Improving Executive Sponsorship of Projects

A Holistic Approach

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Abstract

This book is a resource for senior managers looking to enhance project outcomes by improving executive project sponsorship. It is also a source for project managers and sponsoring executives seeking information to improve sponsor effectiveness.

Improving Executive Sponsorship of Projects addresses gaps in current project management literature. From a senior management perspective, the gap is the lack of resources explaining why and how to establish a program to improve executive sponsorship strategically across an organization. From a tactical perspective, the gap is a scarcity of actionable materials to clarify roles, responsibilities, expected behaviors, and identify support necessary for improving sponsor effectiveness.

The authors identify key factors to consider before creating an executive sponsorship improvement program or enhancing an existing one and explain why executive sponsorship is important to an organization, how an organization's culture influences the effectiveness of the sponsor role, and why project management standards are critical to success. They explore what roles, responsibilities, and behavior should be considered and how to determine whether the person in the sponsor role is the right person and prepared to do the job. Finally, the book provides a process, with tools, to assess an organization's readiness to implement an executive sponsorship program, develop a plan for improvement, and monitor the progress of a program once it has begun.

Keywords

Contents

Acknowledgments

Preface

A credible modern book about sponsorship needs four ingredients that are hard to find in a single individual:

1. An executive who has implemented sponsorship in the real world on a national scale (depth—Dawne)
2. A consultant who has worked with a variety of organizations of different sizes and industries to implement and refine sponsorship programs (breadth—Payson)
3. An academic who is familiar with recent literature and the evolving role of the project sponsor (book learnin'—Dawne)
4. Someone who can communicate ideas clearly and concisely in writing (at this point we both point nervously at one another and look at the ground)

Dawne and Payson bring a combined 80 years of work experience to this book project, our complementary background and skills combining (we hope) to bring you a unique and useful reference. Although we have known each other since meeting in the mid-1980s when Dawne was the IBM marketing representative to Payson's start-up software development firm, our professional relationship blossomed 10 years later when Dawne was an executive for a multinational project-based organization where Payson's consulting firm was hired to teach project management and sponsorship.

Dawne has walked the talk. She built a PMO and served on the executive team of an organization for which effective project management and sponsorship were vital strategic disciplines. Over the course of 7 years, she introduced and sustained continuous improvement of project management standards and sponsorship practices. Retiring in 2012 to complete her doctorate in Organization and Management with an emphasis on

project management, she complemented her advanced studies with practical experience of someone who has been there and done that.

Payson Hall began his project management career working on software development and later large-scale systems integration projects where profitability and project management are inseparable. Payson started a project management consulting and training company in 1991 that became Catalysis Group in 1993. Over the past 25 years Payson has helped a variety of public and private sector organizations improve their project management and sponsorship practices.

Troubled by the scarcity of material on how to improve the effectiveness of project sponsorship, Dawne was passionate about developing practical guidance that was actionable. This book project was born from a conversation between Dawne and Tim Kloppenborg in 2015, in which Tim suggested Dawne write her own book, combining her academic research and her real-world experience. When Dawne mentioned the project to Payson over lunch in the summer of 2015, he begged her to let him participate, firmly believing that sponsorship is the vital, underappreciated cornerstone of improving project management practice, and knowing that there was not much practical material about the subject in print.

Writing a book is hard work. We are pleased to say that our friendship has survived this collaboration, driven by our passion for the subject. We hope that you find the results helpful.

CHAPTER 1

Approach to Improving Executive Project Sponsorship

Defining Executive Project Sponsorship

An executive project sponsor is a senior manager serving in a formal role given authority and responsibility for successful completion of a project deemed strategic to an organization's success. Executive project sponsorship is the application of skills and political power to perform the role of executive sponsor and guide a project to successful completion. Successful completion is achieved by either meeting the project's defined goals or by terminating the project if its value proposition becomes compromised.

