

Enabling Effective Project Sponsorship: A Coaching Framework for Starting Projects Well

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ABSTRACT: Projects are vehicles of change. Studies continue to show that projects fail more often than they succeed. Project sponsorship and starting projects well are critical components in shaping outcomes. Though underutilized in project management, human change management practices can be instrumental in managing the inherent complexity of projects. Where intervention is needed, a coaching framework can close gaps in the sponsor's performance and assist those in the project's inner circle to collaborate in positioning a project for success.

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Introduction

Project sponsors vary in their effectiveness, not unlike others in leadership roles. Whether overseeing a large, visible project, such as reorganization, or helping an employee to reach an annual objective, the sponsor's role and involvement are critical, particularly in the project's early stages.

Generally, the role of the sponsor is to clearly communicate the outcome desired --- while ensuring that the project's process delivers the value promised to the project's stakeholders, in exchange for its authorized resources. Ultimately, the project sponsor is the leader accountable for the project's outcome.

How Critical is the Project Sponsor's Role?

Research studies continue to report what experienced practitioners know: project sponsorship is one of the elements that most influences project outcomes. Connell¹, Johnson², and Oz³ are among those whose studies have identified project sponsorship as a critical element that influences project success and failure.

Typically, during the initial weeks/months of the project, the project's critical elements are shaped, including the involvement patterns of the sponsor.

Project research, as far back as Baker⁴ and Paulson⁵ in the 1970's, shows that definition and relationship management activities in the earliest stages of the project exert a significant influence over a project's outcome. It is early in the project that the ability to

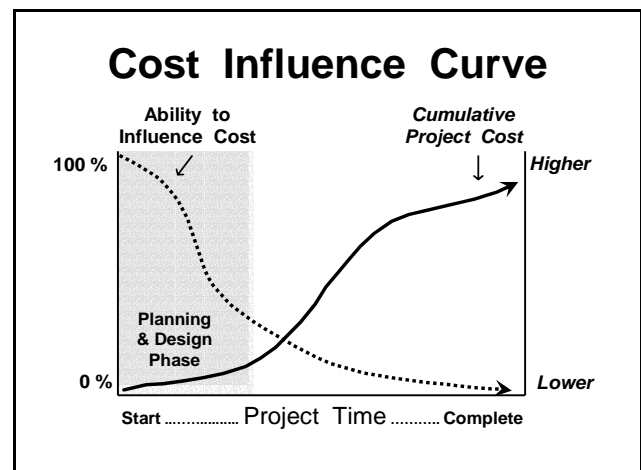


Figure 1

influence the outcome is the greatest and costs are the lowest, as seen in Figure 1.

Though the findings of individual research studies differ somewhat, there are clear patterns in the elements found to exert influence in creating project success/failure.

Figure 2 lists these important elements and summarizes how the success/failure positioning varies. Paulson's work has discussed how spending more or less money/time in the project's planning and design stages can impact the project's cost.

Allocating adequate time and resources early in the project to clarify the objectives, scope, and requirements, as well as to build stakeholder relationships is a prudent business practice.

7 Project Elements that Matter

SUCCESS Profile	PROJECT ELEMENT	FAILURE Profile
Engaged	SPONSOR	Absent
Contributing	CLIENT (stakeholders)	Not involved
Clear	OBJECTIVES	Assumed
"Engineered"	RESOURCES	Inappropriate
Disciplined	PROJECT PLANNING	Inadequate
Defined	REQUIREMENTS	Incomplete
"Contracted"	SCOPE	Creep....leap !

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Figure 2

Effective sponsors are actively engaged in the project. They communicate expectations about activities that increase the likelihood of the project's success. The project's target audience, its team, and the sponsor all benefit directly when the Success Profile, shown in Figure 2, is operating.

Ineffective sponsors tend to limit their own involvement, and/or permit a variety of pressures to taint a project's crucial early decisions. Generally, either/both of these conditions set the stage for failure even before the project's products are under development.

How Do Sponsors View Their Role?

