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Value Beyond the Iron Triangle: Reframing Project Success Through the Role of the Executive Sponsor

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Because when projects succeed, society benefits

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Executive summary

Project overview

Projects are the primary mechanism through which organisations realise strategy. Yet persistent evidence shows that delivery success does not consistently translate into realised value. Recent global benchmarking indicates that less than half of projects are rated as fully successful under value-based measures (PMI, 2024). This raises a practical leadership question: Who keeps strategic intent alive once a project moves from approval into delivery?

Despite widespread recognition that project sponsors are critical to success, systematic evidence identifying which sponsor behaviours matter most, and under what conditions, has remained limited. This study addresses that gap and investigates the role of the project sponsor in bridging strategic leadership and project execution. Drawing on survey responses from 408 experienced sponsors and senior project professionals across sectors, the research identifies which sponsor competencies and behaviours are most strongly associated with project success, and how contextual conditions shape sponsor effectiveness.

The study integrates stakeholder theory, governance theory and agency theory to explain how sponsors influence value creation beyond the traditional iron triangle of time, cost and scope.

Key findings

Strategic leadership functions that drive project success

Project success is more closely associated with value realisation rather than with delivery performance alone

The analysis indicates that overall project success ratings are more strongly associated with realised benefits and the project's longer-term strategic contribution than with adherence to time, cost and scope metrics alone (PMI, 2024). While delivery performance remains necessary, it is not sufficient by itself. Sponsors who actively steward benefits realisation and long-term value creation are significantly more likely to be associated with projects rated as successful. This finding reinforces the shift from iron-triangle metrics to broader value-based success frameworks. It positions the sponsor not as a delivery monitor, but as the executive custodian of strategic intent and organisational value.

Executive championing and strategic articulation are central sponsor functions

Sponsors who consistently articulate the strategic rationale for a project and visibly champion it in executive forums demonstrate stronger associations with both execution and value outcomes. Championing enhances organisational legitimacy and helps protect executive alignment during periods of uncertainty. This behaviour operationalises stakeholder and governance theory: sponsors translate abstract strategy into a coherent narrative and maintain alignment among senior stakeholders as conditions change.

Stakeholder orchestration is a decisive mechanism for bridging strategy and execution

Active, direct stakeholder engagement by sponsors significantly correlates with higher perceived project success. Sponsors who intervene early to resolve cross-functional tensions and sustain executive consensus reduce the risk of strategic drift and escalation. This confirms that sponsor influence is both relational and structural. The sponsor acts as a coalition-builder and boundary-spanner, particularly in politically complex or multi-stakeholder environments.

Behavioural enactment and governance enablement

Enacted sponsor behaviours predict outcomes more strongly than self-rated competencies

Sponsors report uniformly high competence levels in themselves; however, behavioural frequency and visible enactment show materially stronger associations with project success. This indicates that sponsor effectiveness depends less on the sponsors' positional authority or perceived capability and more on their consistent behavioural engagement. This finding highlights a critical professionalisation gap: defining sponsor competencies is insufficient unless governance systems enable and reinforce the enactment of behaviour.

Governance maturity amplifies sponsor effectiveness

Sponsor behaviours have significantly stronger effects on project success where governance systems clarify decision-making authority, provide reliable escalation routes and assign accountability for benefits. In weaker governance environments, sponsor effectiveness depends heavily on personal initiative and informal influence. This confirms that sponsorship is both behavioural and systemic. Governance frameworks act as force multipliers, strengthening the impact of strategic leadership behaviours.

Team confidence in support from the sponsor enhances execution stability

Projects where teams report strong confidence in the sponsor's support achieve higher overall success ratings. Sponsor accessibility and visible backing of project managers, particularly during uncertainty, contribute to greater team resilience and discretionary effort. This illustrates the dual internal–external role of sponsorship: sponsors operate upwards within executive governance structures, and downwards as visible protectors and enablers of delivery teams.

Context, complexity and long-term orientation

Sponsor impact intensifies under conditions of complexity

In projects characterised by high interdependence between stakeholders, regulatory constraints or organisational transformation, adaptive sponsor behaviours become significantly more important. Sponsors who adjust their leadership style and decision cadence, including the intensity of escalation where needed in response to complexity, demonstrate stronger value outcomes. This finding supports complexity theory: sponsor effectiveness is contingent on dynamic environmental conditions rather than static role prescriptions.

Sustainability-oriented sponsorship strengthens perceived long-term value

Projects in which sponsors explicitly integrate sustainability and long-term impact considerations into governance decisions report higher benefits realisation and stronger perceptions of strategic alignment. The integration of sustainability correlates with enhanced legitimacy and enduring value. This suggests that sustainability is not peripheral to success but is central to contemporary value frameworks. Sponsors who broaden evaluative criteria beyond immediate delivery metrics contribute to strategic coherence and organisational legitimacy.

Structural barriers constrain sponsor effectiveness across sectors

Respondents consistently identify role ambiguity, limited formal authority, competing operational priorities and unclear benefits ownership as key inhibitors of effective sponsorship.

These constraints persist across sectors and organisational forms. This indicates that improving sponsor effectiveness requires structural reform, not solely the development of individuals' capabilities. Without clarity of mandate and authority, even highly competent sponsors face diminished influence.

Recommendations

Formalise sponsor authority and strategic accountability

- Establish clear decision rights, escalation powers and benefits ownership in governance charters and stage-gate processes.
- Align sponsor performance evaluation with strategic value and benefits realisation, not delivery metrics alone.

Embed value and sustainability metrics in sponsor accountability

- Make realised benefits and long-term strategic value formal components of sponsor scorecards and governance reviews.
- Integrate sustainability and long-term organisational impact into sponsor reporting requirements and stage-gate approvals, including relevant environmental and social considerations.

Shift from competency frameworks to observable behavioural standards

- Define and embed observable sponsor behaviours into governance expectations, including executive championing, proactive engagement with key stakeholders and timely intervention when conditions change.
- Introduce 360° feedback or sponsor effectiveness reviews to ensure behavioural enactment aligns with role intent.

Strengthen governance infrastructure to enable active sponsorship

- Institutionalise benefits tracking and post-delivery reviews under oversight from sponsors.
- Ensure governance structures reinforce sponsor intervention rather than constrain timely decision-making.

Develop advanced sponsor capability pathways

- Provide structured development programmes that strengthen sponsors' strategic leadership, particularly in stakeholder negotiation and adaptive decision-making in complex environments.
- Establish peer learning forums or executive sponsor communities of practice.

Differentiate sponsorship by context and complexity

- Tailor what is expected of sponsors, and the intensity of governance support, to project complexity and the sectoral or regulatory context. Provide enhanced structural support in politically or regulatorily complex environments.

Introduction

Background and significance

Projects are the primary mechanism through which organisations implement strategy and create long-term value through transformation. Yet despite sustained advances in methodologies, tools and standards, many organisations continue to struggle with converting strategic intent into realised and sustained outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates this disconnect and projects can achieve technical objectives while failing to generate enduring organisational or societal impact (Martinsuo, 2020).

At the same time, the environment in which projects operate has become significantly more complex. Complexity is no longer defined primarily by scale or technical sophistication, but by dynamic interdependencies, institutional plurality, stakeholder diversity and socio-political interaction (Scott and Levitt, 2017). Projects frequently cut across organisational boundaries and operate within shifting accountability and stakeholder conditions.

In such environments, the central challenge is maintaining strategic coherence under uncertainty. Sustainability further intensifies this challenge. Increasingly, projects are expected not only to deliver economic outcomes but also to contribute to environmental responsibility and social legitimacy, as well as long-term organisational resilience. Governance research indicates that value creation is multi-dimensional, extending beyond financial performance to include stakeholder trust and institutional legitimacy (Müller et al., 2014; Yin and Jamali, 2021). Consequently, project success should be understood as the sustained delivery of value across economic, social and environmental dimensions. These conditions expose a critical governance question: How is strategic intent interpreted and protected as projects move from board-level ambition to operational execution?

Tools and methodologies can structure work, but strategic coherence depends on sponsors who can manage ambiguity and keep long-term value central when interests compete. Within this strategy–execution interface, the executive sponsor occupies a uniquely influential position. The sponsor links executive priorities to delivery teams, mobilises authority and resources, resolves cross-boundary tensions, and is accountable for benefits and strategic alignment (Crawford et al., 2008; APM, 2018).