The Approach

This book, *Improving Executive Sponsorship of Projects: A Holistic Approach,* provides a resource for senior management, executive project sponsors, Project Management Office (PMO) leaders, and project managers seeking to improve the effectiveness of executive project sponsorship. Written from an executive's perspective, the book addresses the scarcity of material concerning organizational barriers to effective sponsorship and the necessity for senior management engagement in planning for and successfully implementing this role. From a tactical perspective, the book provides an approach for formalizing clear roles, responsibilities, and support, to improve sponsor effectiveness and working relationships with project managers. From a strategic perspective, the book offers a practical approach

for engaging senior management in discussions about executive project sponsorship and the continuous improvement of this role. From an operational perspective, this book provides assessment tools to determine organizational preparedness for a sponsorship program and prioritize continuous improvement endeavors. This work focuses on the commitments that senior executives must make to position the executive project sponsor role to be successful:

- Ensuring linkages between projects and strategic initiatives
- Securing organizational buy-in to the role
- Implementing project management standards
- Defining clear executive project sponsorship roles and responsibilities
- Funding and supporting executive sponsorship training
- Ensuring the right people are in the role
- Planning for continuous improvement

We identify key factors to consider when creating or enhancing an executive project sponsorship program, explaining why executive sponsorship is important to an organization, how organizational culture influences the effectiveness of the sponsor role, and why project management standards are critical to sponsor success. Using a systems thinking[1] approach that looks holistically at the linkages and interdependencies between the components of a sponsorship program and its whole, we provide processes and tools for assessing the current state of organizational preparedness for executive project sponsorship and developing a plan for improvement and monitoring progress. Finally, we offer practical suggestions for improving communication between project sponsors and project managers, a keystone to success.

This chapter first asserts the value of executive project sponsorship, and then traces the evolution from ancient to modern thinking about sponsor roles and responsibilities and explains why senior managers are crucial to this role. Next we review traditional sponsor responsibilities during the project life cycle. The chapter concludes by introducing the framework used in Chapters 3 through 6 to guide development of an

Figure 1.1 Framework for assessing a sponsorship program

executive sponsorship improvement plan (Figure 1.1) and highlights an organizational preparedness assessment tool for monitoring continuous improvement (Figure 1.6) explored in detail in Chapter 7.

Executive Sponsorship

In its 2016 publication of executive leader and PMO director survey results, the Project Management Institute (PMI) reported projects with active executive sponsorship were more successful than those without it (Figure 1.2).[2]

Executive project sponsorship can have a profound impact on project success and is a strategic role that requires thoughtful implementation and careful nurturing. The ideas and concepts in this book will help shape thinking on how to approach sponsorship program development and implementation to make it more effective and provide a path for continuous improvement.

With Active Executive Sponsorship

Without Active Executive Sponsorship

24%

76%

54%

46%

■ Met Goals/Intent   □ Did Not Meet Goals/Intent
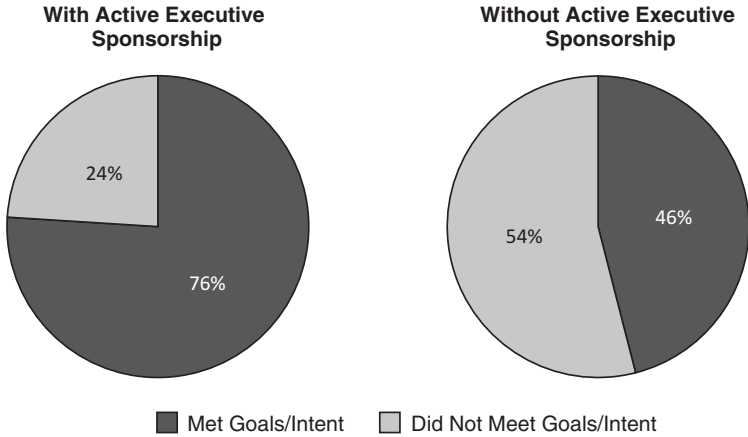
Figure 1.2 Projects with and without active executive sponsorship

