

Briefing: Results of Research on Executive Training on Project Sponsorship ¹

Alfonso Bucero, PhD

Introduction

This briefing document summarizes key themes and findings from the "Executive Training on Project Sponsorship research" done by Alfonso Bucero. This report highlights the critical but often overlooked role of formal training for executives in project sponsorship and its positive impact on project outcomes. A detailed research report (mixed study) will be elaborated and published in a Project Management Journal by the end of 2025, if accepted. This document provides you with an advanced summary of my findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Central Themes and Key Findings

1. Significance of Project Sponsorship and Training:

- This research identifies Project sponsorship as a "pivotal role in bridging executive leadership and project execution."
- Despite its importance, many organizations "overlook the necessity of formal training for executives in this role."
- The study empirically confirms that "sponsorship training for executives has a positive impact on project outcomes."
- This study found that structured training "enhances sponsor engagement and effectiveness."

2. Factors Correlated with Project Outcomes:

- The study, based on 410 responses, identified two distinct factors that significantly correlated with project outcomes. My final research will offer insights into how senior managers may contribute to project success. I also had the

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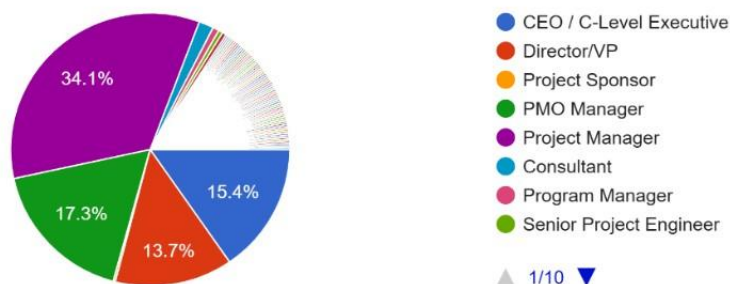
opportunity to interview eleven senior project professionals and summarize their experiences working with project sponsors.

3. Demographics of Participants:

- The study gathered responses from a diverse group across various roles, industries, and organisational sizes.
 - **Roles:** Project Managers (34.1%) were the highest participants, followed by PMO Managers (17.3%) and C-Level Executives (15.4%).
 - **Industry Sectors:** Finance/Banking (23.9%) and Information Technology (22.9%) were the major participating sectors, alongside Education, Healthcare, Manufacturing, Government, Consulting, Construction, and Telecom.
 - **Organization Size:** Most participants (36.1%) came from organizations with over 1000 employees, while 32.9% were from organizations with 1 to 50 employees.
 - **Geographical Reach:** I collected responses from a wide range of countries globally, including: Spain, Switzerland, USA, Croatia, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Australia, Pakistan, Brazil, Turkey, Peru, India, France, Mexico, Ireland, Argentina, Nigeria, Uruguay, New Zealand, Russia, Serbia, Canada, Greece, UAE, Oman, Bolivia, Panama, Chile, Romania, South Africa, Sweden, Venezuela, Jamaica, Indonesia, Côte d'Ivoire, Denmark, Tanzania, Ecuador, UK, Malaysia, Kenya, Jordan, Angola, Bulgaria, Iran, Japan, Netherlands, Austria, Monaco, and Senegal. See the pie charts to illustrate it.

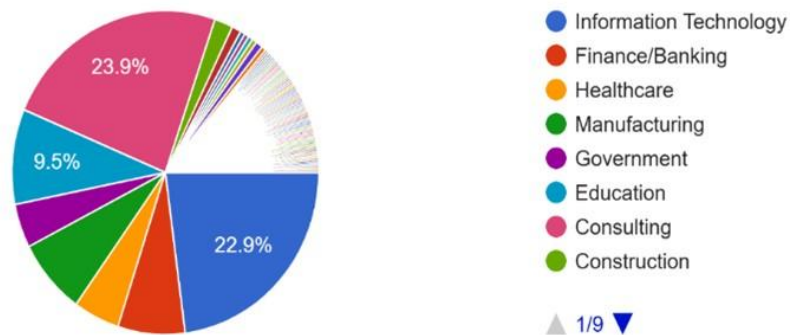
1. Your current role/title:

