

# A project sponsor's impact on practice-based learning within projects



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## KEYWORDS

- Project sponsor
- Project team learning
- Situated learning

## Article highlight:

Achieving a deeper understanding of project sponsor (PS) behaviour requires studies on the interaction of the PS with singular project phenomenon rather than pursue a multi-focused, broad brushed or shallow analysis. Through exploring the interface and the interactions between them, one can better understand the reciprocating impacts experienced and take action to achieve an accumulated benefit in a project.

## What does the paper cover?

This paper seeks to advance a deeper understanding of a project sponsor's impact on practice-based learning activity within a project, representing a first-case examination of the interface between a sponsor and practice-based learning phenomenon within projects.

The paper first explains the theoretical framework informing the study, before outlining the methodological approach engaged and detailing the case study examined. The findings argue for the project sponsor role to be acknowledged as dynamic and interactive, and a dramatic influence on project practice-based learning.

## Methodology:

The outcomes of this study come from a qualitative and longitudinal participative action research case study – a heavy industrial operation that processes coal into coke for use in the local blast furnace or for export. Over a period of 18 months, rich empirical data concerning the project participants and the sponsor and their behaviours in and around the project team was collected. This data was then triangulated to identify and confirm a set of emergent general themes.

## Research findings:

PS behaviour was a profound and multi-layered influence on the practice-based learning processes and activities of the project team and its members. This influence can be dissected and articulated as six impacts, which are:

### 1. The number and quality of verbal exchanges and reflections

The project team participants were still behaving as 'adaptors' rather than 'innovators' for their learning activities – despite the PS wanting them to more readily move into that innovator role.

### 2. The active/passive/nil engagement of members

The PS behaviours and actions spurred mixed outputs in relation to participants' levels of engagement to learn in the team.

### 3. A confusion about processes and roles

Decisions and actions by the PS created uncertainty and confusion for the team about what to do, how to do it and by when.

### 4. Restrained learning actions

Project team members often demonstrated that they felt powerless in their leadership of the case study project.

### 5. Provision of stimulus, structures and opportunities to learn

The PS demonstrated a high propensity to provide the stimulant conditions for the team to learn.

### 6. Quality and quantity of project boundary information flow

The PS was instrumental in being a source and filter of project context information and process guidance, as well as encouraging the team members into networking beyond the immediate team.

## Conclusions:

There are three clear conclusions to the study:

1. The PS role can be clearly dynamic and influential throughout a project life cycle and a sponsor's project interactions are not necessarily just based on rational and 'distanced to the project detail' considerations.

2. The PS role can dramatically impact situated learning activity in a project team, so the PS needs to be constantly reflective about and actively adaptable with their behavioural actions to positively foster situated learning.

3. Through attempting to effectively and systematically foster situated learning development, the PS implicitly acts as an agent for organisational learning development.

## Significance of the research:

Project management research and practice have become increasingly dynamic and diversely focused, which reflects the continuing development and maturation of the project management field. Accordingly, one aspect of project management research that's gained significant impetus involves research associated with social and contextual phenomena affecting projects, project team members and project organisations.

One aspect of project management that had been more generally perceived as 'peripheral' to the main game was the functioning or role of the PS. Consequently, the PS function needs to be more deeply understood, and through attaining such knowledge PSs may become more informatively and more appropriately engaged with projects.

## Comments from the author:

Further research on how the PS interacts and intersects with social phenomena within projects in multiple project contexts is still encouraged since, as demonstrated in this paper, the PS can intimately influence project learning activity and thereby, rightly or wrongly, project outcomes. In attaining such knowledge, both project sponsors and project participants may better understand and manage the dynamics of their interactions and promote productive project learning for the benefit of the project.

## Complete article

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## Glossary:

### Project sponsor

The project sponsor is accountable for ensuring that the project is governed effectively and delivers the objectives that meet identified needs.

### Project team learning

Project team learning is the collaborative effort to achieve the common goal of completing a project, through dialogue, discussion and practice within a group.

### Situated learning

Situated learning evolves through the learning processes of observation, dialogue, storytelling and conversations between people as they interact within a project practice. This can be referred to as learning on the job.

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