Origins of Executive Sponsorship

History provides insights about how the project sponsor role has evolved over time. Project executive sponsorship has existed in some form for millennia. Consider the great projects of antiquity, when kings like Khufu of Egypt sponsored architectural wonders like the Great Pyramid at Giza in 2500 BC.[3] Since the beginning of recorded history powerful rulers and religious leaders have served as sponsors, commissioning engineering masterpieces throughout the Greek and Roman eras, Chinese dynasties, and the European Renaissance.[4] Notable project sponsors are visible throughout the 1800s during the Industrial Revolution and the 1900s in numerous landmark projects. Each of these historical projects had some form of executive sponsorship, represented by the person(s) who oversaw or championed the efforts to successful completion. In these instances, the sponsors provided leadership by supplying funding, ensuring resources were available, and using their political power to overcome barriers. Figure 1.3 depicts some of these notable historic sponsors. The function of these historical sponsors is similar to the roles of the project sponsor found in the recent literature.[5]

Modern Conceptualization of Executive Project Sponsorship

As the project management discipline became more formalized in the latter half of the 20th Century, the need for better definition of the project

2500 BC	• King Khufu –Great Pyramid at Giza
447-432 BC Greek Era	• Pericles –The Parthenon
220-206 BC Chinese Dynasty	• Qin Shi Huang – China's "Great Wall"
70-80 AD Roman Era	• Emperor Vespasian – TheColiseum
1stHalf 12thcentury European Renaissance	• Bishop Etienne d-Orleans – Chapel of St. Vincent at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Tournai
Mid-1800's	• Cyrus West Field – Transatlantic Cable: Built 1854-1858 • Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Collis Huntington, and Mark Hopkins and Thomas Duran – Transcontinental Railroad : Built in 1860s & completed 1869

1900's	• U.S. Government sponsored
	  ○ Panama Canal – 1906-1914
	  ○ Hoover Dam – 1931-1936
	  ○ Atomic Bomb – 1942-1945
	  ○ First manned moon landing – 1969

Figure 1.3 Some notable historic sponsors

sponsor's role became apparent. There was an emerging understanding of project managers as responsible for day-to-day planning, management, and execution of projects, but this duty could not be performed in a vacuum. Members of the senior management team had an essential role in funding, guidance, oversight, and representing an organization's interest in project decision making. Initially, "sponsor" was defined primarily in relation to project management practices. The 2000 edition of PMI's *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® guide)*[6] uses the word "sponsor" fewer than a dozen times in the body of the document, generally describing the sponsor as a funder and approver of key deliverables, risks, and changes. Until late in the 20th Century, little was written about the characteristics and responsibilities necessary for effective sponsorship or how to do the job.

Over the past 20 years, executive sponsorship has become recognized as critical to project success. No longer just a figurehead for oversight and

approvals, the executive sponsor has become an integral member of the project team with more clearly defined role and responsibilities. A synopsis of these pivotal years provides insight into the emerging behaviors identified as necessary for effective sponsorship and project success.

A review of project management literature from 1997 to 2013 shows the term "executive project sponsorship" gaining momentum.[7] From 1997 to 2006, research focused on identifying roles and responsibilities as well as:

- Behavioral attributes—enthusiasm, interest, ownership, reputation, seniority, influential power, communication skills, and compatibility
- Specific facets of the role—being a project's champion, financier, supporter, power broker, or relationship builder
- Commonalities to historical responsibilities—setting objectives, providing funding and resources, facilitating stakeholder communications, and promoting teamwork by motivating, recognizing, and compensating the project team[8]

Researchers began reporting sponsorship responsibilities in terms of their organizational context, like new product launches and complex infrastructure projects.[9] Phrases like "using positional power as an influencer" became associated with sponsorship along with an emerging emphasis on the sponsor serving as a coach and mentor to the project manager.[10] Sponsorship was discussed in the context of the sponsor's willingness to be available to the project team and the sponsor's role in assuring that the project being sponsored was an appropriate use of organizational resources.[11] Juggling multiple needs of various stakeholders and dealing with complexity and chaos became identifiable as key attributes of effective sponsorship.[12] As sponsorship evolved with the support of top-level management from managing projects to programs and then portfolios, interest grew in the application of situational leadership skills in project sponsorship.[13] By 2006 there was recognition that careful selection and assignment of an executive with specifically desired characteristics was more effective than simply assigning any available senior executive to act as sponsor on mission critical projects. A consensus emerged among thought leaders in the field that sponsors needed to exhibit additional attributes to be successful[14]:

