

SEVEN STEPS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR BOND WITH YOUR SPONSOR

The **project manager and sponsor** are the ultimate power couple: They're stronger together than apart. Sponsors and project managers are liaisons between two groups, says David West, senior technical director, WSP, London, England, who has worked as both a project manager and project sponsor. "The sponsor represents the interests of the organization and all the stakeholders, while the project manager speaks for the project team," Mr. West says.

In other words, the sponsor and project manager hold the project **family** together. Not only do the two partners benefit when they work well together—so does the project. According to PMI's Pulse of the Profession® research, having active sponsors— meaning executives who are engaged and who champion the strategic value of projects and communicate benefits to stakeholders—is the top driver of project success.

"Getting the sponsor involved is a huge piece of a successful project," says Jessica Janko, PMP, PMO manager, Medical **Transportation** Management, St. Louis, Missouri, USA. "If you don't have an active sponsor, it's challenging not only because you don't have clear expectations in terms of what the organization is trying to accomplish, but you also don't have an advocate for the project. We need project sponsors as much as they need project managers."

Of course, all relationships take work. These strategies can help both sponsors and project managers build an effective partnership.

1. Talk Early and Often

A solid rapport between sponsors and project managers starts even before the project begins.

"Just as you would do a kickoff meeting for a project, it's **important** to do a kickoff meeting for the project manager-sponsor relationship," says Paul Dinsmore, PMP, PMI Fellow, director, Dinsmore- Compass Consulting Co., Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At this initial meeting, which ideally lasts at least an hour, "both parties should outline what they understand their roles to be," says Mr. Dinsmore, who has worked as a sponsor. By the meeting's conclusion, the project manager and sponsor should each have a written document that lists their responsibilities.

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That should be the **start**, not the end, of the dialogue. Maintain communication as the project progresses, especially with face-to-face meetings. "It's essential that the project manager and

project sponsor have at least a half hour booked every month,” says Vicki James, PMP, senior project manager and business analyst, Professional Project Services, Seattle, Washington, USA.

Ms. James recalls working on a project whose release date kept getting delayed. “I was reporting it all along, but only in status reports,” she says. “At the [last minute](#), the sponsor said, ‘Wait a minute. Why didn’t I know the release date was getting pushed?’ I guess she didn’t read my reports.”

The entire half hour of in-person meetings may not be needed, Ms. James says, but the time can be used to quickly go over the status report and ensure everyone is in the know.

2. Make It Personal

Establishing a personal connection goes a long way toward building trust—a necessity for any strong partnership.

“How many kids does the person have? What are this person’s hobbies? You can talk about things that aren’t just issues of the project,” says Mr. Dinsmore. “Those early friendly conversations build a rapport that makes working together easier.”

Social media can shed a light on possible conversation starters, says Ms. James. “Look up your sponsor on LinkedIn—find out what their interests are, where they went to school, what jobs they’ve had,” she says. “Look for areas of commonality. See if there’s something you can glean that you can build a relationship upon or at least ask questions about.”

But keep in mind it’s not always personal. The project manager and sponsor can become fast friends, but if a project is going poorly, a sponsor still may have to cancel it. “At the end of the day, the sponsor is the one writing the checks and the one with his or her head on the chopping block with the board of directors,” says Ms. James. “They have the right to overrule the project manager or cancel a project, and it’s not necessarily a judgment on the project manager’s abilities.”

3. Build the Team Together

Ideally, the first people on a project will be the sponsor and project manager, who’ll build the team from there. “It’s difficult when the sponsor has already hired an architect and a cost consultant and a structural engineer and then says, ‘Oh, I think I need a project manager,’” Mr. West says. “Then the project manager is the new kid on the block, and the architect and cost consultant and engineer don’t feel they owe the project manager any intrinsic loyalty.” When the project manager gets involved in hiring the team members—sitting in their interviews, asking them questions—then “the team members will in turn feel they owe the project manager some loyalty,” he says.

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But forming a team doesn't guarantee it will never change. Roles can shift, people leave jobs, and the team you hired to launch a project may not be the team that finishes it.

Even the sponsor can change mid-project. When that happens, the project manager must form a bridge between the old sponsor and the new one, says Sakshee Kohli, PMP, program manager, ANZ Bank, Melbourne, Australia.

"New sponsors tend to have a new perspective and often question past decisions. The best strategy in that case is for the project manager to get the two sponsors together, even for just 20 minutes, to say, 'Here's what we've done so far, here's what we're working on now, and here's where we're headed,'" Ms. Kohli says. "Explain that where we're headed is open to suggestions, but we can't change what's been done in the past."

