



The Project Manager's Guide to Dealing With Difficult Sponsors

By Dana Brownlee, PMP

Part 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. We're often taught that our "sponsor" is the person who is the champion of the effort. Indeed, they are often the one we're to seek out for support and issue resolution throughout the project. But what do you do when your sponsor is the problem?



As I travel the country and beyond to speak to business analysts, project managers, and team leaders about how to best manage problem attendees in their meetings or 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 that does pose an interesting dilemma, but it's not one void of strategies you can use to address this not too uncommon dilemma. Let's explore a few different varieties of the "difficult sponsor" and see how they can be managed for optimum success.

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 J.

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 because they become our "problem participants" and that can be difficult to manage. 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 it if it's offered in the spirit of helping take one more thing off their plate (not telling them specifically what to say). Ask them to withhold their opinion until others have weighed in to avoid tainting others' input.
- If you sense others may be intimidated by the sponsor's opinion, suggest the group do a round robin and start at the opposite end of the table as the sponsor (so that their opinion comes near the end).
- Stand up! Whenever 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, this may sound counterintuitive, but oftentimes a sponsor will get on their soap box (and not get off 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 (even sponsors) get caught in a cycle of whining

and venting about problems. After agreeing with the issue (if appropriate or not offering an opinion if you don't agree), simply ask the sponsor to suggest a solution. Insist that the issue being raised is important enough to warrant devoting some energy to focusing on 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.

- 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 emphasise WIIFT (What's in it for them). If they don't understand exactly what they want, ask them to explain their motivation/driving factor. Oftentimes, execs have a soap box issue, predetermined bias, or hypothesis they want validated. Try to find out what this is as soon as possible.
- Ask the sponsor to prioritise cost, time, and scope (good, fast, and cheap). Which is most important (relative to the others)? Hint: The answer is not all three J. Think McDonald's, their focus is very intentionally fast and cheap. Be clear which constraints are really 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 solve world peace too while you're at it J.)

- 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 realise that there is a quicker, easier way to get them what they really want.
- Document your risk analysis. Although we know that virtually all projects encounter problems, we usually spend little to no time analysing 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, see example below:

Event	Probability	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


Risk event probability of occurrence and anticipated impact severity

Check with the sponsor to ensure he or she is comfortable with that level of risk for example, \$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 prioritise 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, emphasise 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 it's 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 hear 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 oftentimes 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!

In 2003 Dana Brownlee, PMP founded Professionalism Matters, Inc., a boutique professional development training and consulting firm. Her company provides interactive training workshops on a variety of topics including project management, meeting facilitation, and team building. In 2009 Professionalism Matters launched MeetingGenie.com an online resource for the latest tips, techniques, instructional videos, and other resources pertaining to meeting facilitation. Her company has produced two meeting facilitation training DVDs: "Are You Running a Meeting... or Drowning in Chaos?" and "5 Secrets to Virtually Cut Your Meeting Time in Half!" Both are available at www.meetinggenie.com. 

Dana has spoken to many PMI audiences including a presentation, "The Secrets to Running Project Status Meetings that Work!" at the PMI Global Congress 2008 North America in Denver. She has also been selected to speak at the 2010 International Association of Facilitators North America 2010 Conference in Chicago.

Dana's client list includes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Environmental Protection Agency, Emory Professional Learning Program, Georgia Power Company, Mississippi Power Company, Southface Energy Institute, Learning Tree International, OCI Chemical Corporation and many others. Dana received a BS from Spelman College, a BIE from Georgia Tech and an MBA from Emory University. Dana may be reached at dbrownlee@meetinggenie.com.

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