- Willingness to drive change in the organization
- Capable of developing mutual trust relationship with the project manager
- Ability to take a holistic view of the project
- Diplomacy in dealing with peers and senior management
- Ability to establish and maintain discipline on the project
- Capacity to make timely and informed decisions
- Involvement and commitment throughout the project
- Passion for the project

Drivers were identified that positively impacted project sponsorship effectiveness, such as having visible support from top management, effective mechanisms for stakeholder communication, formalized roles and responsibilities, a level of sponsor involvement commensurate with the organization's commitment to the project, co-operation from peers, and compatibility between the sponsor and organizational values.[15]

Until the mid-2000s, no widely accepted model existed for determining who might best fill the sponsorship role. In practice the definition and implementation of the sponsorship role varied from one organization to the next. There were no published sponsorship role standards as there were for project managers.[16] However, evidence emerged showing there were consistent themes regarding how the role was effectively performed, which led to the creation of the Situational Sponsorship Model.[17] The Situational Sponsorship Model emphasized considering an organization's needs for project governance and a project's need for support, which facilitated a better determination regarding the skills and competencies required of a sponsor for a specific project. There was also recognition that effective sponsorship was dependent upon personal characteristics and behaviors of the individuals carrying out the role.[18] Three key behaviors highlighted were:

- Excellent communication and listening skills
- Effectively handling ambiguity—especially in complex projects and programs
- Managing self when faced with competing priorities

With the global economic collapse of 2008, investors demanded increased organizational transparency in operational activities. Assigning

accountability for key strategic project initiatives to a senior manager was recognized as a desirable solution. The sponsorship role emerged as a focal point for ensuring accountability, transparency, and strategic implementation of project-oriented investment opportunities.[19] As no prior sponsorship role and responsibility model had existed, the Situational Sponsorship Model, published that same year, was well timed for organizations that needed tools to determine, refine, and clarify sponsorship roles and responsibilities.

Current Thinking on Sponsorship Roles and Responsibilities

As interest in sponsorship standards continued to grow, individuals from the private and public sectors worked together to create a framework and set of standards for assessing the performance qualifications and competencies for project sponsors.[20] The GAPPS (Global Alliance for Project Performance Standards): A Guiding Framework for Project Sponsors was issued in August 2015 to support organizations interested in developing sponsors through established standards for sponsor roles and responsibilities. This framework is a performance-based competency model that infers competency based on the assessment of personal attributes and performance. Some details of the model's elements are found in Chapter 5.

Today's Expectations for Sponsors

Despite the evolution of the role in practice and in literature, one might wonder, "Why all the buzz about project sponsorship, isn't it really just about doing the things management does to help shepherd a major initiative through to successful completion?" It is that, but much more. Industry's understanding of the duties and contribution of the position has evolved and become refined over time. It is no longer acceptable to be an "accidental project sponsor," one unaware of or incapable of supporting the organization's project management practices or fulfilling the expected roles and responsibilities of project sponsorship.

Research has shown that when project sponsors are actively engaged projects have a higher likelihood of success,[21] but what does active engagement look like? It means involvement throughout the project life cycle, capitalizing on a sponsor's seniority, insight, and experience to benefit the project team, whether breaking down barriers, negotiating for resources, mentoring, or providing timely decisions.

Table 1.1 outlines where and how sponsors are traditionally involved in the five major project life-cycle phases today. While local practices regarding sponsor roles and responsibilities may vary, Table 1.1 is an example of what has worked successfully for the authors in practice.