Empirical evidence associates sponsor engagement with higher perceived project success, particularly during initiation and early planning, when the strategic case and expected benefits are defined within the governance approach (Bryde, 2008; Breese et al., 2020). However, while sponsorship is widely recognised as important, prior research often treats it as a relatively uniform role. Studies catalogue sponsors' activities or distinguish between governance and support functions (Crawford et al., 2008) yet provide limited clarity on which competencies and behaviours matter most as project complexity increases and sustainability expectations expand. Governance scholarship further highlights that sponsors operate within institutional systems characterised by competing stakeholder claims and regulatory pressures, embedded in specific organisational cultures (Müller et al., 2014). These contextual factors fundamentally shape how sponsors exercise authority and influence.

Complexity and sustainability therefore place new demands on sponsorship, particularly on how sponsors make decisions and remain accountable for value beyond delivery. In complex environments, sponsors must exercise adaptive leadership by integrating technical considerations with organisational and socio-political realities. In sustainability-oriented contexts, sponsors must broaden evaluative criteria beyond short-term efficiency to encompass long-term environmental and societal value. Agency theory helps explain how sponsors reduce information gaps between executive decision-makers and project teams, and keep incentives aligned (Eisenhardt, 1989). Stakeholder theory adds that executives are rarely unified, while project teams rarely operate in isolation. Sponsorship therefore involves continuous negotiation across competing value systems.

Objectives of the research

Against this backdrop, a central question emerges for both scholars and practitioners: What sponsor functions and behaviours most strongly influence multi-dimensional project success, and how do organisational contexts moderate their impact?

We examine this through an integrated theoretical lens combining three complementary perspectives:

- **Stakeholder theory**, framing sponsors as mediators balancing competing interests (Freeman, 2010).
- **Governance theory**, situating sponsors within formal accountability and decision-rights systems (Crawford et al., 2008; Müller et al., 2014).
- **Agency theory**, explaining how sponsors align executive decision-makers with project teams under uncertainty (Eisenhardt, 1989).

This framework tests which sponsor behaviours predict success across execution performance and value-realisation outcomes, while identifying critical governance and contextual enablers. The analysis moves beyond generic role descriptions by specifying observable actions that organisations can embed in the design of sponsor roles and accountability arrangements.

Together, these theories provide a theoretically grounded and practically relevant framework for understanding how sponsorship can bridge the gap between strategic leadership and project success, particularly where complexity and sustainability reshape what 'success' means.

Scope and limitations

The empirical scope is global and cross-sectoral, focusing on individuals who have served as project sponsors or equivalent (e.g. senior responsible owners). The unit of analysis is the project as rated by its sponsor, with organisational context measured at the sponsor's home base. Success encompasses both execution dimensions, including time, cost and scope, and value dimensions, including benefits realised, strategic contribution and the persistence of outcomes. Cross-sectional survey data carry acknowledged limitations, such as self-report bias and common method variance, which can be mitigated through validated scales and multi-level modelling. Generalisability reflects the involvement of English-speaking research panel participants; measurement equivalence tests address potential cultural or sectoral effects.

Contribution of the study

The contribution of this research is threefold.

First, it provides empirical evidence identifying which sponsor behaviours are most strongly associated with multi-dimensional project success. By distinguishing between competencies and enacted behaviours, the study clarifies what sponsors need to do to influence outcomes.

Second, it integrates value, sustainability and complexity into a single sponsorship discussion. The findings demonstrate that sponsor effectiveness is linked not only to delivery performance but also to benefits realisation and long-term value, particularly under conditions of organisational and stakeholder complexity.

Third, the study offers practical guidance for organisations seeking to strengthen sponsor capability. The results highlight specific behavioural levers and governance enablers that can inform sponsor role design, development activity and accountability arrangements. In summary, this research addresses both what sponsors do and the conditions under which those actions matter most, providing evidence-based insights into how organisations can better align strategic intent with project execution.

Literature review

Conceptualising project sponsorship

Project sponsorship is widely recognised as a critical governance function that connects organisational strategy with project execution. Positioned at the intersection of executive leadership and delivery operations, the sponsor is accountable for the business case, resource mobilisation, strategic alignment and benefits realisation (Crawford et al., 2008; APM, 2018). Sponsorship, therefore, extends beyond symbolic endorsement; it is a structural and behavioural mechanism through which strategic intent translates into operational outcomes.

Empirical studies consistently associate strong sponsorship with improved project performance. Projects with visible and engaged sponsors demonstrate higher perceived success rates, particularly in strategic alignment and benefits delivery (Bryde, 2008; Breese et al., 2020). Conversely, weak or ambiguous sponsorship is frequently cited in post-project reviews as a contributor to governance failure, including scope drift and misalignment between intended and realised value (Borg and Scott-Young, 2020). Sponsorship therefore functions as both a governance safeguard and a strategic leadership lever.

Three complementary theoretical lenses clarify this influence:

- **Stakeholder theory** positions the sponsor as a boundary-spanning actor who negotiates competing interests and sustains project legitimacy (Freeman, 2010; Goyal, 2022; Santos and Fernandes, 2024). Projects operate in pluralistic environments where internal and external stakeholders hold divergent expectations. The sponsor mediates competing claims by aligning expectations with strategic objectives and sustaining coalition support over time.
- **Governance theory** situates sponsorship within formal accountability structures. Sponsors operate through defined decision rights, escalation mechanisms and oversight arrangements that support alignment with corporate objectives and risk appetite (Crawford et al., 2008; Müller et al., 2014). From this perspective, sponsor effectiveness depends on both personal capability and the clarity of the institutional mandate.
- **Agency theory** adds an economic lens, explaining how sponsors reduce information gaps between executive decision-makers and project teams and help keep incentives aligned (Eisenhardt, 1989; Mahaney and Lederer, 2003). In complex projects, where uncertainty and technical opacity are common, this monitoring and alignment role becomes especially important.

Together, these perspectives establish sponsorship as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing relational and structural functions, including control. However, while the importance of sponsorship is widely accepted, the literature offers less clarity on which specific behaviours are most influential across varying contextual conditions. Having established these theoretical foundations, we now examine how they translate into practical sponsorship models and functions.

Models and functions of sponsorship

The literature identifies core sponsor functions that span strategic and relational domains within governance. Sponsors are responsible for articulating and defending the business case, maintaining strategic coherence, overseeing risk and resource allocation, and ensuring benefits realisation beyond formal project closure (Bryde, 2008; Kloppenborg et al., 2006; Breese et al., 2020).

A recurring theme is the sponsor's mediating role between delivery and strategy. Sponsors must balance short-term execution pressures with long-term organisational value, preventing project teams from becoming isolated from broader strategic priorities (Breese et al., 2020; Bucero, 2024).

APM outlines three broad sponsorship models:

- **Influencing sponsor** – operating primarily through informal authority and relational capital in politically complex environments (APM, 2018; Turner, 2014).
- **Dedicated sponsor** – a formally appointed role with concentrated strategic oversight, typically in large infrastructure or transformation programmes (APM, 2018).
- **Representative sponsor** – combining sponsorship with operational duties, common in agile or business-as-usual contexts where role ambiguity may arise (Crawford et al., 2008; Lappi and Aaltonen, 2017).

While these models highlight contextual adaptation, contemporary projects demand more nuanced responses to complexity and expanding success criteria. We therefore examine how environmental conditions reshape sponsorship requirements.

Complexity as a structuring condition for sponsorship

Recent scholarship emphasises that project complexity fundamentally reshapes what is required of governance. Complexity arises not solely from scale but from dynamic interdependence, institutional plurality, stakeholder multiplicity and socio-political interaction (Scott and Levitt, 2017; Yin and Jamali, 2021). Under conditions of high complexity, sponsors need both adaptive leadership and procedural oversight. Interdependencies across regulatory, organisational and stakeholder boundaries create emergent risks that cannot be managed through static control mechanisms alone. In such contexts, sponsors must integrate competing perspectives and adjust governance intensity as ambiguity emerges. Complexity also increases the importance of escalation management and strategic sense-making. Sponsors must interpret shifting environmental signals and recalibrate project direction without undermining legitimacy or team morale. Governance theory suggests that formal authority becomes more salient under complexity; stakeholder theory suggests that relational legitimacy becomes equally important. Effective sponsorship in complex environments, therefore, requires both a structural mandate and political acumen.

Yet empirical research rarely disaggregates sponsor effectiveness by complexity level. This represents a significant gap, particularly because many contemporary projects, from digital transformation to infrastructure renewal, are inherently complex. Complexity represents one key contextual evolution; sustainability introduces equally profound shifts in expectations of success.

Sustainability and the expanding definition of project success

The conceptualisation of project success has evolved substantially over the past two decades. Traditional iron-triangle metrics of time, cost and scope are increasingly supplemented by broader value-based criteria that emphasise strategic impact and the durability of benefits for stakeholders (Serra and Kunc, 2015; Martinsuo, 2020). Sustainability further expands this paradigm (PMI, 2024). Projects are now expected to contribute to environmental and social outcomes while also strengthening long-term organisational resilience. This shift aligns with broader institutional pressures and global sustainability agendas (Yin and Jamali, 2021).

