



# BUILDING SPONSORS

Future project leadership

THE **CHARTERED BODY** FOR THE  
PROJECT PROFESSION

# CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Diverse understandings of sponsorship	4
Sponsor attributes and functions	5
Three sponsor models	6
– Influencing sponsor	
– Dedicated sponsor	
– Representative sponsor	
Supporting organisational capability	10
Next steps	11

In 2015, the Association for Project Management (APM) ran an extensive research project whose analysis concluded that there were 12 'conditions' for project success. Those conditions provided a conceptual framework against which real project delivery could be assessed. The research concluded that while the 12 conditions were widely accepted as being integral to successful project delivery, they were infrequently applied and almost never in full. In five of those conditions, the project sponsor plays a lead role.

Project sponsorship offers organisations huge opportunities when implemented successfully. Whilst much work has been undertaken in the field of project management, by APM and others, to improve project performance, this has almost exclusively focused on the project delivery team. In part, this may be attributed to the sponsor role being hard to define with competences open to debate as well as a lack of traction in the boardroom.

As the chartered body for the project profession, APM has committed itself to addressing this critical enabler of project success. In January 2018, APM held a Sponsors' Summit with its corporate partners, government bodies and key stakeholders to start the process of building a shared understanding of how to improve the sponsorship of projects, programmes and portfolios. The event focused on real-world experiences from a wide range of sectors. This report lays out key themes that drew a broad consensus. We encourage all those interested in how sponsorship might impact their work and business to use this document to help inform debate within their organisations and networks. If you would like to contribute further to evolving this area of interest, please contact [knowledge@apm.org.uk](mailto:knowledge@apm.org.uk)

**"THE SPONSOR  
PLAYS A LEAD  
ROLE [IN  
SUCCESSFUL  
PROJECT  
DELIVERY]"**

# INTRODUCTION

# DIVERSE UNDERSTANDINGS OF SPONSORSHIP

**A**n early consensus is that any debate on sponsorship needs to start with a shared understanding of what 'level' of sponsorship is being discussed. The summit identified four core levels of sponsorship, noting that not every project has all four levels operating separately and that a sponsor may operate at multiple levels at the same time.

- a. Strategic sponsor:** C-suite/board member with direct accountability to the CEO/accounting officer.
- b. Senior sponsor:** At a level in the organisation with delegation of authority, authenticity and influence to take substantive decisions and have meaningful 'ownership' of the business case.
- c. Sponsor's agent:** Those doing the detailed day-to-day work of sponsorship – related to requirements, risk, financial assurance, stakeholders and communications.
- d. Internal sponsor:** Where the delivery organisation/supply chain is independent of the sponsor/client organisation, there will usually be an 'internal sponsor' making the case for the project team to take on the project for the client. The 'internal' business case and benefits can be completely different from the client's project business case.

With the potential exception of level c above, it is recognised that the role of the sponsor will often be as part of another role. A key deduction from this is that any guidance and/or professional development of a sponsor needs to recognise that this is just one part of an individual's competence set – however, it is an explicit skill-set for an individual to have when realising change for clients, organisations, shareholders or the public.

**While the responsibilities are highly context dependent, the key attributes of a good sponsor are:**

1. Leadership – including promoting credibility, confidence and authenticity.
2. The ability to operate in an ambiguous and/or uncertain environment.
3. An appreciation of both project delivery and the dynamic nature of business-as-usual.

**Other key functions for the sponsor to undertake include:**

1. Providing assurance to the board (or equivalent) that their investment continues to be sound.
2. Championing the project with key stakeholders.
3. Owning the business case.
4. Ensuring that appropriate governance exists.
5. Ensuring strategic alignment.
6. Focusing on benefits.
7. Driving key decision making.

The sponsor's main effort will be during the project's initiation and transition to business-as-usual; this is where the greatest risk exists and, usually, where the project delivery team's involvement is at its lowest.

All recognised the need for the sponsor to sit between the delivery team and the intended beneficiary, without being tied too closely to either. Therefore the 'natural' appointment to act as sponsor may not always be the right one. With this common context, the Sponsors' Summit recognised that no single model works across all organisations or project types, but explored three possible sponsor models that can be adapted to meet most business needs.

# SPONSOR ATTRIBUTES AND FUNCTIONS

# THREE SPONSOR MODELS

## Choosing the right model

Deciding which model is appropriate depends on:

1. Project context
2. Culture of the organisation
3. The drivers for change
4. Intended benefits
5. Personality, capacity and capability of the individual candidates
6. Which of the core levels of sponsorship are being undertaken.

A material influence over the choice of model relates to the culture of the part-time sponsor and the issue of 'consciousness' – whether the sponsor has a conscious understanding of the role, its responsibilities and their ability to negotiate and exploit the delegated authority and accountabilities. Frequently, a lack of awareness creates weakness between the sponsor and those further up the chain of command leading to divergence between project team delivery and stakeholder expectations.

Irrespective of the chosen model, the sponsor must have the capacity to undertake, and commit to, accountabilities associated with the role. They must dedicate time to build relationships between the project and programme teams and the impacted areas of the business.