A recent study, conducted by Thomas⁶, has shed some new light on the subject of executive support for project management. Among other things, the study has uncovered that many executives interviewed/surveyed view project management as tactical in their organizations, and as an add-on to people's jobs. Related findings are that 69% of participants spend more than 50% of their time in project management activities. Yet, nearly 60% of that study's participants cite that project managers in their organizations have little or no formal project management training.

Other studies have shown that even when millions of dollars are at stake, project results are too often unsatisfactory. A recent review by Smith⁷ of 49 studies of different types of organizational change showed a median success range of about 20-45%. Smith's review included studies of strategy deployment, restructuring and downsizing, technology change, TQM-driven change, mergers and acquisitions, re-engineering and process design, software development and installation, business expansion, and cultural change.

The project success/failure research literature and the latest research by Thomas suggest that what

projects need from sponsors, and how sponsors perform, are not aligned. Reasonable explanations are that individual project sponsors (1) do not distinguish project work from other types of work, (2) underestimate the complexity of project initiatives, (3) do not know how, or are unable to serve effectively in this role, (4) do not realize that their own early actions/omissions might spell the difference between project success and failure, and/or (5) are not willing to play an active role in the projects they sponsor.

Since the 1970's, research has shown that:

- project performance is seriously problematic in many organizations;
- ineffective project sponsorship is a primary culprit;
- the performance of sponsors does not align with project needs.

With so much money and credibility at stake, why does this performance picture continue to persist?

Project Management and Human Change Management

Projects are the vehicle of change, producing new products, services, or processes at their completion. Their purpose is to close the gap between the current state and a better, desired state. Projects are a temporary venture; they have a beginning and an end. This makes them different from defined business processes that are in place within organizations.

Three major improvement disciplines offer life-cycles and recommended practices to manage projects. From a methodological perspective, performance technology, quality improvement, and project management share important attributes, though their respective practitioners do not seem to readily connect the three disciplines.

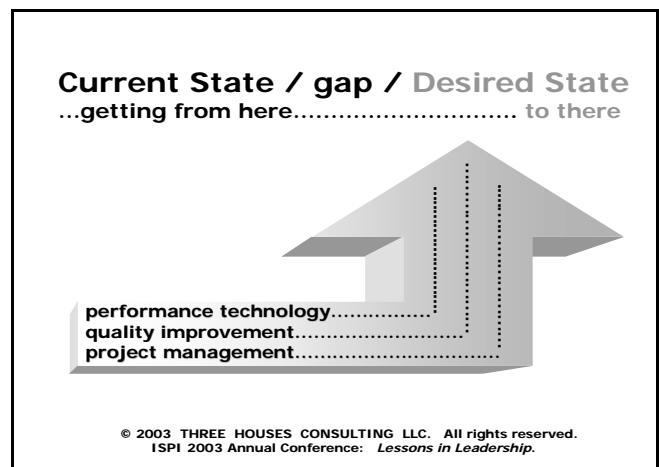


Figure 3

Which traits do they share? Performance technology, quality improvement, and project management:

- Exploit opportunities or solve problems that close the gap between the current state and some desired state. See Figure 3.
- Can be applied to individual, group, or organizational change.
- Follow a similar change path, or life-cycle, from initiation to completion. See Figure 4.
- Bring changes to the way people work.
- Grapple with, and reduce uncertainties over the course of the change path, in contrast to most physical and business processes, which have a much higher level of predictability.
- Depend upon the solution's acceptance/use by its target audience(s) to deliver the ROI. See Figure 5.