From a governance perspective, sustainability introduces new dimensions of accountability for sponsors. Decisions must balance short-term financial outcomes with long-term environmental and social consequences. Ethical judgement and transparency become central to sponsor legitimacy (Clegg and Ninan, 2023).

Research on behavioural competencies reinforces this shift. Emotional intelligence enables sponsors to manage conflict and sustain engagement in uncertain sustainability transitions (Cavaletti et al., 2021). Political skill facilitates coalition-building across stakeholder groups with divergent sustainability priorities (Ferris et al., 2007; García-Chas et al., 2018). These competencies extend traditional leadership models and align sponsorship with contemporary value-based expectations from governance.

However, while sustainability is increasingly referenced in project governance guidance, empirical investigation into how sustainability-oriented sponsor behaviours relate to project outcomes remains limited. This gap is particularly significant given the expanding societal expectations placed on project-based organisations.

Trends in contemporary practice both reflect and accelerate these theoretical developments.

Professionalisation and emerging practice trends

Project sponsorship practices are evolving alongside digital transformation and new delivery approaches. Digital dashboards and enterprise data systems, including real-time analytics, enhance sponsor visibility and decision-making capacity (Huemann and Turner, 2024). Remote and hybrid working arrangements require sponsors to develop virtual leadership and relational presence across distributed teams (Cavaletti et al., 2021).

Professionalisation initiatives, including structured competency frameworks and certification programmes (APM, 2018), aim to formalise expectations of sponsor capability. Nonetheless, empirical studies indicate persistent gaps in role clarity and authority definition, particularly across different contexts (Bucero, 2024; Malik et al., 2024). Many sponsors assume responsibility without structured preparation, particularly in representative or part-time models.

These developments reinforce the need for a clearer, empirically grounded understanding of the interaction between sponsor competencies, sponsor behaviours and the wider governance context, particularly under conditions of complexity and increasing sustainability expectations. These developments frame three critical research gaps that this study addresses.

Synthesis and research gap

The literature converges on three conclusions:

- Sponsorship is central to aligning projects with strategy.
- Sponsor behaviours influence governance by shaping stakeholder alignment and benefits realisation.
- Context, including complexity and sustainability pressures, shapes how sponsorship must be enacted.

However, important gaps remain. Prior research often treats sponsorship as a broad construct without systematically distinguishing competencies from behaviours. Empirical differentiation across complexity levels is limited. Sustainability, while conceptually prominent, is under-examined as a behavioural and governance dimension of sponsor effectiveness. This study addresses these gaps by examining which sponsor competencies and behaviours are most strongly associated with multi-dimensional project success. It also considers how organisational context, including project complexity and the extent to which sustainability considerations are built into governance, moderates these relationships.

Research design and methodology

Research approach

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using a structured online survey administered through a global research panel. The objective was to test an integrated model in which sponsor competencies and enacted behaviours are examined in relation to multi-dimensional project success, while accounting for project complexity and the governance context, including sustainability considerations.

Survey design and construct development

The survey instrument was grounded in established sponsorship and governance literature. Sponsor competencies and behavioural measures were adapted from prior empirical research on sponsorship activities and executive support (Bryde, 2008; Kloppenborg et al., 2006). Governance and organisational context items were informed by Crawford et al.'s (2008) work on sponsorship as governance and support. Project success was operationalised using a multi-dimensional framework consistent with contemporary success literature (Serra and Kunc, 2015; Breese et al., 2020). Measures captured:

- **Execution success** (performance in terms of time, cost, scope and quality).
- **Value success** (benefits realisation, strategic contribution, stakeholder satisfaction and persistence of outcomes).

This approach reflects the field's shift beyond the iron triangle towards broader value-based definitions of success, while retaining comparability with traditional performance indicators.

In addition, the instrument included measures of:

- **Project complexity**, reflecting interdependence, uncertainty and stakeholder multiplicity.
- **Sustainability integration**, capturing the extent to which sponsors integrated sustainability and long-term impact considerations into their decision-making and governance activities.

The survey was pre-tested for clarity and relevance with experienced practitioners prior to distribution.

Sampling and data collection

Data were collected from 408 experienced project sponsors drawn from multiple sectors and geographic regions. The use of a global research panel ensured variation across industry and organisational contexts, enabling analysis across diverse project settings. The study is cross-sectional; therefore, the findings identify statistically significant associations rather than causal effects.

Analytical strategy

Data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to profile respondent characteristics, sponsorship models, governance context and outcome distributions. Second, a correlation analysis examined relationships among sponsor competencies, sponsor behaviours, organisational context, complexity, sustainability integration and project success outcomes. Third, regression modelling assessed the relative contribution of sponsor behaviours and contextual variables in predicting overall success and value-based outcomes. Moderation effects were explored to examine whether governance context and complexity strengthened or weakened behavioural relationships.

This analytical strategy enables clear identification of patterns in the data while remaining accessible to practitioner audiences.

Positioning of the approach

The research approach is theory-informed but empirically driven. Stakeholder, governance and agency theories informed the selection of constructs and model framing; however, the study focuses on testing observable sponsor behaviours related to project outcomes within their organisational context. By combining established theoretical constructs with measurable behavioural indicators and value-oriented success criteria, the study provides an evidence-based foundation for understanding how sponsorship operates in complex and sustainability-oriented environments.

Findings and analysis

Framing the findings

Our empirical analysis (N=408) confirms that project success is shaped by sponsor behaviour and the governance context in which it is enacted. Key sponsor functions show strong correlations with both execution performance and realised benefits, particularly where sponsors champion strategic objectives, align stakeholders and provide visible support to the project team. Robust governance (clear decision rights and benefits tracking) amplifies these effects, and context (industry sector, complexity) significantly moderates them. In practice, this means that empowering sponsors with clear mandates and training them in value-oriented leadership leads to greater project success.

This study set out to answer two practical questions:

- What are the critical functions of a project sponsor in influencing project success?
- How can the sponsor role be optimised to align strategic goals with project execution?

The data from 408 experienced sponsors and senior project professionals suggest that sponsor impact depends less on holding the title and more on acting visibly and with authority at critical moments (see Figure 1). The findings reveal that sponsorship is a strategic leadership function, decisive under complexity and uncertainty, not merely an administrative oversight mechanism.

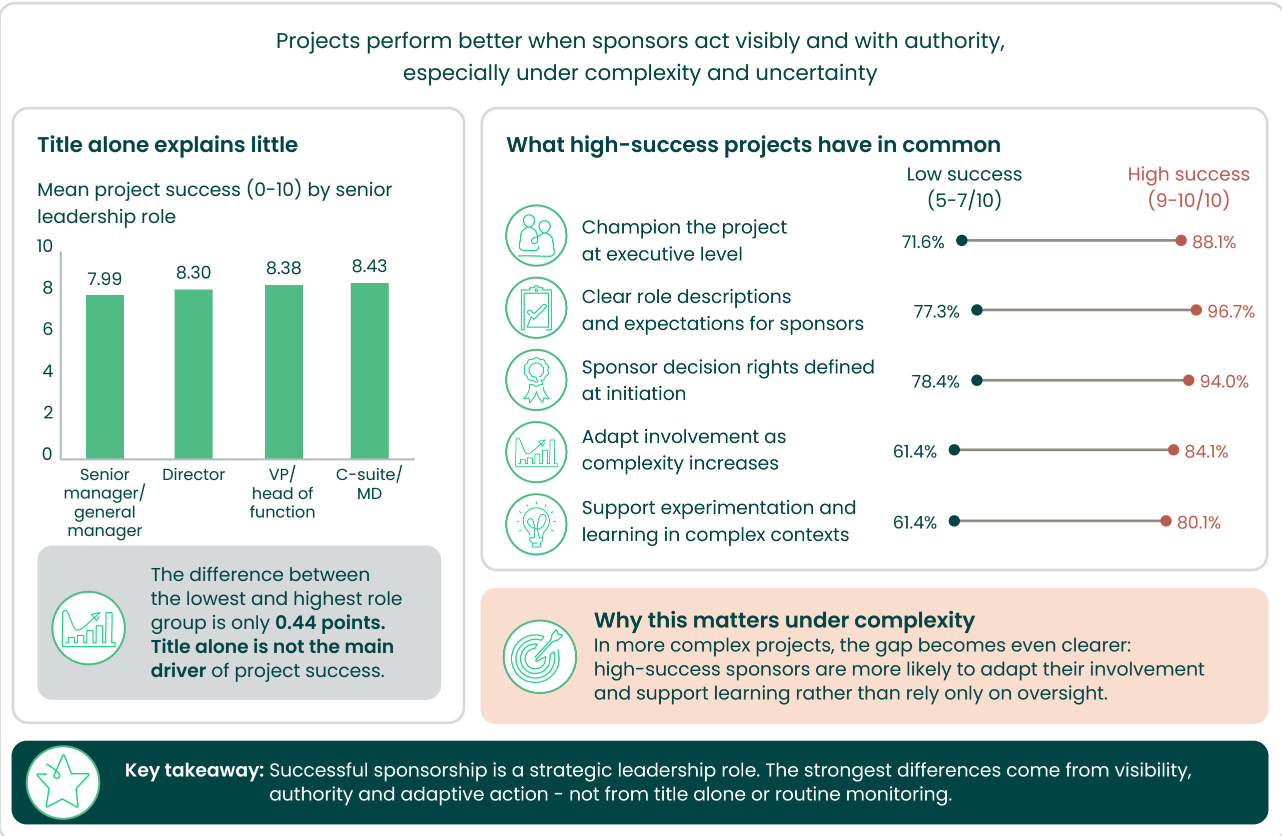

Figure 1: Sponsorship is activated, not assigned.
Source: Sponsor impact survey (N=408)

