eCameron, Inc.
Turning Vision into Value

Challenges in Project Sponsorship

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Article Outline:

Reason For The Study

Recently, eCameron took a serious look at project sponsorship by conducting a series on non-scientific interviews. Initially the focus was the healthcare industry. As patterns started to emerge, however, others outside of that industry expressed serious interest. To address that interest and better understand the larger issue we expanded the interviews to outside healthcare. Candid and confidential interviews were conducted with project related personnel including executives, sponsors, project managers, and Project Management Office (PMO) managers. In summary:

- Sponsorship is an issue in all business domains.

- Good sponsorship is an essential component in creating successful projects.

- Many issues are pervasive across industries.

- Sponsors need to work with project managers to design a successful project outcome.

- Sponsor roles are neither properly defined nor supported.

Study Methodology

Interviews were held with individuals from three dozen different organizations. The interviewee's responsibilities ranged from project managers (both in information technology and operational centers) to the C-Suite. All of the people interviewed (regardless of domain) were focused on projects that altered business operations. This is a critical constraint on the study as their projects require organizational change management (As opposed to other domains like construction). This paper summarizes eCameron's findings.

Cross-Industry Issues

Although the intent of the survey was to find situations that were unique to Healthcare, many issues in project sponsorship are common across many domains. These include recognition of a problem with the sponsor role, sponsor engagement,

Table 1 - Hierarchical Trends in Sponsor Roles Perception

	Executives	Project Managers
Sponsorship Role	- Well understood. - Rarely a problem.	- Highly dependent on the individual. - Poorly defined. - An ongoing issue to manage.
Responsibilities of a Sponsor	- Wide range of definitions from one executive to the next.	- Largely the same from individual to individual.

role definition, and change management. These issues are intertwined, as we will discuss below.

Executives Do Not Recognize A Problem, Project Managers Do

A large majority of executives interviewed did not see any issues with the project sponsorship role.

Only Healthcare sees the project sponsor as critical to or responsible for change adoption.

They felt the role was well-defined and served the purpose intended. This very well could have been based on the fact that very few of the executives have a common definition of the sponsor's role. It is likely the definition was tailored to the situation. It is also possible that executives, who soon might need to step into the sponsorship role, were not likely to criticize themselves.

The few dissenters felt that the interactions between project managers and the sponsors are far too brief and project details too technical, resulting in decision-making by both sponsors and steering committee members being too hasty and based on incomplete data.

This was in sharp contrast to the project managers' view, which was highly critical of the level of support they received and the effectiveness of sponsors. When asked what could

be changed within the sponsor role, project managers had lists of items, while the executives never had more than one. The following issues came primarily from project managers and PMO managers.

Lack of Engagement

Lack of sponsor engagement was by far the most discussed issue: Project managers often felt "unsupported" and that the project was without leadership when sponsors would seemingly disappear. Repeatedly, non-executives indicated that the sponsors did not attend meetings nor give thorough (or any) response to requests for assistance.

The project managers felt strongly that they were often left to fend for themselves. Escalation was considered futile as no one knew why the project sponsor was unresponsive and everyone in the escalation path appeared ineffective at redirecting the sponsor as they have little or no influence over the sponsor's tasks. This was often a result of the level of the sponsor in the organization. Project sponsors "multiple levels above the project managers pay grade" exacerbated engagement issues.

When executives were asked about this problem the only answer was that sponsors were responsible for many other tasks besides the projects they sponsor and that project managers have to understand that. They felt the

sponsor's priorities were well understood.

Project Sponsorship Role Is Ill-Defined

Although project managers and most PMO managers hold a similar definition of a project sponsor, we found that within an organization the role is seldom defined (in writing) or agreed upon at all levels of the company. Key was the lack of a common definition of a project sponsor's role (see Proposed Solutions, below) and the need for the sponsor to be constantly engaged with the project. They are considered the face of the project to the end-users.

Project sponsors' roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined.

Organizational Change Management

Although change management is rarely seen as a sponsor responsibility for non-healthcare organizations, everyone cites inadequate change management as a major issue in the perceived value of the project. Hence it is included as a cross-industry issue. Inherent in this is that success is not achieved with delivering the defined scope on time and within budget. Success is delivering a product that is both adopted and improves the end-user's capabilities in doing their job. In other words, if the change is not adopted, the project is unsuccessful.

