

Would you be? Will you be? Won't you be my Sponsor?

Question:

I'm going to be quite honest with you Samoht, I am managing my first project, and it's not exactly the "walk in the park" that I was hoping for. But it's not entirely my fault. My team and I can only do so much. We are constantly waiting on our sponsor for approval to move from stage to stage. He's always too busy to make time for us. Can you give some insight into the duties of a good project sponsor? I will delicately pass this along to him.

Brianna

Answer:

Brianna

First of all, let's get one thing straight - you are the project manager and you need to take full responsibility for your project. Don't "pass the buck" to your sponsor.

Ha! Just kidding... In fact, an engaged sponsor is a project manager's best friend. Let me explain.

The sponsor is the person that has ultimate authority on a project. Usually, the sponsor provides funding for the project. The sponsor must help resolve major issues and scope changes, approve major deliverables, and provide high-level direction. This sounds great doesn't it? What all this really means is that if you are able to find an engaged sponsor, you won't have to do any work at all! In addition to the responsibilities I have just described you can start to get the sponsor to manage the schedule and budget as well. If you're lucky, the sponsor will slowly replace you until you're able to coast home on a successful project. The sponsor is usually much higher in the organization that you and they will have much more success getting people to do their work on time. Think about it. You can chastise your team until you are blue in the face, but if the sponsor tells them to do something they will quickly fall in line.

I call this technique "delegating upward".

Of course, you still have to complete status reports so it looks like you are in charge. The status reports will simply confirm to the sponsor the work that they already know is going on. This is a great way to manage expectations. Be careful that your boss does not catch on to this technique. If she does, she may ask you to manage two or three projects and that defeats the whole purpose.

This is a "work smarter" technique. It loses its value if you have to work harder.

Another thing about sponsors is that they need to be committed to the long-haul of the project. In my experiences, no matter how talented or handsome the project manager is, there are always unforeseen events that take place. The scope can change, deadlines are missed, budget overruns occur, etc. The sponsor should not think about jumping ship – even if the business case no longer makes sense. It is better for the sponsor to push the project to the end so that no one is embarrassed. Three months after the project ends, no one cares about tracking the business benefits anyway. Everyone has moved on to the next project.

I think this covers the role of a sponsor. Remember this piece of advice – “great sponsors make great project managers”. Your sponsor may be a jerk. Try to get transferred to a project with a better sponsor.