Reframing success: Why sponsorship must be value-focused

A foundational finding of this study is that project success is perceived primarily in terms of realised value rather than delivery compliance alone. While schedule and budget remain relevant, overall success ratings were more closely associated with benefits realisation and strategic contribution, particularly where stakeholders perceived the outcomes as valuable. Figure 2 illustrates the core analytical framework from our research (N=408). The model demonstrates how specific sponsor behaviours drive success outcomes most effectively when amplified by enabling contextual conditions.

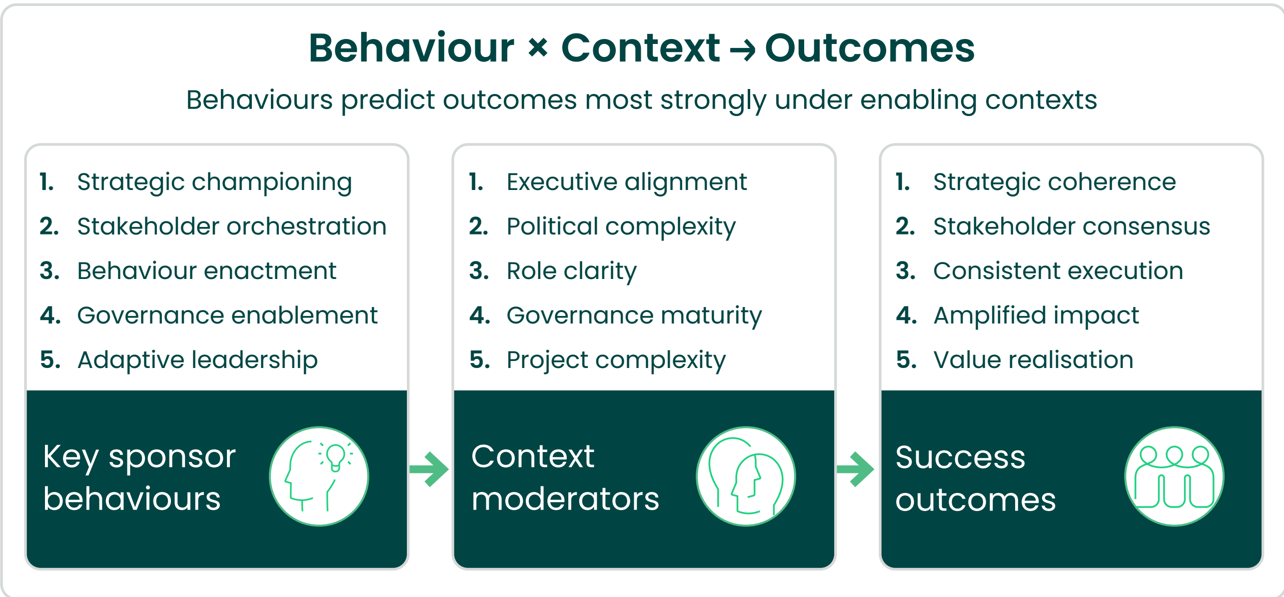

Figure 2: Sponsor effectiveness model
Source: Analytical framework from Sponsor impact survey (N=408)

This framework reveals three critical insights before examining detailed findings:

- **Behavioural primacy**: Enacted sponsor actions predict outcomes more strongly than positional authority or self-assessed competencies.
- **Contextual amplification**: Governance maturity and environmental conditions act as force multipliers for behavioural impact.
- **Value orientation**: Success pathways converge on sustained strategic outcomes rather than isolated delivery metrics.

With this model established, we now examine the specific behavioural mechanisms and contextual factors driving sponsor effectiveness.

This has immediate implications for sponsorship. If success is defined in value terms, the sponsor's accountability must extend beyond execution oversight to strategic stewardship: the sponsor becomes responsible for ensuring that intended benefits remain central throughout the project life cycle, not merely at the point of formal closure. Where organisations continue to evaluate sponsors primarily on delivery metrics, they risk misreading sponsor effectiveness by rewarding compliance over value creation. This finding informs the later recommendation to embed value and sustainability metrics within sponsor accountability frameworks. Without this shift, the behavioural drivers identified in this study risk being diluted by narrow delivery measures, however well-intentioned the governance design. The data therefore show that when success is defined in terms of value, sponsorship must safeguard that value, and accountability structures must be aligned accordingly (see Figure 3).

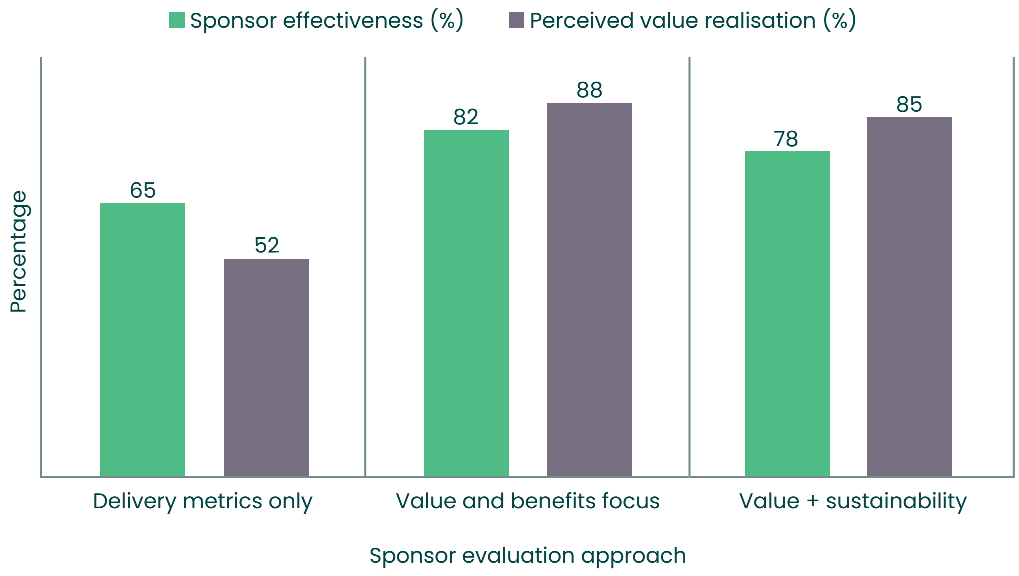

Figure 3: Sponsor accountability: Delivery vs value focus

Behavioural enactment: Sponsorship in action

One of the clearest conclusions from the analysis is that enacted sponsor behaviours distinguish higher-performing projects more strongly than competency self-assessments or positional authority. Sponsors who were visibly engaged, intervened decisively and maintained active oversight throughout execution were associated with stronger success outcomes. This finding shifts the emphasis from who the sponsor is to what the sponsor does. In many organisations, sponsorship is assigned based on seniority or availability. However, the evidence suggests that behavioural engagement, strategic championing, stakeholder alignment and governance intervention are what translate authority into impact (see Figure 4). This insight provides the empirical foundation for moving from abstract competency frameworks towards explicit behavioural standards. If behaviours matter, organisations must define them clearly and reinforce them through governance practices.