How change management is executed is poorly defined. There are a multitude of methods for its implementation, all carrying varying degrees of success. To be sure, sponsors are not expected to be change management experts (any more than they are expected to be project management experts); however, they must understand the need and account for the resources to make it happen. Often these will need to be resources added to the project from its inception.

The sponsor will have to know and understand the jobs of the end-users affected by the change and be able to rally everyone around the change.

Industry Specific Issues

The study produced a limited number of traits that appeared to be healthcare specific. This does not mean that similar conditions may not exist in other domains, but in this set of interviews they were only supported by the Healthcare interviewees.

Clinicians as Sponsors

Well over half of the healthcare interviews cited clinicians as poor sponsors. Those that did not mention this were asked if they felt this was an issue; most discounted it.

The complaints on clinicians were all based on the style of work the clinician did (hence the disclaimer that similar situations may occur in other industries). The broad classification was that clinicians are focused on short, often urgent, interactions that could have life threatening outcomes. To be specific:

- Clinician sponsors want projects to relate to improving their patient's quality of care. Business projects were more often neglected.

- Clinicians are trained to work on risk factors and issues. Not to be involved with anything that is running well (e.g., your doctor does not call you when you are well). Hence, they do little to support a project that is not reporting issues. Once it is in trouble, though, they jump into the project and micro-manage it with relatively poor results.

- Some clinician's professions are based on very short and episodic interactions (e.g., ER/ED, surgeons, and the like). They are not used to dealing in long-term "projects." Clinicians that deal in long-term care (e.g., oncology, chronic disease, and the like) are more effective sponsors.

- Clinicians often have schedules that are booked months in advance with room reserved for emergency appointments and are not available for short notice

meetings. (This is a variant on the priority issues note above.)

Power Differential

As nearly any patient who has been hospitalized knows, there is a long standing power struggle between doctors and nurses. Although, many organizations are trying to break this down, it still exists. Part of this it due to the nature of the job and part of it is cultural.

Many doctors are revered (especially by people who have not been hospitalized). People put them on a pedestal based on the doctors' years of education and ability to make life-and-death decisions. In the hospital environment, doctors do their rounds and make decisions (referred to as "doctor's orders") that technicians and nurses carry out. Even the terminology ensconces the hierarchy. However, the nurses are less subject to this episodic interaction with the patients. Nurses spend significant dwell time and learn more about the patient's condition and its subtleties. The result is nurses often have more information about potential diagnoses than the physician.

This creates a condition where physicians, merely by the type of job they do, fail to take the time nor do they have the people skills required of an effective project sponsor. Barking orders, treating people issues crassly, and feeling "all knowledgeable," creates strife and

animosity. This behavior carries over into their jobs as sponsors.

Proposed Solutions

Solutions to many of these problems are deep rooted in culture (social and corporate) and may take years to resolve. Following are some ideas that would be the first steps forward.

Leadership

The dearth of experienced leaders in today's organizations is appalling. Nowhere is this more evident than in how projects are run. From

> *Project Sponsors must be leaders.*

disseminating the vision of the company, to inspiring the troops, leaders are responsible for making the gains toward achieving the corporate vision. Both project sponsors and project managers need to lead their teams. However, more important is that each must also understand how to lead without authority—"leading up" and leading non-subordinate stakeholders.

Strong leaders must have the ability to "lead one's leaders." This requires concise project updates that clearly identify project risks and issues to ensure that executives carry through on the actions required to successfully address those risks and issues.

In the other direction, these leaders, especially the project sponsor, must

rally the end-user to be excited about adopting the change. This takes a soft approach that focuses on both individual and organizational change.

Selecting a sponsor for their domain knowledge, or even their enthusiasm for the project, is insufficient. The project sponsor has to have leadership skills first and foremost. They need to be able to empower the team, generate excitement in the vision, communicate the need for the change, enable the end-user to take ownership of the change, and help build the infrastructure to support it. This is the most critical contribution any sponsor can provide to realize the project's successful completion and adoption.

