

## Does your project sponsor need help? <sup>1</sup>

Yogi Schulz and Jocelyn Lapointe<sup>2</sup>

Time-challenged executives who've been assigned or perhaps coerced to accept the project sponsor role need help. Too often, project sponsors:

- Do not understand their essential role.
- Are unsure about what others expect.
- Have little or no direct experience with the project subject and mistakenly assume that such a background is essential.
- Are nervous that association with the project might sully their carefully nurtured reputation.
- Are too embarrassed to ask for help.
- Receive no guidance from their organization.

As a result, project sponsors too often retreat to cursory figureheads or ignore the role to the project's detriment and the project manager's annoyance.

As an experienced project manager, you recognize when a project sponsor, who must contribute to project success, has become a dangerous failure factor. To help the project sponsor fulfill their role in ensuring project success, thoughtful project managers add project sponsor coaching to their to-do list.

They coach project sponsors to improve their effectiveness in the following elements of their role.

### ***Is accountable for project business results***

The project sponsor validates the project business case. It doesn't matter how valuable the project manager thinks the project is to the organization or what other executives believe. There is no project if the project sponsor doesn't believe in the business case.

For example, if the business case is about slicing days or weeks out of the supply chain, the project sponsor must believe it's achievable and valuable.

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<sup>2</sup> The authors are co-authors of the recently published book *A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide - Improving Project Performance*, available from Amazon at this [link](#). In their book, the authors discuss how to avoid the dysfunction described above.

The project sponsor ensures alignment between the project's business goal and the organization's strategic goals. They are accountable to the CEO and other senior executives for achieving the business goal of the project. Project managers often explain the details of the business case to project sponsors.

Given this significant role, the project sponsor chairs the project steering committee.

### ***Provides project resources***

The project sponsor provides budget dollars, business staff, and facilities. Without these resources, no project can proceed and has no hope of finishing successfully. Therefore, the project sponsor must be high enough on the organization chart to allocate resources.

For example, VPs or Executive VPs make great project sponsors because their authority to allocate staff and budgets is a critical success factor for projects. Managers and supervisors do not because their authority is insufficient. Presidents are not good project sponsors. They are involved in too many moment-to-moment issues to focus on the role of the project sponsor. Project managers support their project sponsors when others claim the project can be magically achieved with fewer resources.

### ***Champions project benefits throughout the organization***

The project sponsor and the other steering committee members must enthusiastically communicate, sell and defend the project benefits in informal discussions throughout the organization. They remind the organization of the project's value proposition and maintain its commitment to the project. If these individuals fail to champion the benefits or, worse, challenge the benefits or criticize the project, the project is doomed.

For example, the project sponsor must reference the project status in meetings with other senior managers and remind them of its value proposition. Project managers often provide project sponsors with summary communication artifacts.

### ***Provides support and guidance for the project manager***

The project sponsor provides support and guidance for the project manager. The project sponsor offers organizational insights to the project manager, who often does not have enough seniority and reputation for the organization to accept necessary but unwelcome recommendations.

For example, the project sponsor may say, "Thanks for indicating that the support of the South American Division seems tepid. I'll go with you to approach the VP about the staffing shortage issue we've been discussing."

Conversely, if the project sponsor loses confidence in the project manager, the project sponsor must replace the project manager.

### ***Encourages the team***

The project sponsor occasionally speaks to the entire team to publicly provide kudos, encouragement and boost morale. On these occasions, the project sponsor strongly supports the project and the team's work.

For example, the project sponsor can share some senior management scuttlebutt that would be good for the team to hear to reinforce the importance of the team's work for the organization. Project managers often encourage project sponsors to be more visible to the team.

### ***Ensures resource commitments are fulfilled***

When the project was approved, various stakeholders accepted resource commitments to work with the project. However, as the project proceeds, the business departments are typically hit with new resource demands and gradually de-commit from the project. Only the project sponsor can reverse this trend.

It's up to the project manager to point out this failure to fulfill commitments to the project sponsor for resolution.

For example, only the project sponsor can effectively glare at the managers or VPs to rebuild the commitment. Project managers can't do that and survive efforts to fire them.

### ***Resolves issues that the project manager cannot resolve on their own***

Every project develops issues related to scope, priorities and approach. Only the project sponsor can resolve or lead the resolution of the most significant problems that tend to cross organizational lines. It's up to the project manager to raise these issues with the project sponsor for resolution.

For example, the project depends on manufacturing data, and the data quality is low. Only the project sponsor can march into the office of the VP of Manufacturing and ask that the data be cleaned up and extract a commitment that the data will remain high quality into the future.

To the greatest extent possible, the project sponsor shields the team from distracting and harmful internal politics and defends the project.

### ***Needs no technical expertise or experience***

Executive management selects project sponsors for their significant business experience and senior leadership credibility.

Project sponsors do not need technical expertise or experience related to the project deliverables. For example, project sponsors do not need to know about metallurgy, software development methodologies or specific consumer product-design considerations.

You can explore these and other topics that help project sponsors in our new book, *A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide - Improving Project Performance*. It's available from Amazon at this [link](#). View the book as a reference tool. You don't have to read it all to obtain actionable insights.

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## About the Authors



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**Yogi Schulz** has over 40 years of Information Technology experience in various industries. Yogi works extensively in the petroleum industry to select and implement financial, production revenue accounting, land & contracts and geotechnical systems. He manages projects that arise from changes in business requirements, from the need to leverage technology opportunities and from mergers. His specialties include IT strategy, web strategy and systems project management.

Mr. Schulz regularly speaks to industry groups and writes a regular column for [IT World Canada and for Engineering.com](#). He has written for Microsoft.com and the Calgary Herald. His writing focuses on project management and IT developments of interest to management. Mr. Schulz served as a member of the Board of Directors of the PPDM Association for twenty years until 2015. Learn more at <https://www.corvelle.com/>. He can be contacted at [yogischulz@corvelle.com](mailto:yogischulz@corvelle.com)

His new book, co-authored by Jocelyn Schulz Lapointe, is "[A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide: Improving Project Performance](#)."



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