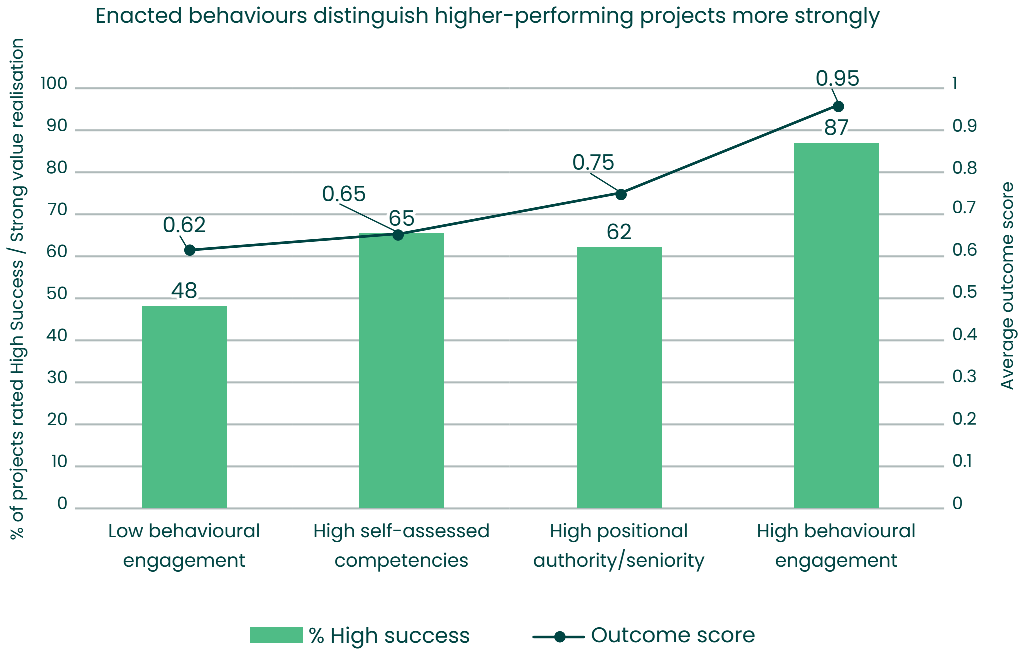

Figure 4: Sponsor impact – enacted behaviours vs competencies and positional authority on project success

Strategic championing: Preserving strategic intent

Strategic championing emerged as one of the most influential sponsor functions. Sponsors who consistently articulated the project's strategic rationale in executive settings reported stronger value outcomes and more sustained organisational commitment. Championing operates as a protective mechanism. In dynamic organisations, strategic priorities and resource availability shift as competing initiatives emerge, placing significant pressure on project sponsors to maintain portfolio coherence. Without continuous reinforcement of purpose, projects are vulnerable to incremental erosion. This finding informs the recommendation to formalise sponsor authority and strategic accountability (see Figure 5). Championing is effective only when sponsors possess recognised authority in governance forums. Where authority is ambiguous, advocacy lacks weight. Thus, the evidence supports a structural intervention. Strategic championing must be embedded in governance architecture, not left to informal influence alone.

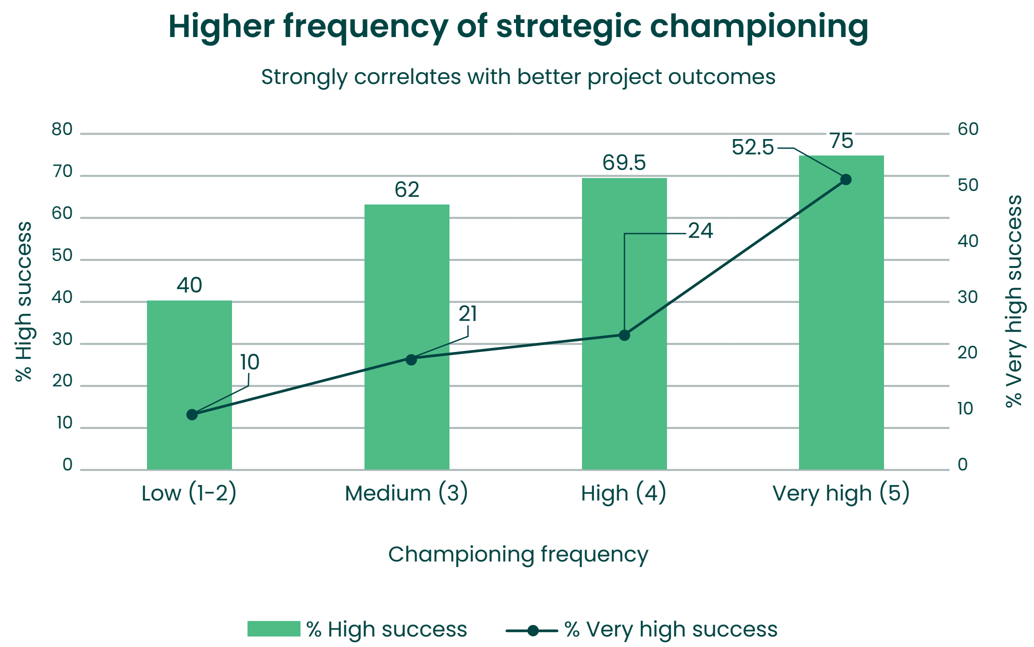

Figure 5: Strategic championing frequency and project success outcomes

Stakeholder alignment: The boundary-spanning function

The findings demonstrate that sponsors who actively orchestrated stakeholder relationships achieved stronger stakeholder satisfaction and overall success (see Figure 6). Projects exist within networks of internal and external interests. The sponsor's ability to mediate these interests is central to maintaining legitimacy and alignment. Importantly, this behaviour was not limited to formal review meetings. Effective sponsors used proactive dialogue to resolve tensions early and keep stakeholders aligned across organisational boundaries. This insight reinforces the need for formal authority structures that empower sponsors to intervene decisively, while also highlighting the importance of developing sponsors' relational and political capabilities. The recommendations therefore build on this finding by advocating structured sponsor development pathways and explicit expectations for stakeholder engagement.

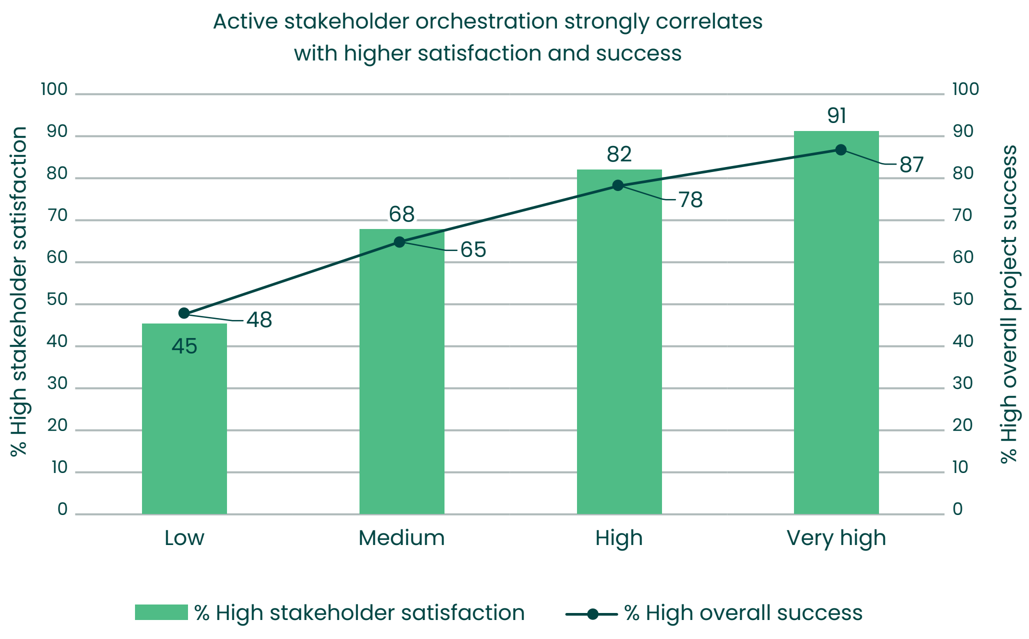

Figure 6: Stakeholder engagement frequency and project outcomes

Governance maturity: Amplifying sponsor impact

The study found that governance maturity significantly strengthens the relationship between sponsor behaviour and project success. Clear decision rights, defined escalation pathways and formal benefits tracking are governance instruments that shape the scale and consequence of sponsor activity. In governance-mature environments, sponsor interventions carry clarity and authority; in ambiguous environments, even well-intentioned behaviours become fragmented and their impact inconsistent. If organisations invest in sponsor capability without simultaneously strengthening the structural conditions in which that capability is exercised, this finding suggests the returns will be materially limited. Closing that gap requires stronger governance infrastructure, including benefits tracking, clearer decision rights and mechanisms that enable timely intervention. The evidence is therefore cumulative in its logic: behavioural engagement drives success, but governance structures determine the scale of that impact. Strengthening governance creates the structural conditions for strategic leadership by turning oversight into a driver of performance.