4. Speak the Same Language

You can't work with your colleagues if you don't understand them. So forgo jargon, and if you have to use technical terms, take the time to explain them.

"Just as a doctor might need to translate medical terms for a patient, a project manager can help the sponsor understand things like earned value analysis and critical path—all those terms project managers take for granted," Mr. West says.

On the flip side, project managers should educate themselves in the business's language as well, he says. When Mr. West worked on the relocation of a pathology laboratory for the Royal Air Force, he asked the sponsor, a pathology expert, to show him around the existing lab. "Getting that tour helped me understand their language and understand what worked in the current lab and what didn't," he says.

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Remember that "what" is often less important than "why": The definition of something like "schedule variance" has less significance for a sponsor than why it matters. "When explaining earned value, for instance, make sure the sponsor knows what it means for them and how it affects them and affects this project," Ms. Janko says.

5. Help Me Help You

A sponsor serves as the project's advocate, breaking down obstacles that impede progress. But sponsors can't solve problems if they aren't aware of them.

"Most project managers are independent individuals and assume they should try to handle problems themselves," Mr. Dinsmore says. "Sometimes they don't realize that the sponsor's role is to help, particularly in situations that are political in nature."

A sponsor usually knows the ins and outs of an organization and its cast of players, so project managers should take advantage of that knowledge and ask questions to understand the stakeholders. "I've been in a situation where there were external roadblocks preventing a project from moving forward," Ms. Kohli says. "The sponsor identified for me the people I needed to talk to, and shared strategies for communicating with those people most effectively, so it didn't seem politically influenced. My sponsor knew background that I didn't know when I joined the organization, and that helped a lot."

But again, it's a two-way street: Sponsors should also reach out to their project managers, says Mr. Dinsmore. "The best thing a sponsor can do is say, 'Hey, if you need help convincing so-and-so, I know him well and we can work together on this.'"

6. Anticipate Surprises

No one likes to be caught off guard. Sponsors should try to avoid surprising project managers with scope creep—but if the scope must change, they must understand that might cause cost increases and time delays.

"Organizations exist in a constantly changing competitive environment," Mr. West says. "So scope might need to change, particularly if it's a very long project—how can you be sure that the reasons for the project that exist now will still exist in two years' time?"

As for project managers, they should never keep bad news to themselves—especially if negative developments call into question the project's strategic value. "If a problem affects the business case, let me know," says Mr. West. "If costs are rising, if delays are creeping in, the sponsor needs to know. When the business case for a project goes negative, something's got to be done about it, and that's the sponsor's responsibility."

When surprises happen—and they will—both sponsors and project managers must try to stay as flexible as possible.

7. Stay in Your Lane

Micromanaging is "the cardinal sin of project sponsorship," says Mr. Dinsmore. When both parties do the work of building trust, outlining roles and responsibilities, and communicating regularly, micromanagement shouldn't be an issue. "Presumably, the right project manager has been assigned to the project, so the project sponsor has to trust that that person will do the job," Mr. Dinsmore says.

A time suck for both parties, “micromanagement is not productive for anyone,” Ms. Janko says. “It usually happens because the sponsor doesn’t know what’s going on—they’re not seeing what they expected to see or they’re receiving different metrics—so they get overly involved. Having an open dialogue up front alleviates that issue.”

Project managers should remember, though, that just because it’s annoying doesn’t mean it’s micromanagement. “I had a project sponsor who did one thing that I thought was really micromanage-y, and it used to bug the heck out of me,” Ms. James says. The sponsor in question wanted to see the project schedule in a particular format, “because when she did her master’s she had studied critical path and she wanted to see the float on the project,” she says. “Looking back, I realize she was a great sponsor, and she probably did have a better grasp on critical path. So, as a project manager, you have to ask yourself: Are they really micromanaging? Why are they making this request?” In the scheme of things, it might not be so bad.”

It takes two to create an effective relationship between sponsors and project managers. If they both hold up their ends of the bargain, they—and their projects— will reap the rewards.

Sponsors in Action

On Target: 81% of projects at high-performing organizations— those that complete 80% of projects on time, on budget and within original goals—have active sponsors. At low-performing organizations, just 45% of projects have active sponsors.

On Strategy: 66% of strategic initiatives are successful when they have actively engaged sponsors. Without active sponsors, just 41% of strategic initiatives are successful.

On Organizational Change: 81% of organizations that are highly effective with organizational change report frequently using executive sponsors on their strategic initiatives, compared to only 25% of organizations minimally effective.

On Complexity: When it comes to complexity in projects, a sponsor who actively supports the project is the **second** factor with the greatest impact on the success of projects—second only to effective communication.

Check out www.PMI.org/Pulse this month for the new in-depth report on executive sponsorship.