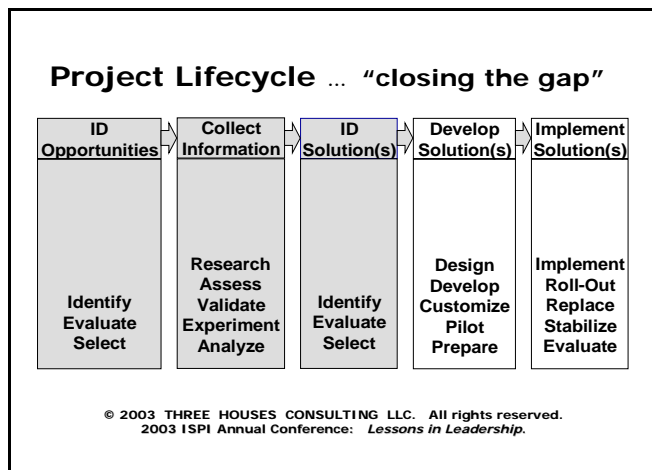


Figure 4

Fundamentally, each of these disciplines are at their best when they integrate human change management practices throughout their respective life-cycles, as this reduces risk and produces better solutions. But, as discussed earlier in this paper, research indicates that more projects fail than succeed, and it appears from cause data that human change management practices are underutilized.

Whether a project has good leadership, clear objectives, involved stakeholders, appropriate resources, defined requirements & scope, and disciplined project planning are largely a function of human decisions and omissions. These key elements are shaped during the first three stages: (1) identify an opportunity, (2) collect information to define the problem, (3) identify a viable solution(s). These stages are shaded in Figure 4.

The relationship management patterns established in the project's early stages create the foundation for its later stages. Clear objectives and stakeholder involvement in the project's early stages directly affect problem definition, solution development and design, and preparation of target audiences for the

change. The usability, acceptance, and effectiveness of the project's product(s) are critical to customer satisfaction; i.e., delivering the benefits portion of the business case, and ultimately, the project's ROI.

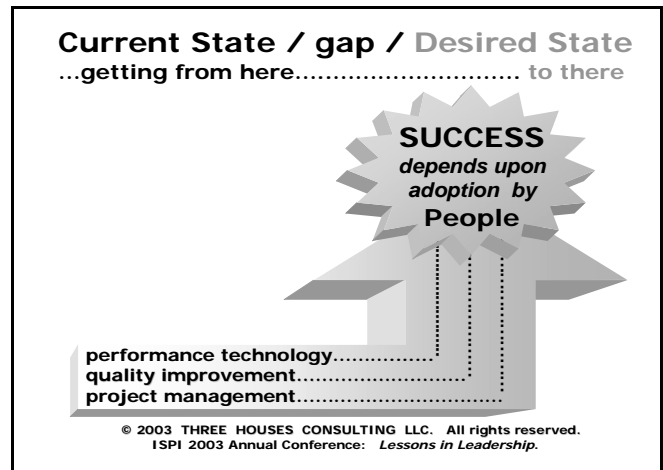


Figure 5

Project sponsors are in a key position to set expectations regarding all these early project definition, or "front-end loading" factors. Effective project sponsors clearly understand the connection between their own actions and their project's eventual ROI.

When it is clear that either performance gaps exist in a particular sponsor's performance, or in an organization's sponsorship patterns, intervention is desirable. Direct benefits for customers, credibility, and receptiveness to exploiting future opportunities are all at stake.

However, problems associated with a sponsor's performance can be minimized in some instances, in the initial selection of the project's sponsor.

Who is an Appropriate Sponsor?

Even within the same organization, patterns are often inconsistent when it comes to selecting sponsors for projects. Individually or in combination, the most common sponsor selection mechanisms are (a) appointment by a higher power, (b) self-selection for an initiative of importance to the sponsor, (c) functional jurisdiction, (d) the project cost falling within someone's budget authority.

Whether sponsorship is via appointment or default, there are some scope and personal attributes that support effectiveness. Ideally, the sponsor:

- has a span of control = the project's scope.
- feels the project is important.
- has an inclusive vs. exclusive philosophy.
- possesses the ability to influence others.
- is willing to make difficult decisions.

Effective sponsors make important decisions and have the authority to do so. They invite participation by key stakeholders and work with them to generate enthusiasm and communicate the business value of the project. Where necessary, they help the project team and stakeholders to mitigate risk, and to work through any potential barriers to success.