Complexity as a multiplier of sponsor influence

Project complexity was shown to magnify the importance of sponsorship. Sponsor behaviours had a stronger effect in projects with high interdependence, uncertainty and competing stakeholder interests. This indicates that sponsorship is particularly critical in transformation and infrastructure programmes, including digital initiatives, where ambiguity and competing interests are inherent. This finding supports the case for differentiating sponsors' expectations by project complexity and sectoral context. Uniform sponsorship models are insufficient. Complex environments require sponsors who are empowered to adapt their level of engagement. By explicitly linking behavioural intensity to complexity level, the recommendation reflects the contingency logic revealed in the data.

Sustainability integration and long-term accountability

Sponsors who integrated sustainability considerations into governance decisions were associated with greater persistence of benefits and greater overall perceptions of success. This suggests that value stewardship in contemporary organisations extends beyond immediate financial metrics to encompass long-term organisational and societal impact. This finding supports the case for embedding sustainability and long-term value metrics into sponsor accountability structures. Without such integration, sponsors may prioritise short-term efficiency over enduring impact. The cumulative logic is clear. If sustainability integration strengthens value outcomes, and if value defines success, then sponsor accountability frameworks must explicitly include sustainability dimensions.

Life cycle engagement and sustained oversight

The data indicate that sponsor involvement often peaks at initiation and declines during execution (see Figure 7). Projects with sustained sponsor engagement beyond approval demonstrated stronger benefits realisation. Sponsors need to be equipped and expected to remain engaged throughout the life cycle. Development programmes and performance metrics should reinforce sustained involvement rather than episodic participation.

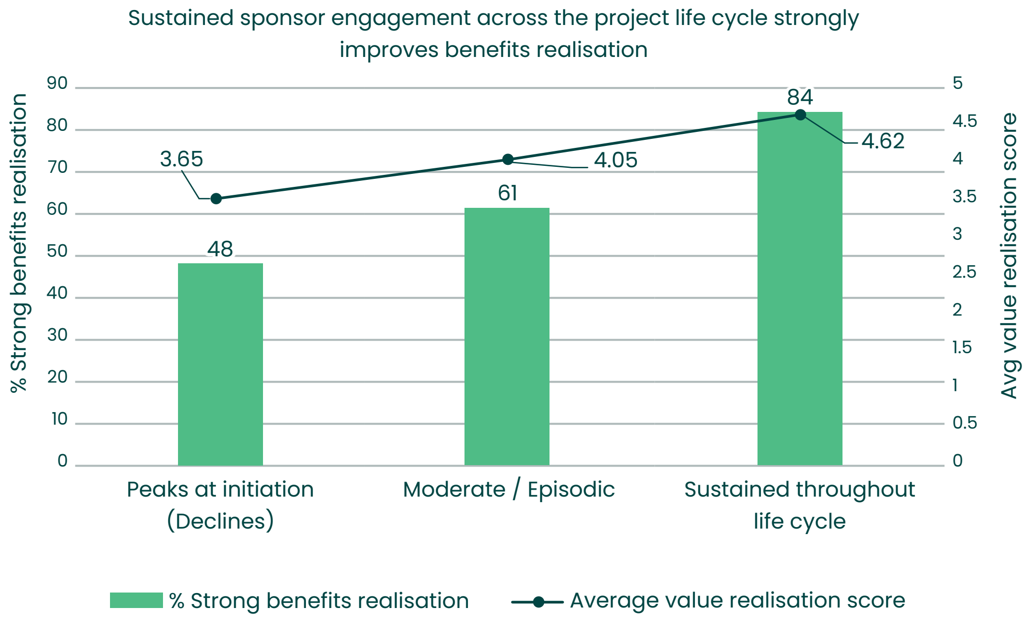

Figure 7: Sponsor engagement patterns and benefits realisation

Sectoral context and institutional constraints

Sectoral variation suggests that public and infrastructure contexts face greater institutional constraints, yet the behavioural drivers of success remain consistent (see Figure 8). This indicates that while execution environments differ, the core functions of sponsorship are stable. Sponsors must adjust tactics to sectoral constraints, while strategic championing and stakeholder alignment remain essential across contexts.

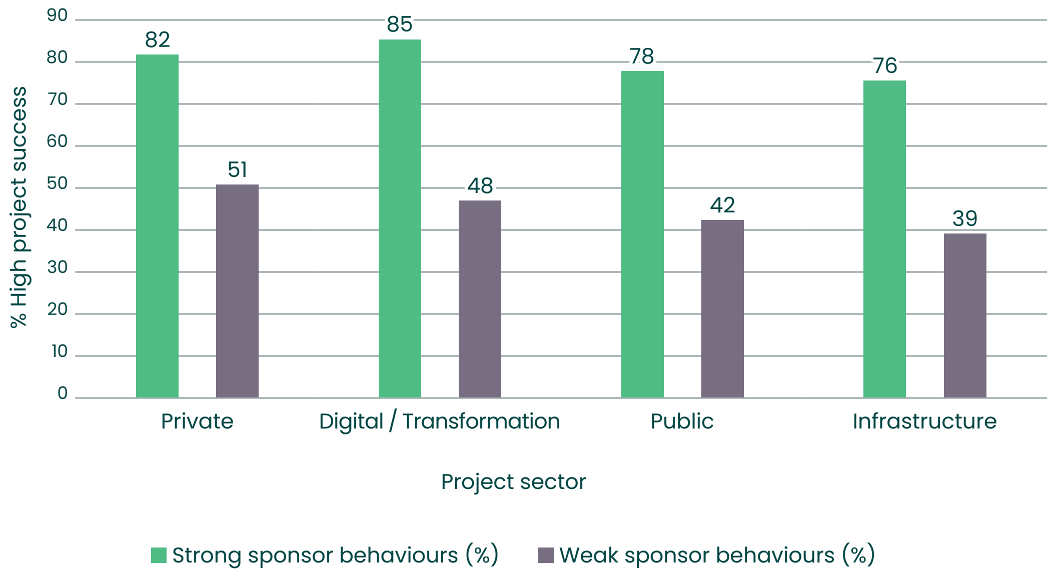

Figure 8: Sponsor behavioural drivers across sectors

Organisational barriers and the need for structural reform

Respondents consistently cited unclear authority, role ambiguity and competing operational priorities as the primary barriers to effective sponsorship, and the outcome data reflect this directly: projects with clearer sponsor mandates reported materially higher success rates. If organisations define sponsor behaviours without simultaneously clarifying the structural conditions under which those behaviours can be enacted, this finding suggests the investment will be incomplete at best and ineffective at worst. Addressing these barriers requires formal structural reform, so that governance charters and stage-gate processes give sponsors clear authority and reduce ambiguity around decision-making. This addresses two sides of the same problem: what sponsors are empowered to do and within what governance architecture they are expected to do it. Without that structural clarity, even the most capable and motivated sponsors face a ceiling on their influence.

Integrative interpretation: A cumulative case for reform

The evidence demonstrates that effective sponsors act as strategic interpreters who mediate stakeholder interests through governance. Their behavioural engagement directly influences project outcomes. Governance maturity and complexity moderate that influence. Sustainability integration enhances long-term value realisation.

This study confirms that sponsorship is the bridge between strategic leadership and project success. Project failure often begins in governance, where strategic alignment weakens, and accountability for value dissipates before technical shortcomings become visible. Sponsors who act with visible and timely intervention sustain that alignment. However, their effectiveness depends on the organisational systems in which they operate. If sponsorship is the mechanism that bridges strategy and execution, then strengthening sponsorship is one of the most powerful levers available to organisations seeking to improve project success.

Summary of findings

This research confirms that project sponsorship is the critical leadership mechanism through which strategic intent is converted into realised value. Well-managed delivery contributes to project success, but sustained strategic alignment determines whether that success translates into value. The sponsor is the custodian of that alignment.

Across a global sample of experienced sponsors, the evidence shows that effective sponsorship is behavioural and shaped by its structural context. Sponsors who consistently enact strategic leadership behaviours, particularly executive championing, stakeholder orchestration, visible governance engagement and adaptive intervention under complexity, are associated with materially stronger project success outcomes. Success, in turn, is defined less by time and cost performance alone than by the extent to which projects realise benefits and create sustained strategic value (see Figure 9).

