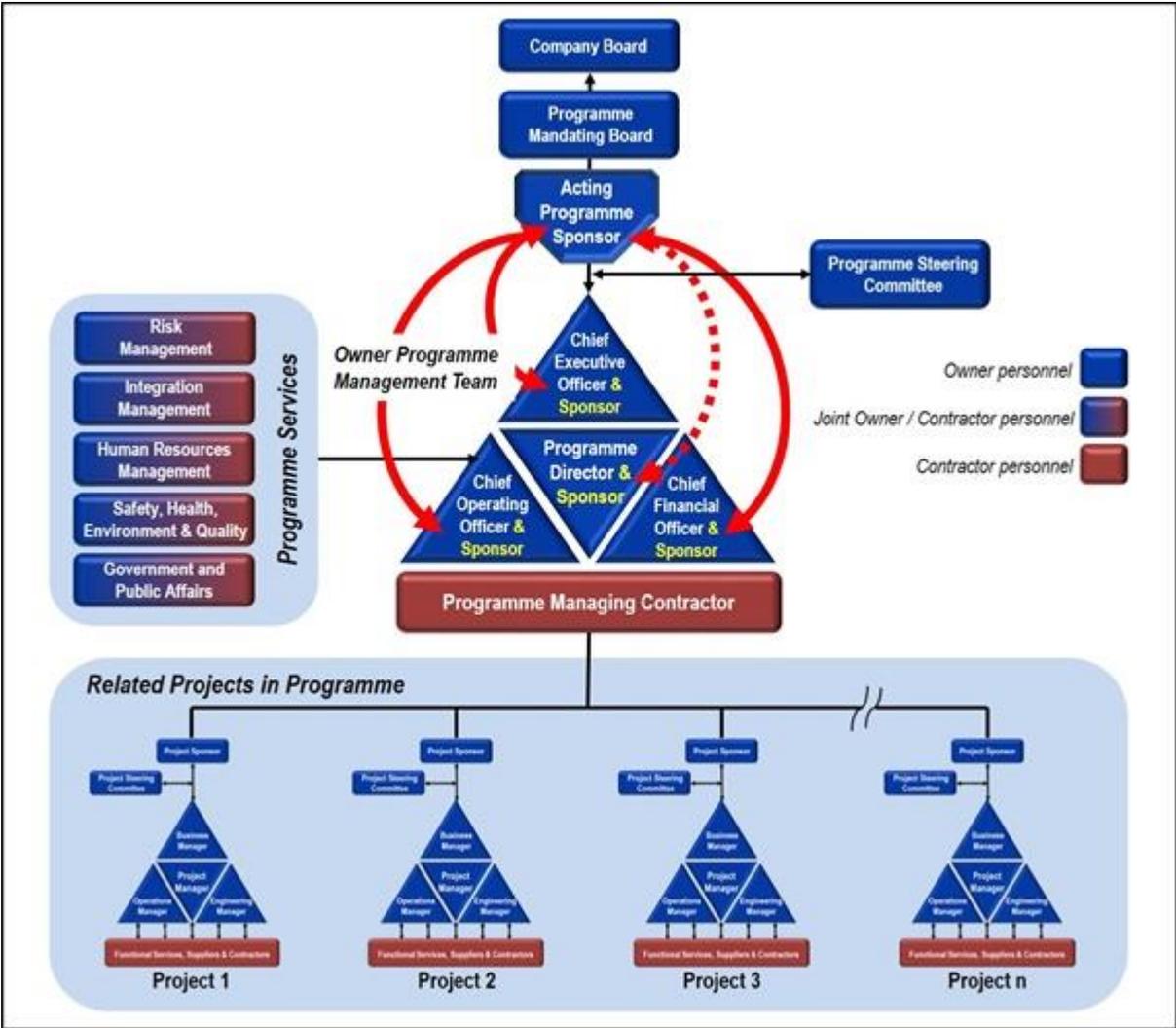


Figure 4: The elusive sponsor of a programme (Adapted from van Heerden et al, 2015)

The reluctant sponsor

A reluctant sponsor, as the name implies, is a person who does not want to be in that position of responsibility. Perkins (2015) refers to them as resistant sponsors, and states that resistant sponsors may be blatant or passive-aggressive in their efforts to block progress: indeed, a very dangerous situation. In my opinion, having a reluctant project sponsor on board is far worse than having an ineffective or 'missing' sponsor.

Sponsors can be referred to as 'reluctant' for any of the following reasons:

- They consider the project to be a career-limiting disaster;
- They don't wish to be tied down for the multi-year lifespan of the project;
- They anticipate that the project will diminish their current responsibilities;
- The project proposal was not their preferred option; and
- They want to fulfil their prophecy that the project will be unsuccessful.

Reluctant sponsors can have very negative effects on project success and can demoralise project management teams (Perkins, 2015). This can lead to project team members leaving the project, rather than work in a toxic environment.

When dealing with a reluctant sponsor, the following approaches can be considered (Perkins, 2015):

- **Remain professional:** Don't resort to personal attacks on a reluctant sponsor. Rather blame the work processes and seek or offer solutions;
- **Keep the reluctant sponsor informed:** Discuss matters requiring difficult decisions with the reluctant sponsor prior to formal meetings to avoid time being wasted during project steering committee meetings;
- **Document thoroughly:** Project management practice requires the team to document agreements, motivate change requests, keep a risk register, list and follow up on action items, etc. Ensure that all documentation is timely and thorough with a reluctant sponsor;
- **Call in supporters:** Ask high-level supporters of the project in the organisation to highlight the project's value. Stubborn reluctant sponsors will find it hard to continue destructive behaviour in the face of continuous enterprise-wide support;
- **Informal engagement:** Ask a senior member of the organisation's management team, respected by the reluctant sponsor, to discuss the project with him/her. If the discussion is penetrating enough, reluctant sponsors may modify their destructive behaviour; and
- **Auto-ignition:** Let reluctant sponsors destroy themselves through their actions. This is a risky, last-ditch effort, based on the hope that the rest of the organisation will recognise the reluctant sponsors' poor decisions, and remove them from the sponsorship responsibilities.

Concluding remarks

Ashkenas (2016) states that the project sponsor should be the first appointment to be made when steps are taken to implement corporate strategy. Before launching a new project, the sponsor and the project leader should meet to set, clarify, and align expectations. This is particularly important if the sponsor was not actively involved in the project initiation phase, and may not understand the background and risks.

Several authors have expressed the concern that due to the growing number of megaprojects in the world, good project sponsors are becoming increasingly difficult to find in the open market or inside the organisation (Merrow, 2011; Barshop, 2016). Organisations are encouraged to train their executives for future roles as project sponsors. If your company has a need for project sponsorship training, do not hesitate to contact us at OTC.

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