**Harvard
Business
Review**

Project Management

How to Be an Effective Executive Sponsor

by Ron Ashkenas

May 18, 2015

Over the past decade, the role of the "executive sponsor" has become well accepted and even ubiquitous in organizations. In fact, most of the literature about project and change management suggests that having a C-level sponsor is a key requirement for success. There are a number of reasons: The sponsor makes sure that the project's goals are aligned with overall company strategy, garners support (and overcomes resistance) from other senior executives, and provides ongoing direction as the effort unfolds. In

contrast with the project leader, who focuses mostly on day-to-day execution, the sponsor role is much more strategic, focusing on creating conditions for success instead of tactical implementation.

Aside from playing a huge role in a project's success, effective sponsorships can also be worthwhile for senior executives, as they get to oversee key initiatives that are important to the company and CEO. Unfortunately, many senior executives often aren't sure what it means to be a "sponsor," and how they're supposed to truly enhance project outcomes. When the responsibilities and expectations are unclear, the role becomes either a meaningless designation or creates dysfunction. These examples show how this tends to play out:

In a large financial services company, there is a policy that every major project (i.e., over a certain dollar threshold) needs to have a senior-level sponsor in order to be "official" and get funding. However because there are many hundreds of projects that qualify, most senior managers sign on as sponsor to dozens of projects. This is on top of their regular jobs. Consequently, very few are actually involved in the projects (many can't even list the ones that they are sponsoring). The role largely consists of skimming project review decks and occasionally signing off on a milestone. So without actual strategic guidance and support, many projects founder, fail to get sufficient funding, or get stuck between different parts of the business.

In a global engineering organization, the CEO designates C-suite sponsors for the biggest initiatives in the company. Sponsors are supposed to ensure cross-functional alignment of these major projects. But because of the deferential, hierarchical culture of the organization, most project leaders—who are farther down on the org chart—hesitate to interact with their sponsors until key milestone review meetings. However, these are highly orchestrated: presentations are reviewed, revised, and massaged a number of times before actually getting to the sponsor. Project managers simply seek approval; the sponsor doesn't have an opportunity to add any substantive value.

In both of these cases, senior executives weren't sure of how to play the sponsor role. They didn't know how much input to provide or what they could do to help support the project. Without a clear understanding of responsibilities and expectations, they either ended up sponsoring more projects than they could manage, as in the first

company, or they allowed cultural issues to subvert the power of the being a sponsor, as in company two. Ultimately, sponsorship became a ritualistic and empty assignment for both.

This uncertainty about what being a sponsor means is exacerbated by the fact that many executives are not held accountable for their sponsorships. Often they are selected by the CEO or a senior committee, because someone has to fill the role and they have some previous experience with the subject. This results in many taking on the job without being truly invested in the assignment. Then, given everything else on their plates, they don't take the time to really figure out what's needed.

So how can leaders make the most of these roles? Let me suggest two steps:

First, before launching a new project, the sponsor and the project leader should meet to set, clarify, and align expectations. This is particularly important if the sponsor was not actively involved in the project conception (and was only asked to be the sponsor after the fact), and may not understand the background and issues. The project leader can address the amount of guidance, senior-level support, and resources that would be needed for the project. The sponsor can analyze and sharpen the project's objectives, establish key milestones, and approve a review and communication schedule. For this to work however, both have to be able to talk candidly, which requires courage on the part of the project leader and encouragement on the part of the sponsor.

Next, and perhaps more importantly, the sponsor and the project leader have to be realistic about how much time and effort will be required from the executive level. If the sponsor wants to take project sponsorship seriously, she should be clear about the commitment. Sponsoring a dozen different projects is a worthless proposition, since the executive won't have the bandwidth to provide any

meaningful support. Therefore the executive needs to push back on requests and only accept the very few programs that she's passionate about and will make a difference to the company. And she has to accept accountability for seeing these through. Setting up key meetings, reviews, and checkpoints can cut down on time, but it takes a strong emotional commitment to do what is necessary to help see the project through. This can be incredibly rewarding for the sponsor too, since it provides an opportunity to work with senior colleagues and be viewed as an enterprise leader.

Having an executive-level sponsor can be crucial for shepherding major projects, particularly those that cut across functions. But in order for this to happen, both the executive and the project leader he or she is sponsoring must be clear about their mutual expectations and time commitments for insuring a success.

Ron Ashkenas is a coauthor of the *Harvard Business Review Leader's Handbook* and a Partner Emeritus at Schaffer Consulting. His previous books include *The Boundaryless Organization*, *The GE Work-Out*, and *Simply Effective*.