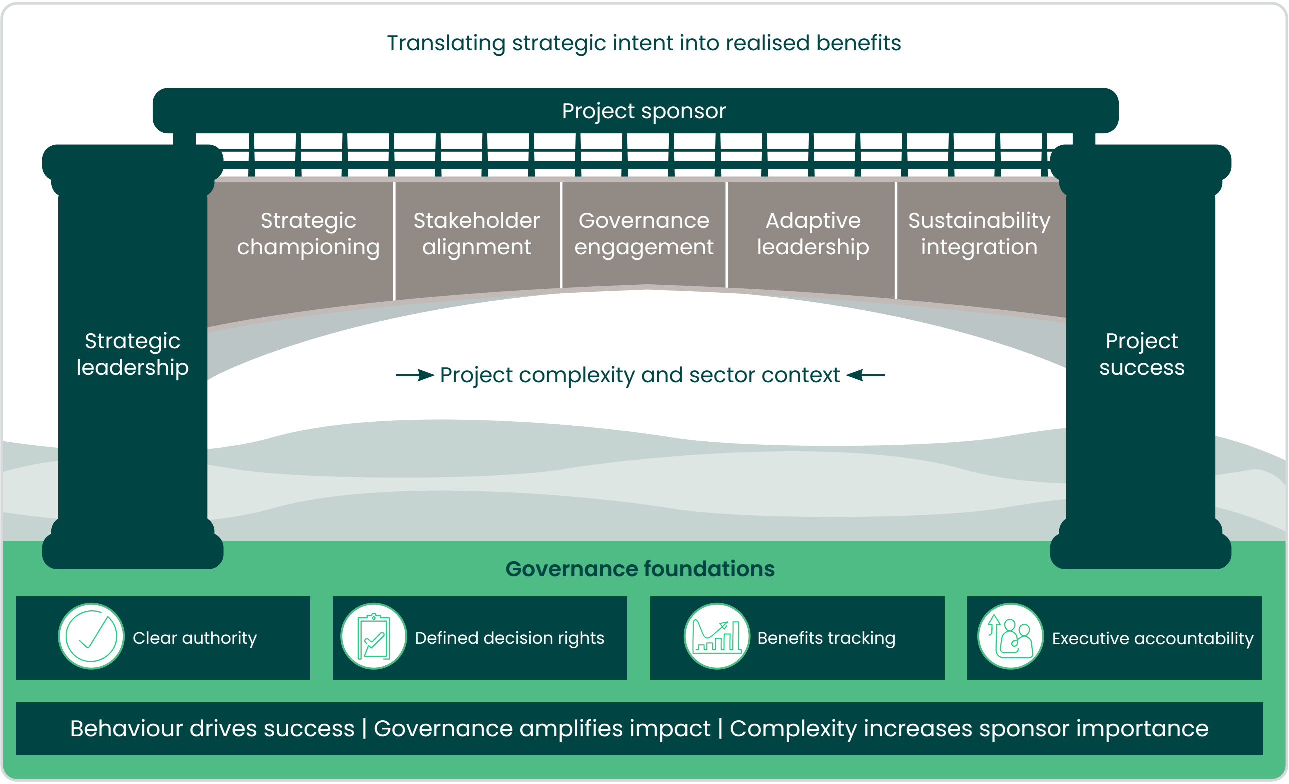

Figure 9: The strategic sponsorship bridge

A critical distinction emerges between competence and enactment. Seniority or perceived capability alone does not distinguish higher-performing projects. What matters is visible, sustained behavioural engagement. Sponsors bridge the gap between executive ambition and operational execution by defending the strategic case and keeping stakeholders aligned with benefits delivery. Governance maturity amplifies this effect. Sponsor behaviours have a stronger impact where decision rights and escalation pathways are clear and benefits tracking is formally embedded. Conversely, ambiguous authority constrains even capable sponsors. Governance systems therefore enable sponsorship rather than replace it.

Project complexity further intensifies the importance of sponsorship. In highly interdependent and uncertain environments, sponsor engagement becomes decisive. Adaptive leadership and timely intervention are particularly influential in complex transformation initiatives.

Finally, integrating sustainability strengthens value outcomes. Sponsors who integrate long-term environmental, social and organisational impact into decision-making are associated with stronger persistence of benefits and greater overall perceptions of success. Modern sponsorship is therefore not only strategic but future oriented. Taken together, the findings show that sponsorship plays a central governance role in translating strategy into delivery. Strengthening sponsorship requires formalised authority, behavioural clarity, stronger governance infrastructure, capability development and contextual adaptation. These measures offer organisations a practical route to improving project success.

Recommendations

Strengthening sponsorship to bridge strategic leadership and project success

The findings of this study demonstrate that project sponsorship is a decisive mechanism for translating strategic intent into realised value. Effective sponsors act as strategic champions, governance stewards, stakeholder mediators and adaptive leaders under conditions of complexity. However, the findings also reveal structural and behavioural gaps that limit sponsor effectiveness in many organisations.

The following proposes six interrelated interventions designed to strengthen sponsor authority, embed value accountability, clarify behavioural expectations, reinforce governance infrastructure, enhance sponsor capability and adapt sponsorship models to context. Each recommendation derives directly from the empirical patterns identified in the study, grounding the proposed actions in the evidence rather than in abstract principle. Together, they form a coherent reform agenda aimed at closing the gap between strategic leadership and project execution.

The recommendations

Recommendation 1: Formalise sponsor authority and strategic accountability

The findings indicate that strategic championing and governance engagement are central functions of the sponsor. However, their effectiveness is contingent on clarity of mandate and authority. Projects characterised by ambiguous sponsor roles or contested decision rights were more vulnerable to strategic drift and misalignment. Organisations should therefore formalise sponsor authority in governance frameworks. This requires governance frameworks to clearly document sponsor authority, including how decisions are made, how benefits accountability is assigned and how the sponsor participates in executive decision-making forums. Sponsor mandates should be reflected in the organisation's governance framework, including its charters, stage-gate processes and portfolio oversight arrangements. This formalisation gives sponsors the structural clarity needed to act decisively. When sponsors possess recognised authority to challenge assumptions and protect strategic intent when conflict arises, their behavioural engagement translates more effectively into project outcomes. Strengthening sponsor authority is foundational. Without structural legitimacy, even highly capable sponsors may struggle to bridge the gap between strategy and execution.

Establish explicit sponsor decision rights in governance frameworks:

- Document sponsor authority in project charters, specifying thresholds such as approving scope changes above a pre-agreed threshold, for example, £250,000 or 10% of approved budget.
- Grant sponsors veto power over major risk escalations and formal sign-off on benefits profiles at each governance gate.
- Link 20–30% of sponsor performance evaluation to benefits realisation metrics rather than delivery performance alone.

Recommendation 2: Embed value and sustainability metrics in sponsor accountability

The study confirms that project success is perceived primarily in terms of realised value and strategic contribution, rather than delivery compliance alone. Sustainability-oriented sponsorship was also associated with greater persistence of benefits and higher success ratings. Organisations should therefore embed value and sustainability metrics directly in sponsor accountability frameworks. Sponsor performance evaluation should include explicit assessment of realised benefits and long-term value, including sustainability impact. Benefits registers and post-implementation reviews should be formally owned by the sponsor, with structured reporting at executive level. This intervention aligns accountability with contemporary definitions of success. It signals that sponsorship is not limited to overseeing delivery but extends to ensuring enduring organisational and societal impact. Embedding value metrics also reinforces behavioural expectations. When sponsors are evaluated on strategic contribution and the integration of sustainability, they are incentivised to maintain alignment beyond project closure.

Shift sponsor scorecards from iron-triangle metrics to value outcomes:

- Require quarterly benefits-tracking reports with realised vs planned benefits variance analysis under sponsor signature.
- Mandate sustainability impact assessments as standard stage-gate deliverables, signed off by sponsors.
- Include stakeholder satisfaction scores from 360° pulse surveys as formal sponsor key performance indicators (KPIs), benchmarked against sector averages.

Recommendation 3: Define and reinforce observable behavioural expectations

A central insight of the research is that enacted sponsor behaviours, rather than self-assessed competencies or positional authority, distinguish higher-performing projects. Strategic championing and visible governance engagement, particularly in stakeholder-intensive settings, emerged as consistent behavioural drivers of success. Organisations should therefore move beyond abstract competency models and define explicit behavioural expectations for sponsors. These expectations should clarify when sponsors engage, how they participate in governance forums and what form their intervention should take during periods of uncertainty. Behavioural standards should be supported by structured feedback mechanisms, including periodic sponsor effectiveness reviews that involve project managers and key stakeholders. Such mechanisms reinforce visibility and accountability while encouraging reflective leadership. This recommendation directly addresses the gap between formal designation and practical enactment. By institutionalising behavioural clarity, organisations can ensure that sponsorship operates as an active leadership function rather than a nominal title.