Accountability For Project Success

Of all the characteristics of leaders, accountability is essential. Too much of our culture is focused on blame, which is only a thinly veiled attempt to mask the desire to sidestep accountability. Holding ourselves and others accountable to fulfill our roles and responsibilities and deliver on our commitments is the cornerstone of running projects efficiently. Accountability for project success cannot lie at the feet of the project manager alone. The project manager is only delivering within a set of artificial bounds on the project, which all too often are conflicting. This is most evident when end-users

or sponsors increase scope and fail to provide commensurate increases in resources or the timeline.

To thwart this, project sponsors must be held, in-part, accountable for the level of success of the project. The area where this is most applicable is in the project's value—its adoption by the end-user and its ability to provide the capability needed. In most cases this is the result in the delicate balance of usability, functionality, time to market, and cost. Too much scope increases the cost; at some point the added expense decreases the effectiveness of the solution. Achieving the right balance must be part of the sponsors' goals and objectives and woven into any bonus structure they might have.

Communicate Priorities

It is felt that the single most common cause for a project sponsor's inability to engage in the project is conflicting priorities. The root cause for this could be in any number of areas. Table 2 shows some reasons and appropriate actions:

Tools can help with the communication and focus of the company. These include:

- Balance Scorecard templates and Strategy Maps that are available throughout the organization and reflect the current business environment are essential in keeping any organization aligned and focused on the essential components of the strategy.

- Implementation goals and guidelines to demystify the application of regulations in compliance projects to meet that organizations risk tolerance.

- Production metrics to understand the impact of projects focused on operational efficiencies.

Common Definition

The project sponsor needs to be seen as a partner with the project manager in delivering a project result that is focused on one or more strategic goals, compliance issues, or operational efficiencies. The sponsor's role should include the responsibility to:

- Maintain scope within the limits of the defined objective.

- Secure adequate funding for the required scope.

- Ensure involvement of the end-users (early and often) to address organization change management and adoption of the project's deliverable.

- Securing assistance from cross-functional departments to complete the project.
- Adjusting and communicating project priority within the organization.

Sponsor Training

The genesis of this report was to identify training techniques and styles. It found that few of the organizations interviewed had any form of sponsor training at all. Mostly it consisted of project managers working with their sponsors to come to an agreement on roles. This helps to a degree, but perpetuates the issues of poor definition, bifurcation in expectations between project teams and executives, and is often thwarted by the implied superiority of some sponsors. Formal job descriptions must be developed, goals set for the sponsors that are reflected in their reviews, and sponsors must be trained to do the job.

Training for sponsors cannot be conducted in isolation; all levels of

Table 2 - Common Priority Disconnects

Reason	Action
Sponsor does not have the project as part of his or her goals.	Determine why the project is missing from his or her goals: • If the project is still part of the company's strategic goals and the sponsor is responsible for the areas affected, add the success of the project to their goals. • If the project is not strategic or has lost its business case, cancel the project. • If the sponsor has too much work or is not interested in the project, assign a new project sponsor.
Sponsor is not responsible for the area the project is focused on.	• Assign a different project sponsor.
The sponsor's goals have changed due to a business change.	• Cancel the project if it is no longer on the strategic roadmap. • Re-prioritized the project and communicate its new priority to everyone. • Move the project to a group where the project is still a priority.

the organization must be trained on the sponsor's role. The curriculum must be built from the bottom up by encompassing the issues that face the organization. It must create ownership from the project team to the executives as the culture of the organization will need to change. This is not a single class or even a set of classes. This will need a champion at the highest level of the company who understands the need and is able to articulate its criticality to the entire organization. For if the project success rates are going to improve, sponsorship models must change.

Conclusion

In the end, project sponsorship is problematic in all industries. Industry specific issues exist that are rooted in its culture and training. Other industries may have similar issues that need to be addressed. The problem cannot be solved at the "grass roots" level. It must be addressed at the executive level through a corporate understanding of the project sponsors roles and responsibilities. Sponsors need to be held accountable for the project adoption, have strong leadership capabilities, and be able to communicate effectively throughout the organization.

Biography:

Todd C. Williams

A strong comprehensive strategic foundation coupled with project execution excellence allows companies to build the capabilities to thrive. Todd Williams' goal is to improve how companies implement their strategic plans—from definition to ensuring the proper people are in place. His passion is removing corporate roadblocks and bridging the gaps from vision to value. Utilizing twenty-five years of project rescue experience he helps all sizes of organizations achieve their goals.

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