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**C**omplex projects frequently involve a network of powerful, interested stakeholders whose buy-in the sponsor needs to acquire and maintain. Failure can have a catastrophic effect on the project if the ambitions of senior leaders and the ability to deliver become misaligned. It is critical, therefore, that the sponsor is able to influence those surrounding the project.

In many organisations, this is achieved through the sponsor's ability to influence via informal connections using 'charm, wit and sophistication'. These connections are often specific to the sponsor. As the role is rarely full-time or a core responsibility, it is only as effective as the sponsor's connections and the time they give to nurture their network.

To be an effective influencer, the sponsor must be able to deal with different styles, accept ambiguity and manage issues of stress and burn-out. They have a key role in speaking 'truth to power', with a willingness to resist, where justified, the whims of senior management. This culture needs to permeate throughout the project.

## **INFLUENCING SPONSOR**

# DEDICATED SPONSOR

Larger infrastructure projects, where temporary organisations exist for the duration of the project, have seen the growth of dedicated sponsors. In this model, sponsorship is a professional discipline and the enabler of successful projects. The sponsor acts as a 'guiding mind', a symbol of the project and a lynchpin across numerous satellite groups.

The role is one that requires adaptability, agility and flexibility. At different stages, the sponsor will take different roles but, as neither the delivery team nor the ultimate decision maker, they will rarely take the credit for project. The dedicated sponsor must be able to communicate an enthusiasm for the project and its intended benefits. It also requires the sponsor to be dispassionate – knowing that cancelling a project they are championing must, sometimes, be a decision they are able to make.

The fluid and dynamic nature of the dedicated sponsor is built around relationships with the project manager and programme director. There will be flexibility in those relationships but understanding them is key. The dedicated sponsor is not for all projects: in large infrastructure and public sector transformational projects, they can work well because of their scale and because this gives a focus to delivering intended benefits. Sponsorship is a challenging and rewarding role requiring a diversity of people and skills. With dedicated sponsorship as a role, there is an opportunity to raise its profile as a career option for people seeking varied leadership roles.

**“WITH DEDICATED SPONSORSHIP AS A ROLE, THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO RAISE ITS PROFILE”**





In transformation projects, where the focus is on developing organisational capability, generating revenues or realising efficiencies, a 'representative sponsor', whose day job is delivering business as usual, is common.

Organisations are dynamic, they are constantly responding to external challenges and internal demands. As such, projects contribute to an evolving journey which both influences and is influenced by the organisation's culture. The representative sponsor leads organisations through the uncertainty that transformation projects create and leads their team to a better way of working. As organisations move away from large scale programmes and towards more agile approaches focusing on fast deployments and early realisation of benefits, the sponsor role in these contexts is increasingly important and the representative sponsor model becomes ever more appropriate.

### **Barriers to good sponsorship**

A significant risk associated with the representative sponsor model is that the sponsor displays the additional 'unhelpful' characteristics associated with:

1. Butterfly sponsor – whose interest in the project waxes and wanes.
2. Reluctant sponsor – who feels unable to turn the responsibility down or who is not fully bought into the project's intended benefits.
3. Incompetent sponsor – who simply doesn't understand the role.

The best representative sponsor frequently comes from where the project will impact most as this drives a sense of ownership. They play an essential role in inspiring both the project team and the end users within the business. They encourage simplicity in the project which delivers benefits, particularly in agile environments. The shift in mindset associated with a transformation project frequently requires the sponsor to embrace a clear need for change, often driven by regulation or significant business challenges.

Qualities such as having a detailed understanding of the project's technical aspects and, particularly in transformational projects, a keen understanding of the business' future state, challenges the idea that the sponsor must be senior in the organisation. C-suite leaders are rarely representative of the business's future state at the necessary detailed level. This model requires the organisation to decide what the sponsor is intended to represent – the hierarchy of the organisation or its future.

# REPRESENTATIVE SPONSOR

# SUPPORTING ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITY

In many organisations the sponsor is viewed to be the driving force behind the project. It is a proactive role, maintaining and developing relationships, focusing on delivering benefits and managing any threats to those benefits. While many organisations accept the role of sponsor as viable and important, it is frequently ineffective where the link between the project and the wider organisational strategy is weak and the sponsor is unable to influence either. This often results from weaknesses in project governance which reduces the leverage the sponsor has over key aspects of the organisation and allows the more mature business-as-usual functions to win out in the competition for resources. As well as a robust governance process, greater emphasis on managing projects as a portfolio allows the agents of change to speak with both business-as-usual and the board in a unified and credible way.

It is therefore essential to start at the top. An effective sponsor function requires delegation of authority and accountability that will cut across lines of authority. Without leadership at board level and an organisational culture that supports this, the organisation and governance needed to enable sponsorship will be ineffective and the incentive for the sponsor, to take on and embrace the sponsorship role, will be reduced. In almost all circumstances, and particularly where part-time sponsor models are adopted, sufficient stable professional support to the sponsor must be provided – with the portfolio office a common home for this expertise.

**T**he Sponsors' Summit has taken a key step in developing a shared understanding of sponsorship and this report highlights and shares with the wider community the key knowledge developed from summit contributors. But this is on the beginning of the journey to improve project sponsorship for the benefit of society. Contributions to its development would be most welcome. Please contact [knowledge@apm.org.uk](mailto:knowledge@apm.org.uk)

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**NEXT STEPS**



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