Table 1.1 Sponsor involvement activities by project management life cycle phase

Sponsor Involvement Activities by Project Management Life Cycle Phases				
Initiating	Planning	Execution	Monitor & Control	Close
Verify & maintain strategic alignment of the project with senior management				
▲			▲	
Meet with project manager to discuss project charter, key stakeholders and expectations				
▲			▲	
Mentor project manager throughout project life-cycle to build their leadership skills				
▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
Review and sign-off on project plan and significant plan changes				
	▲		▲	
Attend project kick-off meeting and explain importance of this project to the organization				
	▲	▲		
Meet with project manager to review project status				
▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
Review and provide feedback on risk register and high priority risk response plans				
	▲	▲	▲	
Review and approve change requests that alter project scope, schedule, cost, and quality				
	▲	▲	▲	
Attend regularly scheduled core team meetings, providing insight and support				
	▲	▲	▲	
Attend project close-out meeting for celebration and recognition of team members				
				▲

An Organization Must Tailor Its Approach

Whether an organization has an established and effective sponsorship program, is looking to refine or improve an existing one, or is just beginning to explore the benefits of implementing a more thoughtful approach to sponsorship, the first step is to determine how the role is performed today and how it might be more effective. Readers exploring this book for ideas should consider the following as they develop their plans.

First, there is no one "right" way to implement the executive sponsorship role and its associated responsibilities. Each organization must decide how they want to use sponsors, who best fits the role, and what roles and responsibilities fit the organization's business context.

Second, an organization's environmental factors must be considered to develop an approach and pace that are feasible. This book contains suggestions based on our experience, but plans must be developed mindful of the organizational history and context.

Third, build support for your initiative with the executive management team early and work to sustain it. The process, cultural, and behavioral changes required to build and maintain an effective sponsorship program are not huge, but they require buy-in, co-operation, and commitment from the highest levels of the organization to succeed. Fortunately, there should be early, visible returns on the program investment in the form of better communication, more informed decision making, and better project outcomes.

As we will explore in later chapters, we believe the secret lies in not overcomplicating sponsorship implementation. We encourage our readers to avoid making start-up or improvement plans onerous. Start small and grow practices organically, particularly if no existing structures are in place. If existing structures are inadequate, add to them gradually. In our experience, success requires identifying organizational roadblocks and eliminating them and then focusing on what is expected of sponsors, getting necessary training, and then executing the role with appropriate support.

Depending on where an organization is in implementing both project management and the sponsorship role, the five-step assessment process (repeated below as Figure 1.4) provides a framework for building and
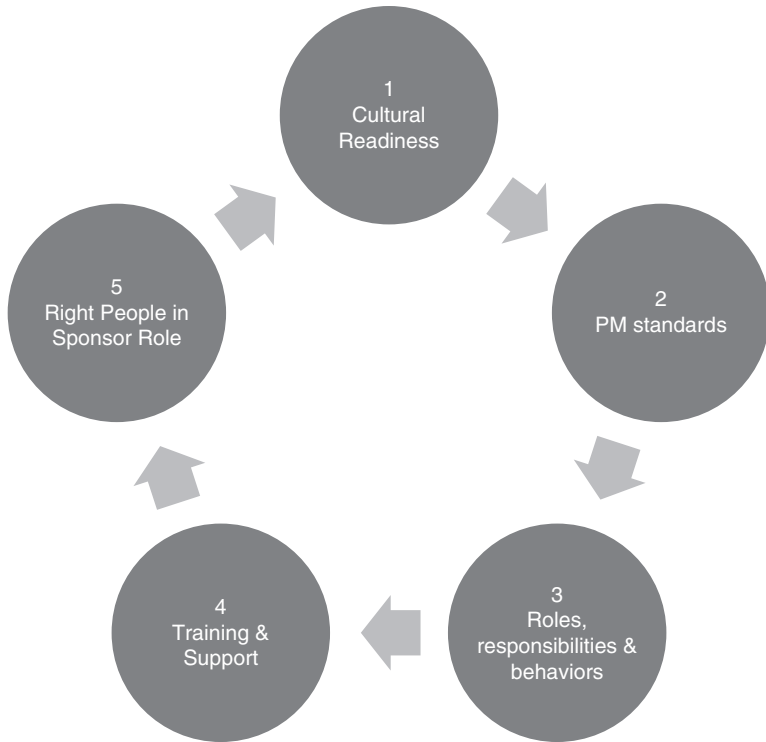
Figure 1.4 Five assessment steps