When it is the functional jurisdiction or the internal accountability/budget structures that determine who the project sponsor will be, dual sponsorship is typical. That is, it is not uncommon to find that there is both an executive sponsor and a sustaining sponsor, the former handling the more formal, and the latter handling the day-to-day sponsorship role duties.

Usually, the sustaining sponsor will be someone in the chain of command between the customer partner and the executive sponsor. (The customer partner serves on the project's core team with the project manager.) By splitting the sponsor role, all the planning, control, and accountability patterns of the normal reporting structure re-emerge. It is easy to understand, as found in the Thomas study, how this sponsorship arrangement might give an executive sponsor the impression that project work is like any other type of work.

Performance Tools for Project Sponsorship – Getting Started

At the front line, a project team may be struggling to manage all the levels of complexity that a project entails. The project sponsor may be ineffective, or unaware that assistance may be needed. A topic of discussion for the project's core team, stakeholders, and/or performance technology consultants may be whether or not to intervene.

Performance tools may be part of an intervention to close a gap in the sponsor's performance. As project sponsor competence and receptiveness will vary within the same function or organization, any performance tools introduced can be welcomed or rejected, not unlike other products developed.

So, those players in the project's inner circle, such as core project team members and performance technologists, may wish to proceed using a similar approach (project life-cycle and critical elements) to the one they are hoping to introduce for the sponsor's use.

At minimum, a needs assessment and its accompanying dialogue might heighten awareness of project success/failure research, while validating whether or not the sponsor might benefit from a sponsorship coaching framework.

If done at the organizational level, a needs assessment might include:

- Identifying how much work or budget of the function/organization are associated with projects.
- Examining the project track record of the function/organization.
- Interviewing individuals who have served as project managers.
- Interviewing individuals who have served as the customer business partner.
- Interviewing individuals who have served as project sponsors.

In addition, in the development of sponsorship-related performance tools, some practical considerations relating to the current business climate and demands on a sponsor's time are relevant. Ease of use and time needed to use a tool are important design considerations. It is a challenge to develop short tools, with well chosen content, that have a meaningful impact. This type of coaching tool needs to support dialogue and provide some direction toward courses of action. Versatility, i.e., ability to be used different ways by different people in the inner circle, and still work reliably --- can add immediate value.

Performance Tools for Project Sponsorship – One Interpretation

Taking these constraints into account, a coaching framework for individual project sponsors, concentrating on the project's early stages, might consist of the following performance tool components:

- role profile (1-2 pages);
- probing questions (1-2 pages); and
- reliable techniques (1-3 pages).

The role profile could employ 20-40 factor statements based on the seven critical elements and each reflecting a useful standard.

Figure 6 provides an example of how the role definition standards connected to the project's purpose can be stated. The rating scale is a simple, three-point Agree/Disagree scale. The standards are clearly stated, structured to permit gray areas to emerge easily, and connect project elements and stakeholders, wherever possible.

This type of tool can be used (a) individually, by the sponsor, core team member, or performance technology consultant, or (b) by any combination of these individuals.

PROJECT SPONSOR PROFILE			
RATING SCALE: A = Agree U = Unsure D = Disagree			
X	Rating	The Project Sponsor(s)...	Notes
		<i>PURPOSE</i>	
	A U D	1.....clearly communicated the purpose of the project to stakeholders.	
	A U D	2.....invited key stakeholders to help shape the project objectives and metrics.	
	A U D	3.....listened to input on the proposed scope prior to finalizing.	

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Figure 6

Dialogue, or probing questions, can be a useful complement to the role definition tool. The probing questions may be used while rating the role assessment factors, or following the latter's use. Together, factor statements and related probe questions (tied by factor number) help to diagnose performance gaps, while also leading the discussion to action items. Figure 7 provides sample questions that correspond to the factors shown in Figure 6.

