

How project sponsors can help project managers ¹

Yogi Schulz

Project managers routinely juggle many balls. There are issues to advance, team members to encourage, vendors to push, stakeholders to placate, and status reports to write. The list goes on and on.

Too often, project managers add managing their project sponsor to that lengthy list. That perspective is misguided. Instead, project managers should view their project sponsor as someone who can help them, someone who can be expected to accept specific thorny tasks that only a senior executive can deftly handle for the benefit of the project.

Here are some of the ways that project sponsors help project managers. Consider using some of the points in this article during your next meeting with your project sponsor.

You can explore these and other tips to help project sponsors and 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](#).

Communicates project benefits throughout the organization

The project sponsor and steering committee members must enthusiastically communicate, sell and defend the project benefits in meetings and informal discussions throughout the organization. If these individuals fail to champion the benefits or, worse, challenge the benefits or criticize the project, the project is doomed.

For example, they frequently remind the organization of the project's value proposition to maintain its commitment to the project at various management meetings or town hall events.

When this visible public support is not evident, project managers provide project sponsors and steering committee members with brief talking points to encourage more communication.

Guides the project manager

The project sponsor guides the project manager. The project sponsor offers organizational insights about internal politics, corporate history, and prejudices held by various stakeholders. This information is valuable to project managers, who often do not have enough seniority and reputation for the organization to accept their necessary but unwelcome recommendations.

When project managers feel neglected, they can reach out to their project sponsors to reconfirm the following best practice points for building their relationship:

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- Commit to a firm schedule of meetings with the project manager. The frequency is usually weekly or bi-weekly.
- Respect the project manager's mandate and delegation.
- Provide open, frank feedback to the project manager on project observations and what improvements are needed.
- Demand honest opinions from the project manager about project status and issues.
- Will not create pressure to provide a false, overly optimistic project status.
- Operate the project manager relationship based on mutual trust.

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, express 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 and organization performance metrics that would be good for the team to hear and reinforce the importance of the team's work for the organization.

When teams feel unappreciated, project managers can diplomatically encourage their project sponsors to inspire 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.

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

It's up to project managers to point out this failure to fulfill commitments to their project sponsors for resolution.

Resolves issues that the project manager cannot resolve

Every project develops issues related to scope, priorities and approach. Only the project sponsor can resolve or lead the resolution of the more significant issues that tend to cross organizational lines.

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.

It's up to project managers to raise these issues with their project sponsors for resolution.

Shields the team from distracting internal politics

To the greatest extent possible, the project sponsor shields the team from distracting and harmful internal politics. The project sponsor also defends the project team from being hijacked to solve a crisis in the business.

For example, if the team is distracted and upset by rumours of a reorganization or downsizing, the project sponsor can reassure the team.

It's up to project managers to raise the concerns with their project sponsors for attention.

You can explore these and other tips for effective project sponsors in [A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide – Improving Project Performance](#), a new book I wrote with my co-author Jocelyn Lapointe. 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.

About the Author



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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](http://ITWorldCanadaandforEngineering.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.](#)"