The Project Manager's Guide to Dealing with Difficult Sponsors

By Dana Brownlee

P art of the challenge that the project manager faces is the reality of having to serve so many different stakeholders and sometimes being pulled in very different directions. Most of us have been taught that our "sponsor" is the person who is the champion of the effort. Indeed, the sponsor is often the one that we are required to seek out for support and issue resolution throughout the project. So what do you do when your sponsor *is* the problem? As I travel across the country and sometimes beyond to speak to business analysts, project managers, and team leaders about how to deal with difficult team members, I am astounded by how often someone raises their hand to ask, "*But what do you do if your* sponsor *is the problem?*" I have to admit that having a problem sponsor poses an interesting dilemma, but strategies do exist that you can use to address this not-too-uncommon situation. Let's explore a few different varieties of the "difficult sponsor" and see how they can be managed for optimum success.

> " Most of us have been taught that our 'sponsor' is the person who is the champion of the effort. ...What do you do when the sponsor is the problem? "

Sponsor Type 1: "I hope you don't mind me intimidating everyone with my overbearing nature at your team meetings…I'm just trying to help you speed things along."

Sometimes the problem is getting the sponsor to show up for meetings as requested. On the other hand, sometimes we're sorry they did show up when they become our "problem participants." In this situation, try these meeting facilitation techniques:

- Meet with the sponsor prior to the meeting and specifically discuss what you need from them in the session. Possibly write out talking points for them: Many will appreciate this if it's done in the spirit of helping take one more thing off their plate (that is, if you make it clear that you do not intend to be telling them what specifically to say). Ask them to withhold their opinion until others have weighed in, to avoid tainting others' input.

- If you sense that others may be intimidated by the sponsor's opinion, suggest that the group do a "round robin" and start at the end of the table opposite from the sponsor (so that their opinion comes near the end).

- Stand up! If you stand when everyone else is seated, you immediately regain control of the group (temporarily). Thank the sponsor for their input (even note it visibly), and redirect the conversation as needed.

- Repeat their point and write it down. Although this may sound counterintuitive, often a sponsor will "get up on a soapbox" (and not back get off of it) because they don't feel heard. When you repeat the point back to them and then write it down for all to see (on a flip chart or whiteboard), it reassures them that they have indeed been heard and immediately communicates an appreciation for their point.

- Ask for solutions. Sometimes meeting participants (and even sponsors) get caught in a cycle of whining and venting about problems. First, if you agree with the issue, voice your agreement,. Then simply ask the sponsor to suggest a solution. Insist that the issue being raised is important enough to warrant devoting some energy to coming up with a solution.

Sponsor Type 2: "I'm not exactly clear on what I'm looking for, but I'll be sure to hold you responsible when I don't get it …"

Too often sponsors may have a vague idea of what they want or, even worse, they may be frustrated by a complicated problem or issue but have no real idea of what they want done to address it. The first phase of the project management cycle (initiating) is the point at which the sponsor (or senior managers) should clarify why the project is being initiated and determine the high-level expectations of the project. Too often this step is skipped and project managers are sent on a wild goose chase trying to reach a loosely or poorly defined objective. Don't fall into that trap. Try these best practices instead:
- Clarify the effort early and often. Identify in-scope items and out-of-scope items (out-of-scope is critical), tangible deliverables, timing expectations, budget restrictions, roles and responsibilities, known risks, and key stakeholders.
- Identify their "soap box issue" early and emphasize WIIFT (*What's In It For Them*). If they don't understand exactly what they want, ask them to explain their motivation/driving factor. Often, executives have a "soap box issue," predetermined bias, or hypothesis that they want validated. Try to find out what this is as soon as possible.
- Ask the sponsor to prioritize cost, time, and scope (good, fast, and cheap). Which is most important (relative to the others)? *Hint: The answer is "not all 3."* Think of "fast food"—the focus is intentionally fast and cheap. Be clear which constraints are actually driving the project.
- Explicitly ask how they will define success. Always ask the sponsor to finish this sentence: "*I will consider this project a success if…*"

Sponsor Type 3: "Would you please boil the ocean? (and create world peace too while you're at it)?"

We've all encountered the sponsor who wants you to achieve the impossible. They somehow think you've got a magic wand tucked away in your cubicle and can move mountains. When you encounter this type of sponsor, don't be drawn into their haze of wishful thinking. Instead, try these techniques:
- Try to identify the specific mandatory requirements (and separate the "wants" from the "needs"). Sometimes they will ask for a Porsche when a skateboard will do. Also, there may simply be a knowledge gap and they don't realize that there is a quicker, easier way to get them what they actually want.
- Document your risk analysis. Although we know that virtually all projects encounter problems, we usually spend little to no time analyzing risk before the effort starts. Don't make that mistake! Assemble a few key stakeholders, brainstorm a list of potential risks, then estimate the likelihood and impact of each event. For each risk event, multiply the likelihood by the anticipated impact to quantify the severity. Add the severity of all risk events to determine an estimate of risk for the project.

For example, see the table below.

Risk Event	Probability of Occurrence	Anticipated Impact	Severity
Supplier goes out of business	20%	$1M	$200K
Team loses key resource	75%	$100K	$75K
Inclement weather occurs	50%	$200K	$100K
Technology fails	20%	$500K	$100K
Total Estimated Risk			**$475K**

Check with the sponsor to ensure that he or she is comfortable with that level of risk (e.g., $475K in the example above). Also, ask the sponsor to help you come up with a back-up plan proactively. (For example*, "Jim, I know that if we lose our lead system architect, it will severely impact our timeline. In an effort to be as proactive as possible, I'd like to find out from you what we can do in the unlikely event that that does happen."*) Even if they insist that you proceed, your having documented these risks will be very valuable to you and the team. If you are proceeding, work with the team to prioritize risks and identify mitigation strategies and/or back-up plans for the most severe risks.

- Remember the triple constraint. When they change one element, it impacts the others. If there is a reduction in time, emphasize the impact on cost and scope. *(For example, "Jim, I understand that you now need to roll out the new release a month earlier than planned, and we can do that, but there will be an impact on cost and scope. I can either reduce the scope and hold off on some of the features until the next release or spend about $50K more to expedite things. What is your preference?")*

- Push back if the sponsor's expectations are just not realistic. (For example,*"Jim, I would be irresponsible if I didn't tell you that I don't think this can be accomplished with the level of quality we would expect. I know you would prefer that I be very honest now (before any time and money have been invested) rather than that I give you a laundry list of apologies after an unsuccessful project. I'd really like to be positioned for success, and I honestly have real concerns here."*)

Sponsors are supposed to be our protectors, and often they are. Unfortunately, the difficult sponsor can make an already challenging project excruciating. Admittedly, dealing with a sponsor is a unique challenge due to the political realities, and there are no easy answers. Sometimes a difficult sponsor does not respond to reason and helps contribute to a very negative experience for the project manager. More often than not, the project manager is too intimidated to deal with the situation at all. Don't make that mistake. Proceed with caution, use tact and diplomacy, be strategic, but do address the issue. The sophisticated project manager can indeed manage many stakeholders— even the difficult sponsor!

About the Author

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