improving a successful program and the agenda for the remaining chap-
ters. Each of the steps must be considered in turn and local practice/
performance brought to a minimally accepted level for each iteration of
the process as part of the overall program. The steps are outlined below
and explored in more detail in Chapters 3 through 6 along with guidance
for assessing each area. Integrating those assessments to support initial
planning and ongoing process improvement is described in Chapter 7.
Planning for process improvement is addressed in Chapter 8.

Step 1. **Cultural readiness**: Gain buy-in from the senior manage-
ment team that having executive project sponsors on key
strategic projects is important for organizational success.
Agree on what this role means to the organization and what
culturally needs to be in place to support it.

Step 2. Project management standards: If an organization has minimal standardized project management practices defined and in use, then identify and implement a minimum useful set of practices to facilitate project success.

Step 3. Executive sponsor roles, responsibilities, and behaviors: Once standards are in place, define and formalize the sponsorship role, responsibilities, and expected behaviors. As a baseline, consider the list of sponsor activities from Table 1.1. Identify and communicate the sponsor behaviors expected to both sponsors and project managers.

Step 4. Executive sponsor training and support: Establish a training and mentoring program that supports sponsors in performing their role, responsibilities, and expected behaviors.

Step 5. Right people in sponsor role: Make effective performance of the sponsor role a key component of evaluating sponsoring executives.

Chapter Overviews

The remainder of this book describes an approach for building or refining an executive sponsorship program customized to the needs of an organization. Each chapter begins by explaining why the material is relevant, then exploring the material in detail. Chapters conclude with discussion questions and considerations for PMO and Project Management staff. For each element of the framework in Figure 1.4, assessment tools are provided in Chapters 3 through 6. If this book is used in an academic setting, the discussion questions can be used to stimulate learner debate and/or assess their knowledge in a particular area.[22] Figure 1.5 lists the book's chapters.

Chapter 2 explains why executive project sponsorship is important to an organization and why putting plans in place to improve or start a sponsorship program improves the chances for project success. The contents of Chapter 2 may be helpful in gaining buy-in from executive management for the sponsorship program.

Chapter 3 discusses how an organization's culture influences sponsorship and explores whether an organization is currently positioned to

Chapter 1	• Approach to improving executive project sponsorship
Chatper 2	• Executive sponsorship matters
Chatper 3	• Cultural influences on executive sponsorship
Chapter 4	• Importance of project management standards
Chatper 5	• Desirable executive sponsor characterisitics
Chatper 6	• Sponsor readiness
Chatper 7	• Roadmap to organizational preparedness
Chatper 8	• A plan to enhance executive sponsorship
Chapter 9	• Summary

Figure 1.5 Overview of the book

support the executive sponsorship role. A set of cultural assessment questions and a tool for gauging cultural readiness are provided.

Chapter 4 discusses the value of project management standards and practices to an organization. A set of tools recommended to support effective sponsorship and questions for assessing existing project management standards are provided.