410 responses



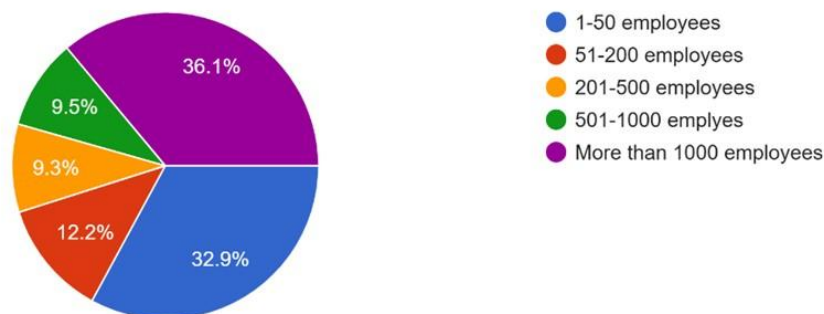
2. Industry sector of your organization

410 responses



3. Size of your organization

410 responses



4. Perceived Barriers to Effective Executive Project Sponsorship and Training:

- The survey data reveals several consistent challenges that prevent executives from becoming better project sponsors and hinder their training. The most frequently cited issues include:
 - **Lack of time/availability of executives:** This was a pervasive concern, indicating that executives' schedules often preclude their dedicated involvement in sponsorship duties or training.
 - **Lack of interest or perceived value:** Most respondents noted that executives either do not see the value in project sponsorship training or lack interest in developing these skills. One respondent noted, "Many

senior-level staff 'assume' that sponsoring a project is just senior management of a project as opposed to a specific skillset requiring some specialist knowledge."

- **Lack of expertise in project sponsorship:** A considerable number of responses highlighted a clear deficit in the specific knowledge and skills required for effective project sponsorship.
- **Budget constraints:** This study mentioned that financial limitations were often a barrier to implementing necessary training programs.
- **No clear ownership for training delivery:** This study identified the absence of a designated party responsible for providing sponsorship training as a hurdle. **6. Interview Summary**

This detailed briefing document synthesises insights from interviews with eleven experienced project management professionals, revealing a consistent global challenge: the often undefined, misunderstood, and inconsistently applied role of the project sponsor. While the strategic value of an effective sponsor is universally acknowledged – particularly in terms of strategic alignment, issue resolution, and empowering project managers – a significant gap exists between theoretical understanding and practical implementation. Key themes include the pervasive lack of formalisation, the impact of organisational culture and leadership styles, the critical need for targeted executive training, and the essential shift towards a collaborative, trust-based relationship between sponsors and project managers.

Main Themes discussed during the interviews

1. The Pervasive Lack of Formalisation and Understanding of the Project Sponsor Role

A recurring and critical theme across diverse geographies and sectors is the absence of a clearly defined, formalized, and consistently understood project sponsor role.

- **Undefined and Undocumented:** "In most organizations, not" is the answer to whether the sponsor role is "defined and documented formally". One of the interviewees states that the "project sponsor role" is rarely formalized or understood, with clients typically using personal names rather than the title "sponsor." Similarly, another interviewee has "never" seen the project sponsor role formally documented in any organization, a point corroborated by the interviewer. One interviewee from the Middle East. Explicitly states that in Middle

Eastern state-run projects, "the sponsor per se does not even exist," with the role "diluted between functional organizations."