Project Sponsorship		Dialogue & Review Questions	
Early Stages*	1=Initiation	2=Definition	3=Solution Selection
Area	Sponsor's Questions		When to Ask*
Opportunity ID	(1) Why does this opportunity interest us?...		1,2,3
Alignment	(1) How does this opportunity align...		1,2,3
Stakeholders	(1) Who are the key stakeholders?...		1,2,3
Objectives	(2) What do we want to achieve?...		1,2
Metrics	(2) Which metrics are the most appropriate...		2,3
Scope	(3) What is the proposed scope?...		1,2

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Figure 7

The third performance tool strictly provides summary information about best practices used to achieve desirable early project positioning. Examples of best practices that can be included are: kick-off meetings, accountability/responsibility matrix, business case, stakeholder analysis, use of a facilitator, and gate review. A simple description of what the practice is, and bullet items that indicate its value can be provided. An additional design option might be to provide cross references between this list of techniques and specific project factors covered on the other two performance tools.

The bibliography contains a number of useful sources that discuss the role of the project sponsor. In addition to needs assessment data, this

information can assist performance technology consultants to structure the content for the tools in their coaching framework.

The Coaching Framework for Effective Sponsorship - Alternatives for Use

If the tools are used early in the project, issues (risks) are identified, proposed actions determined, and issue resolution steps taken. If the tools are used at project conclusion, or at a later date to assess a completed project, the information can support future interactions with a particular sponsor, or amplify needs assessment data collected on the subject of sponsor performance.

As mentioned earlier, the tools in the coaching framework can be used (1) individually, (2) by a few people, or (3) by a team.

If used individually, a sponsor, core team member, or performance consultant can use the insights collected to prepare for meetings/discussions with the other parties. This assessment process can also be used to prepare for an intervention with the sponsor, if that is needed.

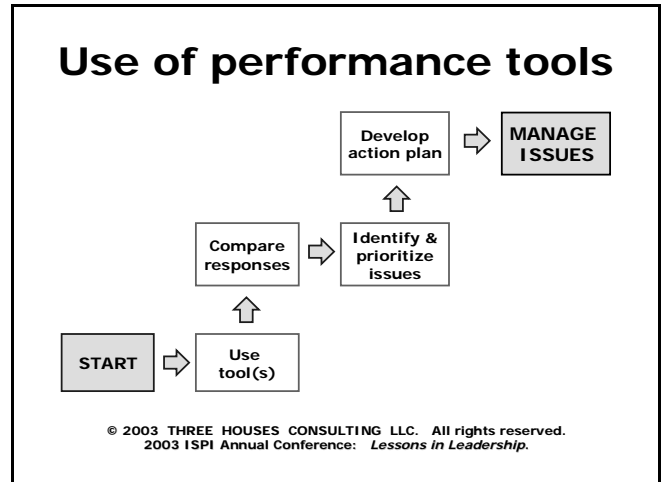


Figure 8

Figure 8 outlines the process for group use. The comparison of responses is an effective way to draw on perspective from those in the project's inner circle. An exchange of each person's ratings and reasons yields valuable information, for either lessons learned or next steps purposes.

Additional Considerations

As with any other intervention, core team members and/or the performance consultant are advised to give careful thought to how the coaching framework is introduced to a sponsor, even when a needs assessment has been conducted. Performance tools

can be helpful in either helping the sponsor to coach others, or to help others coach the sponsor.

Some sponsors would be willing, (and, are appreciative) to have a short checklist of sorts to help them prepare for meetings with business and team stakeholders of the project. Others might delegate the analysis responsibility to trusted advisor, assistant, or project consultant. Many sponsors welcome suggestions for action from core team members or facilitators/performance consultants associated with the project. Some executive sponsors would expect that the sustaining sponsor is handling 80-90 percent of the leadership responsibility.

The dynamics in each project organization vary. Reporting structures can make access to the sponsor easier or more difficult. Even with access, a sponsor's decision, to use or not use a performance tool may depend upon other factors not directly connected to the performance tool(s). These include decision styles, receptiveness to trying new approaches, and the perceived credibility of the person(s) seeking to intervene.

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