
Advances in Project Management Series¹

The unspoken role of sponsors, champions, shapers and influencers

Balancing organisational concerns and personal values for effective project and programme initiation

*By Prof Darren Dalcher
Director, National Centre for Project Management
University of Hertfordshire, UK*

Many of the surveys focused on the success criteria of projects, organisational change efforts, or process improvement initiatives home in on the need for senior executive support. The advice is often couched in terms of securing the support and backing of a senior figure within the organisation in order to guarantee successful delivery. Within the software process improvement community this is typically recognised as the dominant factor that is required in order to guarantee success.

Defining sponsorship

The 6th Edition of the Association for Project Management, *APM Body of Knowledge* positions sponsorship in the initial section of the book, under the heading of governance, and alongside key areas such as project management, infrastructure, life cycle, success factors and maturity. It begins by confirming that sponsorship is an important senior management role; asserting that “the sponsor is accountable for ensuring that the work is governed effectively and delivers the objectives that meet identified needs”.

Sponsors are required to play an active role in promoting, advocating and shaping projects. They may be known as project champions, Senior Responsible Owners (SRO), funders, or senior clients, and may even be part of the project steering group.

The APM Body of Knowledge points out that sponsors own the Business Case. Their role starts before the appointment of a project manager, and continues beyond project closure and the departure of the project manager. As owners of the business case, they are responsible for overseeing the realisation of benefits, thus spanning a longer project life cycle, extending beyond project delivery and handover.

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In many situations the sponsor and project manager may belong to different organisations, with the sponsor representing the client organisation and the project manager hailing from the contracting organisation. Note: In larger and more complex project setups, this disparity in role and position often requires a senior contractor representative on the project board to work with the sponsor and address the different sets of business priorities and commercial objectives.

Given that the sponsor owns the business case, there is a need for a close relationship with the project manager to ensure that the business case remains viable and that the benefits are both relevant and realisable.

The APM body of knowledge therefore acknowledges (p. 36) that the sponsor needs to be:

- A business leader and decision maker with the credibility to work across corporate and functional boundaries;
- An enthusiastic advocate of the work and the change it brings about;
- Prepared to commit time and support to the role;
- Sufficiently experienced (in project and programme management) to judge if the work is being managed effectively and to challenge project managers where appropriate

Additional guidance on sponsorship

According to received wisdom sponsorship is concerned with influencing the performance of project management. The Association of Project Management's publication, *Directing Change* (2005) notes that sponsorship is the effective link between the organisation's senior executive body and the management of the project. The sponsoring role has decision making, directing and representational accountabilities, providing a route through which project managers directly report to owning organisations and from which project managers obtain their formal authority, remit and approval of decisions that require agreement.

Englund and Bucero (2006) make the point that the success or failure of any project often hinges on how well the sponsor relates to the project, the project manager and other stakeholders. In reality, maintaining the relationships is difficult and multi-faceted, and sponsors often do not understand their role and impact. Englund and Bucero note that the sponsor fulfils the roles of: seller, coach and mentor, filter, business judge, motivator, negotiator, protector and upper management link during the different phases of the project.

The APM's publication *Sponsoring Change* (2009) concurs that every project needs a sponsor (p. 1), and identifies four core purposes for sponsorship:

- **Separation of decision making responsibilities**, particularly in relation to the purpose of the project, the objectives, the top-level contingency provisions,

appointment of the project manager, feasibility and deployment of external resources

- **Accountability for the realisation of benefits** that typically extend beyond the role of the project manager
- **Oversight of the project management function**, by applying consistent oversight, expertise and sound judgement
- **Stakeholder management**, particularly at senior levels and in relation to other significant parts of the organisation

The critical success attributes that project-owning organisations should consider developing and enhancing include (APM, 2009):

- **Support:** appropriate organisational support in terms of clear authority, access to decision makers and adequate resources
- **Continuity:** Ensuring continuity of sponsorship throughout the life of the project
- **Alignment:** Acting in the long term interests of the organisation and providing professional and ethical leadership consistent with its culture and values

Perhaps the key importance of the role relates to its core position, and associated responsibility, as mediator and translator between the board, the project manager and the project (and its pledged benefits). The position thus allows sponsors to communicate and translate requirements downwards to ensure real needs are being addressed, whilst communicating resource requirements, progress visibility and identified constraints back upwards to ensure that pace and momentum can be maintained.

Rethinking the position of sponsorship

Sponsorship is increasingly addressed as part of the discourse around project governance but its impact on projects and programmes remains underexplored. Moreover, only limited guidance and advice is available for executives and senior managers seeking to undertake sponsorship roles, with the majority of available content representing the project side of the conversation.

French-American microbiologist René Jules Dubos noted that “man shapes himself through decisions that shape his environment”. In general, we create conditions that can enhance or limit. Early decisions, in projects, and other creative endeavours, introduce constraints, limit options and direct future development. In contrast, early consideration also opens up opportunities and new perspectives ripe for both exploration and exploitation.