- **Vague Understanding:** Even when a formal title exists, executives may only have "a vague understanding" of its meaning. One of the interviewees. Observed as early as 1997-1998 that "project sponsors were awful. They did not understand the role. They didn't know what they needed to do."
- **Accidental Assignment:** The role is often implicitly assumed, particularly when executives are "in charge of the contract or whatever," leading to individuals who had no idea what a project sponsor should do."
- **Contrast with Mature Organisations:** One interviewee highlighted that in large multinational organisations, they define the sponsor role formally and document it as "standardising roles, responsibilities, formats, templates, who is who, which activities, process flows." This study suggests that formalisation, while rare, is achievable and beneficial.

2. Diluted Responsibility and Complicated Decision-Making

Instead of a single, accountable sponsor, decision-making is often fragmented, leading to inefficiencies.

- **Fragmented Authority:** One attendee describes decision-making as "tremendously complicated and a long process – between 15 to 20 steps" with "no such thing as sponsor decides; it's always a long-winded process where a lot of entities and a lot of levels participate in the decisions."
- **False Sponsor" Phenomenon:** One of the attendees identifies the "false sponsor" – someone who "provided resources, enabled the project, and then is the ghost we don't see." This absence creates "locks" that the project manager cannot resolve.
- **Reactive vs. Proactive:** According to most of the interviewees, Sponsors are often "totally reactive", engaging only when "something goes wrong") or during "escalation" rather than proactive involvement. The decision-making process identifies sponsors' "reluctance to launch" as a "main trouble," causing significant delays.

3. Impact on Project Managers and the Need for "Managing Up"

In these kinds of settings, project managers need to take on a more expansive and human role, frequently "managing up" to gain the support and agreements they need.

- **Broadened PM Role:** One interviewee note that project managers must "obtain... the grace, the agreement, the buying of different level people," involving "a lot of stakeholder management," "a lot of so-called friendship building," and "a lot of bridging."
- **Coaching the Sponsor:** In cases where sponsors lack understanding, project managers often find themselves "managing up" and "coaching them on how to do their job". This situation requires project managers to "adapt to different sponsorship styles".
- **Communication Adaptation:** One of the interviewees emphasises tailoring communication to different sponsor personalities (e.g., DISC model) to "tailor the right messages to everyone." Many of the interviewees highlight the PM's role in "translating the technical part to the business part" to foster greater understanding.
- **Building Trust:** Most interviewees agree that the relationship is a "two-way street" requiring "transparent communication in both directions" and "mutual trust." They believe that "trust and a good relationship" are essential for both parties.

4. The Value of a Clearly Defined and Engaged Sponsor

There is a strong consensus that a clearly defined and actively engaged project sponsor significantly adds value to the organisation and the project manager.

- **Strategic Alignment and Advocacy:** All interviewees agreed that the Sponsor is the "voice to the executive of the organisation", linking projects to strategic objectives. They "connect the organisational strategy and the organisational mission and vision to the deliverables of the project".
- **Issue Resolution and Obstacle Removal:** According to most of the interviewees, Sponsors play a crucial role in "moving the roadblocks" (Alexander Matthey) and "getting issues resolved". The Sponsor's ability to "remove obstacles" by leveraging their network and authority is key.
- **Decision-Making:** Sponsors are primarily "decision makers and not problem solvers". They are crucial for timely, decisive decision-making, preventing projects from being bogged down by indecision.
- **Resource Allocation:** Sponsors are primarily "responsible for selecting a project manager" and ensuring "all resources," including people and money, are in place.

- **Support and Empowerment for PMs:** A sponsor adds value by "convincing the project manager and empowering the project manager to feel... as if he were himself the sponsor or responsible for the project." They "pave the road for the project" and remove high-level managerial obstacles.
- **Fostering Collaboration:** When sponsors and different management levels work well together, it positively influences the project teams, promoting a "teamwork spirit and collaboration". One of the interviewees describes the ideal Sponsor as an "enabler" who considers "how it will benefit the organization as a whole."

5. The Critical Need for Sponsorship Training and Awareness

This study identified a significant and consistent need for dedicated sponsorship training for executives, as many individuals in de facto sponsor roles lack a clear understanding of the responsibilities and effective behaviours.

