Is your project sponsor making you angry? [1]

Yogi Schulz

Project managers and teams suffer dysfunctional consequences when project sponsors shirk their roles. Projects flounder when sponsors are absent, hiding deliberately or unsure of their role.

Ideally, project managers collaborate with project sponsors and stakeholders to position projects for success, reduce risks, and mitigate the impact of the various issues that arise as projects proceed.

In reality, project sponsors let down their teams and put projects at risk in many ways. Here are the eight most common sins of project sponsorship and how project managers can politely and diplomatically correct the situations. As much as expressing anger is tempting, it's never helpful.

You can explore these and other tips to help project sponsors and project managers be more effective in our new book*, A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide - Improving Project Performance*. It's available from Amazon at this link.

Sit on recommendations

The project sponsor refuses to act on project team recommendations to resolve issues. In some organizations, it's better not to make a decision than risk being blamed for the wrong decision. On projects, delays waiting for a decision are always more expensive than correcting a decision that turned out to be wrong later.

Project managers address this problem through diplomatic coaching of the project sponsor and then proceed on an assumptive basis where the assumption is that the recommendation will be accepted eventually.

Project managers do not let the absence of a decision delay the project schedule.

Refuse coaching

When project managers try to make diplomatic suggestions about how the project sponsor could better fulfill their role and support the project, the project sponsor claims to be too busy or suggests the project manager can handle the issue independently.

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Project managers address this refusal professionally by:

- Diplomatic coaching.
- Assigning project sponsors small, tactical tasks to increase their involvement gradually.
- Thanking project sponsors when a task has been completed.

Fail to support the project manager

Suppose the project manager feels the project sponsor doesn't support them. They sense they will be blamed for project shortcomings. In that case, an experienced project manager will begin to think about how to exit the project quietly. Such an outcome can reflect poorly on the project sponsor's carefully cultivated reputation, the project's progress and the team's effectiveness.

To avoid this situation, project managers seek assurance that project sponsors will support them and the team in the following ways:

- Communicating and selling the project benefits among the project sponsor's executive peers.
- Publicly supporting project recommendations to stakeholders when complex issues inevitably arise.
- Proactively support the project work.

Push scope additions

On multiple occasions, the project sponsor has proposed surprising scope additions for approval by the steering committee. There was no prior discussion with the project manager. These additions would add value but are clearly out of scope as defined in the project charter.

The project manager politely reminds the project sponsor of the agreed scope management process and has an analyst on the project team complete the proposed scope addition form for review by the project sponsor. Project sponsors usually never review the form, and the idea dies quietly.

Contradict agreed decisions

The role of project sponsors includes emphatic support of the agreed decisions in conversations with other executives. If it becomes politically expedient to support the contrary view, some project sponsors are tempted to make a U-turn, claim they weren't part of the decision, and blame the project team.

The project manager should politely remind the project sponsor of the agreed decision and ask the project sponsor if the decision needs to be reversed. If so, the project manager assigns an

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analyst on the project team to complete the proposed scope change order with an estimate for review by the project sponsor. The form privately embarrasses project sponsors, who quit articulating the contrary view.

Criticize the project manager

We've all observed project sponsors who are smooth political operators. They are reluctant to accept responsibility for anything. They are experts at deflecting criticism and blame. When minor project problems appear, they quickly criticize the project manager, ignore the team and distance themselves.

In this situation, a project manager will conclude they have been hired as the convenient scapegoat should a problem occur and not, as claimed, as a project manager with a mandate to deliver the project.

Project sponsors who play these political games cause project team turnover and failure. It's often best for the project manager to lobby the stakeholders to assign another project sponsor.

Commit to a ridiculous project completion date

Sometimes, project sponsors believe they can impress their peers on the executive team by committing to an overly aggressive project completion date without consulting the project manager.

Naturally, the project manager is angry about not being consulted and the real possibility that the project will be viewed as a failure when it can't achieve the unrealistic date.

A solution to this problem that avoids embarrassing the project sponsor is to replan the project to create a release that can be achieved by the aggressive date, declare a success and then work on the rest of the project after that date.

Criticize the project

When discussing the project with stakeholders, some project sponsors express hesitancy about the benefits and criticize the performance of the project team.

The project manager should diplomatically explore the project sponsor's hesitancy about the business case. The project sponsor's commitment is typically strengthened if the hesitancy can be resolved.

If the project sponsor and the project manager cannot resolve the hesitancy, they should cancel the project immediately. Continuing will only waste money and perhaps lead to conflicts between the team and the stakeholders.

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About the Author

Yogi Schulz

Calgary, Alberta, Canada

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

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