Considering sponsorship from a project perspective focuses on deliverables, and the project structure, whilst also recognising that sponsorship needs to extend beyond the minimal life of the project and account for factors such as benefits, the business case, and the organisational value of introducing change. However, this perspective fails to account for the extended life cycle of the project, the reasons for carrying out the work

in the first place, and most crucially, it ignores the early identification and definition effort that occurs before a project is formally and officially launched.

In many projects and change initiatives sponsors may predate project managers' involvement. Considering the role of sponsorship therefore necessitates taking account of the wider activity of sponsorship within its full scope. An opening into such a crucial perspective is offered by Dr. Mark Mullaly, in his article *Exercising Agency – Making a Difference in How Projects are Initiated*, which considers the wider environment of project initiation and the impact of sponsors, or shapers, as key players during early deliberations. The article is derived from Mark's recent book, *Exercising Agency: Decision Making and Project Initiation* published by Routledge.

Mark's work addresses the important area of decision making, particularly around the initiation of projects. Drawing on extensive and original research, it highlights the importance of *shaping*, or sponsoring organisational undertakings and the balance between process, politics and agency in the initial shaping of new undertakings. Yet, the critical importance of the work is not in emphasising the role of sponsorship, but in drawing specific attention to the upfront shaping activities that influence and determine the success of projects. Initiation of projects is an area that has been recognised by practitioners as being of crucial importance to starting projects right, but it somehow also managed to defy extended scrutiny by researchers.

Mullaly's research addresses many of the concerns and entanglements inherent in project initiation. Mark identifies the tension between established organisational processes, politics and the need to shape the environment and make informed choices and good decisions. The role of shapers in starting project right is crucial to improving the track record of project delivery. Mark's research offers fresh ways of considering decisions, choices and bringing the shaping part into the discussion about effective sponsorship, improved project initiation and informed decision making.

Shaping for future progress

While sponsorship has been considered from a governance position, or even from the perspective of managing the business case (APM, 2009; West, 2010; APM, 2012), it is useful to employ a wider lens to re-conceive the issues surrounding project initiation in order to engender a deeper appreciation of success in the context of implementing change projects. Extending the distinction put forward by René Jules Dubos indicates that organisations could shape themselves through decisions that in turn shape our change projects, and inevitably alter the ways we organise for them.

Work that draws attention to the upward connection of projects to strategy can therefore play a key part in reframing our understanding of projects, and change in organisations.

In 1938 Chester Irving Barnard, an American business executive, published his landmark book, *The Functions of the Executive*. The book, which sets out to explain how organisations actually behave, was voted the second most influential book of the 20th Century in a poll of Fellows of the Academy of Management. The book introduced a

number of important concepts: It imported the idea of decision making from public administration into the business world, thereby introducing a preference for action, through the implied end to deliberation and the initiation of action. Moreover, Barnard put forward his view of organisations as systems of cooperation of human activity. He asserted that organisations are short lived because they fail to follow the two criteria necessary for survival: effectiveness and efficiency. Note however that Barnard's definition of organisational efficiency is the degree to which an organisation is able to satisfy the motives of the individuals. In his view, if an organisation can satisfy the motives of its members, while attaining its own explicit goals, it can sustain itself and develop through cooperation.

Accordingly, the cooperative functions of the executive were defined as:

- Establishing and maintaining systems of communication
- Securing essential services from other members
- Formulating organisational purposes and objectives
- Managing people, and ensuring they do their job

The four functions of successful executives offer a good match with the roles of sponsors highlighted above. If shapers endeavour to execute the functions of the executives, whilst maintaining an interest in Barnard's version of organisational efficiency through the satisfaction of the needs of members of the project team, they can begin to leverage a new perspective on the initial definition and development of projects.

Decision making and trade-offs are absolutely essential. Indeed, balancing Barnard's organisational efficiency of internal members with the effectiveness of achieving corporate goals can provide a more intimate synthesis of interests and cooperation that can be used as a basis for shaping, sponsoring and leading teams.

Barnard observed that firms, systems and even societies do not typically last a whole century due to the mismatch and tensions between organisational efficiency of participants and wider corporate effectiveness. As we embrace long term thinking in our societal undertakings, it is useful to consider the need to balance the wider organisation with its internal people, and the possibility of invoking longer-term success through such amalgamation. The ideas put forward by Barnard's seminal work may yet offer a direction for channelling our interest in shaping new organisations (including temporary endeavours) that can offer lasting cooperation and meaningful translation and juxtaposition of corporate and personal concerns leading to enhanced, sustained and combined achievements.

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Editor's note: Editor's note: Prof Darren Dalcher, is the editor of the Gower/Routledge Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To learn more about the book series, go to <https://www.routledge.com/Advances-in-Project-Management/book-series/APM>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Gower author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.peworldlibrary.net.

About the Author



Darren Dalcher, PhD

Author, Professor, Series Editor

Director, National Centre for Project Management
University of Hertfordshire
United Kingdom



Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI SFHEA is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine’s “Academic of the Year” for his contribution in “integrating and weaving academic work with practice”. Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London. Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice*, an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond. He is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an editorial advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.

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