- **Unsolved Problem:** Many of the interviewees acknowledge that the problem of getting sponsors to understand their role has "not been solved in almost 30 years now." One of the interviewees who works for a PM consulting company stated: "No customer asked us about project sponsorship training."
- **Awareness Over Just Training:** Executives need more project sponsorship awareness before receiving formal training. Most of their executives are not ready for."
- **Bridging the Gap Between Knowledge and Practice:** Some interviewees noted that while executives may understand the concept of sponsorship in theory, applying that knowledge in practice is another matter, often due to time constraints. Many project directors do not feel empowered to explain the Sponsor's role to an executive, making formal training crucial.
- **Key Training Content:** Training should cover "understanding what project success is," "how the sponsorship role will support project success," "governance," "the project life cycle," "kick-off" responsibilities, and "issues management", good risk training and understanding "contingencies."
- **Joint Training Model:** Several interviewees, implicitly or explicitly, advocate for joint training sessions with both executives and project managers to foster mutual understanding and collaboration. Others believe that executives should initially undergo basic training before participating in joint training sessions with other executives.
- **Highlighting Benefits:** The focus of the training needs to be on questions like "what's in it for them?" (such as "better projects, better delivery, better

collaboration,” “more efficient with their time,” and “reduce the number of escalations.)” to attract executives. One of the interviewees suggests using “examples like a real person who they appreciate providing the testimony that this has improved their efficiency.”

6. Contextual Understanding and Organisational Culture

The larger organizational structure, cultural norms, and the efficacy of project sponsorship are closely linked.

- **Organisational Structure Impact:** While Project-Based Organisations (PBOs) may have “better” sponsors, challenges remain. Functional organisations often remain “focused on their functional objectives,” lacking the organisational perspective.
- **Investor Mentality:** Some sponsors have an “investment mentality” – they “leave the money and that’s it,” treating projects like passive stock investments.
- **Personal Leadership Style:** One of the interviewees observed that sponsor involvement often “responds a lot to personal leadership or the personal style of each individual rather than having a more cultural style,” leading to inconsistency.
- **The “Hidden Sponsor”:** One of the interviewees recounts an anecdote of a “hidden sponsor” (a retired company founder) who was still making key decisions, impacting the project significantly, highlighting the importance of understanding informal power structures.
- **Short-Term Focus:** Another interviewee noted that the “curse of the quarterly reporting cycle” in the private sector makes it “hard to make investments in projects which go on multiple years.”

Most Important Ideas/Facts

- **Global Pervasiveness of the Problem:** The lack of effective project sponsorship is a long-standing and widespread issue, acknowledged across all interviews, from the Middle East to Europe, Canada, the USA, and Latin America
- **The “Non-Existent” Sponsor:** In many state-run projects, particularly in the Middle East, one professional interviewed stated, “the sponsor per se does not even exist.”
- **Project Manager as “Psychologist”:** Some of the interviewees describe Project Managers as “the psychologists of management” due to the need to understand and adapt to various stakeholder personalities and behaviours.