Define and measure what sponsors do, not what they know:

- Embed five observable behaviours in sponsor role descriptions: weekly executive championing, monthly stakeholder alignment meetings, quarterly benefits reviews, risk intervention within 48 hours and team support during step-gates.
- Implement annual 360° sponsor effectiveness reviews using behavioural frequency scales.
- Create sponsor dashboards tracking behavioural enactment metrics alongside project outcomes.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen governance infrastructure to enable active sponsorship

The findings demonstrate that governance maturity amplifies sponsor influence. Clear decision rights, structured escalation processes and formal benefits-tracking systems enhance the impact of sponsor behaviours. Organisations should invest in strengthening governance infrastructure to support sponsorship. This includes transparent stage-gate criteria and operational benefits tracking, supported by clearer interfaces between sponsors, project managers and portfolio governance bodies. Governance systems should enable timely sponsor intervention rather than constrain it. Escalation routes must be defined and accessible. Decision-making authority must be aligned with accountability for outcomes. Strengthening governance creates the institutional conditions for sponsorship to operate effectively and consistently across projects.

Institutionalise systems that amplify sponsor impact:

- Deploy enterprise benefits registers with automated workflow that routes sponsor approvals for benefit profile changes.
- Establish 'sponsor escalation hotlines', bypassing standard chains for critical decisions.
- Mandate post-project sponsor-led benefits audits at 6, 12 and 24 months, feeding learning into organisational project management offices (PMOs).

Recommendation 5: Develop advanced sponsor capability pathways

While behavioural enactment is critical, sponsors require structured support to develop the skills necessary for strategic leadership and adaptive decision-making in stakeholder-intensive contexts. The findings highlight the importance of political acumen and the ability to articulate strategy under complex conditions. Organisations should establish dedicated sponsor development pathways that extend beyond introductory training. These programmes should address advanced topics such as strategic narrative framing, negotiation in politically complex environments, benefits realisation management and sustainability integration. Peer learning forums and communities of practice can provide sponsors with opportunities to share experiences and refine their approach in response to emerging challenges. Mentoring arrangements for newly appointed sponsors may further strengthen capability development. Professionalisation of the sponsor role is essential. As projects grow in scale and complexity, sponsorship must evolve from an ad hoc responsibility to a recognised leadership discipline.

Implement structured 12-month development programmes combining:

- **Quarterly workshops**: strategic storytelling, stakeholder mapping, adaptive governance and benefits realisation.
- **Peer coaching triads** (e.g. monthly 90-minute sessions): rotating sponsor groups addressing live challenges with external facilitation.
- **360° feedback cycles** (three per year): multi-source ratings on behavioural enactment with personalised action plans.
- **Capstone project**: lead a live portfolio-level sponsorship challenge with executive observation and certification.

Recommendation 6: Differentiate sponsorship models by complexity and sector

The study confirms that project complexity intensifies the importance of sponsorship. In high-complexity environments, sponsor behaviours had a stronger impact on outcomes. Sectoral analysis further indicates that institutional constraints shape how sponsorship is enacted. Organisations should therefore adopt differentiated sponsorship models based on project complexity and sectoral context. Complex transformation initiatives require sustained, high-intensity sponsorship with active executive engagement. Routine operational projects may require lighter-touch oversight. In highly regulated or politically sensitive sectors, sponsors may require additional formal authority and structured mechanisms for stakeholder engagement. In agile or innovation-driven contexts, sponsors may need to adopt more adaptive and iterative engagement styles. Contextual differentiation ensures that sponsorship intensity and structure are aligned with project demands. A uniform model is unlikely to be effective across diverse environments. Table 1 sets out how sponsorship intensity can be tailored to project complexity and sectoral context.

Table 1: Sponsorship intensity by project complexity and sectoral context

Project complexity and context	Sponsor time commitment	Governance support	Development focus
Low complexity, such as internal IT	2 hours per month	Standard charter	Core sponsor behaviours
Medium complexity, such as business change	4 hours per month + stage gates	Defined escalation protocols	Stakeholder engagement skills
High complexity, such as transformation or regulatory change	8+ hours per month	Dedicated governance support	Adaptive leadership
Extreme complexity, such as multi-stakeholder programmes	Full-time senior responsible owner (SRO)	Portfolio-level support	Coalition-building

Integrating the recommendations

These six recommendations are mutually reinforcing. Formalising authority without embedding value metrics would risk producing narrow governance compliance. Embedding value metrics without behavioural clarity would dilute accountability. Developing capability without strengthening governance infrastructure would limit practical impact. Taken together, the recommendations form a coherent reform agenda grounded in empirical evidence. They address both behavioural and structural dimensions of sponsorship and recognise the moderating influence of context. Implementation should therefore be approached as an integrated programme rather than a set of isolated interventions. These recommendations provide organisations with immediately actionable pathways to strengthen sponsor effectiveness, supported by empirical evidence from 408 experienced practitioners.

Implementation considerations

Organisations seeking to implement these recommendations should begin with a diagnostic assessment of current sponsorship practices. This assessment should examine role clarity, governance maturity and whether behavioural expectations are reflected in accountability metrics. Phased implementation may be appropriate. Initial efforts might focus on clarifying sponsor mandates and embedding value metrics, followed by structured capability development and contextual adaptation. Senior executive endorsement is essential. Sponsorship reform requires visible commitment from organisational leadership to reinforce the role's strategic importance.

Conclusion

This study set out to address two central questions: What are the critical functions of a project sponsor in influencing project success, and How can the sponsor role be optimised to effectively align strategic goals with project execution? Drawing on quantitative evidence from a global sample of experienced sponsors, the findings provide a clear and consistent answer. Sponsorship provides the governance mechanism by which strategic leadership translates into realised project value. The evidence demonstrates that effective sponsorship operates through enacted strategic leadership behaviours. Sponsors who actively champion strategic intent, orchestrate stakeholder alignment, engage visibly in governance, integrate sustainability considerations and adapt their leadership under conditions of complexity are associated with stronger value realisation and higher overall project success. Competence alone is insufficient; behavioural engagement is decisive. Moreover, the impact of sponsor behaviour is shaped by context. Sponsor influence is amplified by governance maturity and becomes more important as complexity increases, although sectoral conditions shape how authority is exercised.

These findings contribute theoretically by advancing a more nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of sponsorship. Integrating stakeholder, governance and agency perspectives, the study demonstrates that sponsor influence is both behavioural and structural. It operates through boundary-spanning leadership and formal accountability mechanisms that reduce misalignment between strategic principles and project teams. By empirically linking sponsor behaviours to multi-dimensional success outcomes, including value and sustainability dimensions, the study extends existing sponsorship literature beyond descriptive role definitions and towards a more analytically grounded model.

Practically, the implications are direct. Strengthening sponsorship is a strategic imperative for organisations seeking to improve project outcomes. The recommendations presented in this report provide an evidence-based roadmap for reform. Formalising sponsor authority ensures that strategic championing carries institutional weight. Embedding value and sustainability metrics in sponsor accountability aligns incentives with contemporary definitions of success. Defining behavioural expectations clarifies what effective sponsorship looks like in practice. Reinforcing governance infrastructure enables sponsors to act decisively. Developing sponsor capability pathways professionalises the role. Adapting sponsorship models to project complexity and sector ensures contextual fit. Taken together, these interventions move sponsorship from implicit expectation to explicit strategic discipline. They recognise that projects succeed not merely because they are well managed, but because they remain strategically aligned throughout their life cycle.

Like all empirical research, this study carries limitations that should inform interpretation of the findings. The cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported perceptions of behaviour and success constrain causal inference; the associations identified are robust and consistent, but directionality cannot be assumed. While the global panel provides meaningful breadth across sectors and regions, it is important to acknowledge that panel respondents may systematically over-represent organisations with higher governance maturity; this potential sampling bias could moderately inflate the observed relationships between governance quality and project success. Readers should therefore treat the magnitude of these effects with appropriate caution, even as the directional patterns remain meaningful.

These limitations also point towards a productive research agenda. Sector-specific studies would enable more granular examination of how sponsorship is enacted in distinct institutional and regulatory environments. Longitudinal designs could clarify how sponsor behaviours evolve across the project life cycle and how sponsor capability develops over careers and organisational contexts, questions that cross-sectional data cannot address. At the portfolio level, the interaction between sponsorship and broader governance architectures remains under-explored, particularly as organisations manage increasingly interdependent project landscapes. Finally, as sustainability becomes a more explicit criterion of project success, longitudinal investigation into the long-term organisational outcomes of sustainability-oriented sponsorship would represent a particularly timely and high-value contribution to the field.

Nevertheless, the findings offer a robust and timely contribution to both scholarship and practice. At a time when organisations face increasing complexity and rising stakeholder expectations, including pressure for more sustainable outcomes, the capacity to convert strategic intent into realised value is critical. This study confirms that project sponsorship is central to that capability. Strengthening sponsorship is therefore a strategic investment in the leadership needed to translate strategy into execution. By acting on the evidence presented in this report, organisations can materially improve their ability to ensure that projects not only deliver outputs but also realise enduring strategic value.

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