Chapter 5 explores behaviors and temperaments necessary for effective executive sponsorship and explores current thinking on sponsor roles, responsibilities, and performance criteria. A collection of scenarios is presented to highlight necessary sponsor actions and rationale. The GAPPS *Guiding Framework for Project Sponsors* is presented and discussed as a foundation for gauging current sponsor competencies and an assessment tool is presented for examining individual sponsor behaviors.
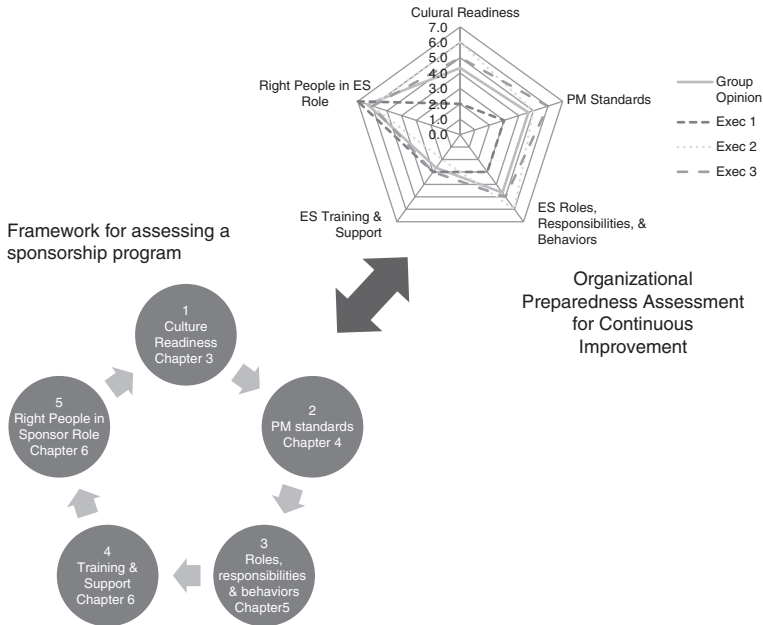
Figure 1.6 Assessment framework interaction with organizational preparedness tool

Chapter 6 explores the readiness of assigned individuals to perform the sponsor role. It provides assessment tools for gauging the effectiveness of an executive sponsorship program by examining project outcomes, and also examines existing sponsor training and support programs with an emphasis on preparing individuals to serve in the sponsor role.

Chapter 7 provides the organizational preparedness assessment (Figure 1.6) tool for consolidating assessment data gathered using the tools in Chapters 3 through 6. The overall assessment facilitates developing and prioritizing initial improvement plans as well as monitoring ongoing improvements to the executive sponsorship program.

Chapter 8 outlines a holistic approach for incorporating the material from previous chapters into an action plan for improving executive sponsorship and offers recommendations about initial priorities for organizations with minimal sponsorship infrastructure.

Chapter 9 summarizes the book's key take-away messages and encourages a call to action to begin the journey for improving executive project sponsorship.

Questions for Discussion

1. Projects throughout time have had sponsors—what new information has emerged in the early 21st Century regarding the sponsorship role that has changed expectations?

2. Why might sponsorship and standardized project management processes depend on one another for success?

3. Although more detail is presented later in this book, what factors were identified in this chapter as important to planning a sponsorship initiative?

4. What environmental factors might help or hinder development or enhancement of a sponsorship program?

5. Why might assessment and continuous improvement be important to a sponsorship program?

Considerations

Project Management Office

The PMO has an opportunity to take a leadership role in helping senior management understand the organizational importance of the executive sponsor role and in assessing the health of the organization's sponsorship program. PMO staff insights can be valuable in shaping the roles, responsibilities, and behaviors of sponsors and identifying the training and support required. The PMO should be prepared to provide senior management with the data needed to assess and build an effective sponsorship program.

Project Manager

Experienced Project Managers have an opportunity to offer their insights and vision for improved sponsorship roles, responsibilities, and behaviors. Actively engaging in dialogue with senior management as executive sponsorship is refined not only helps the project manager gain confidence working with executives but also affords them a unique opportunity to see an executive's perspective of the role as it is being transformed.

Notes

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8. Cooke-Davies, 2005; Hall, Holt, and Purchase, 2003; Helm and Remington, 2005; Kloppenborg et al., 2006; Pinto, 2000; Tighe, 1998; Whitten, 2002; and Wright, 1997.

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12. Hall, Holt, and Purchase, 2003.

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15. Cooke-Davies et al. 2006.

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22. Kloppenborg and Lanning, 2012, p. 13.

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Dawne E. Chandler, PhD, PMP®, is a management consultant with 35+ years of blended academic and corporate experience. For 17 years, she held various executive positions in project management, sales/marketing, strategic planning, international business and product development, process re-engineering, as well as heading an electronic services start-up. Dawne spent 18 years at IBM in various technical, sales, consulting, and management positions.

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