- **“Not Taking a Side”:** Based on the interviewees, project sponsors should embrace their “responsibility and commitment” (the responsibility of this being mine).
- **The “Say No” Moment:** One of the things that I learned from the most senior consultant I interviewed was that pushing sponsors to commit at checkpoints – even by saying “No, we’ve prepared this checkpoint... You have all the information you need to take. You want it, you need to commit; if you don’t commit, you will not get it” – is crucial to avoid delays and foster decisive action. He also states that the ability to say “No” is “the most important quality a project manager should have.”
- **The Power of Respect and Trust:** Most people I interviewed emphatically state, “Respecting each other” is “mandatory. If there is no respect, we feel stopped.” This reason underscores the foundational nature of interpersonal dynamics.
- **The “Strict but Effective” Sponsor:** One of the interviewees provides an “excellent example” of a division head who, though perceived as “very strict,” drove project success by “relentless prioritisation,” “exceptional preparation,” and acting as a “role model” by holding others accountable.
- **“Half Know, Half Don’t”:** Based on frequent assessments, I found that “approximately half of the sponsors understand their role and the other half do not” succinctly summarises the inconsistent understanding within organisations. Former project managers “understand what the project’s problem is” and are “much more active and present.”
- **“What’s in it for us?”:** Reframing the executive mindset from “What is in it for me?” to “What is in it for us?” to foster a broader organisational perspective on project value.
- **“Dunning-Kruger Effect”:** One of the interviewees highlights this psychological bias as a significant challenge for executive training, as “people who need it the most will not even realize that they have the gap.”
- **Sponsor Turnover:** An experienced program manager highlighted a critical, often overlooked challenge in multi-year projects: “the sponsor will change,” necessitating strategies like “redundancy in sponsorship” to maintain continuity.
- **Human Skills Over Process:** This study project managers suggest “Don’t rely on processes and techniques and whatever. The fact is, relying on personal relationships and human skills, you know, building a relationship with your Sponsor.”

Conclusions

- The interviews collectively paint a compelling picture of project sponsorship as a critical yet consistently underdeveloped function.
- The absence of clear role definitions, coupled with time constraints and varied individual leadership styles, often leads to disengaged or ineffective sponsors.
- The immense value that a truly engaged sponsor brings – in terms of strategic alignment, decisive issue resolution, and empowering project managers – is undeniable.
- There is a strong, unmet demand for targeted executive training that focuses not only on formal responsibilities but also on fostering a collaborative, trust-based relationship between sponsors and project managers, ultimately benefiting project outcomes and organisational success.

5. Some Recommendations for Improvement:

1. Organizations need to try to get executives aware of the importance of the project sponsor for project and organizational success (speeches, dialogue, and presentations may be some examples).
2. The report emphasises the need for institutionalized training programs to cultivate effective project sponsors. Check if your organization offers project sponsorship training for project managers and executives. In some organizations, executives need to be trained separately at the beginning.
3. The study concludes that executives can improve their project sponsorship by receiving "targeted training and support in areas like strategic alignment, effective communication, and understanding project management methodologies."
4. Furthermore, executives need to "develop skills in influence, leadership, and active engagement with the project team."
5. A good relationship and cooperation between the project manager and the project sponsor are key contributors to project success.

In summary, the report strongly advocates for formal, structured training in project sponsorship for executives, asserting that such training is crucial for improving project outcomes and addressing the current barriers of time, interest, expertise, budget, and ownership.

About the Author



Alfonso Bucero, PhD

Madrid, Spain



Alfonso Bucero, Ph.D., CPS, ACE, PMP, PMI-RMP, PfMP, SFC, IPMO-E, PMI Fellow, is an International Correspondent and Contributing Editor for the **PM World Journal** in Madrid, Spain. Mr. Bucero is also the founder and Managing Partner of BUCERO PM Consulting. Alfonso was the founder, sponsor, and President of the PMI Barcelona Chapter until April 2005 and belonged to PMI's LIAG (Leadership Institute Advisory Group). He was the past President of the PMI Madrid Spain Chapter and then nominated as a PMI EMEA Region 8 Component Mentor. Alfonso was a member of the PMIEF Engagement Committee.

Alfonso has a Computer Science Engineering degree from Universidad Politécnica in Madrid and a Ph.D. in Management from the ISM University. He has 39 years of practical experience and is actively advancing the PM profession in Spain and Europe. Alfonso received the *PMI Distinguished Contribution Award* on October 9, 2010, the *PMI Fellow Award* on October 22, 2011, and the *PMI Eric Jenett Excellence Award* on October 28, 2017. You can contact Mr. Bucero at alfonso.bucero@abucero.com.

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