

## Being an Executive Sponsor

Project management of all types —implementing change, transitioning to new technology, or reengineering business processes— identify executive sponsorship as absolutely critical for success.

However, it is often unclear exactly what an executive sponsor should do to create success for the project. The good news is that much of what the job requires is familiar territory: standard project management procedures apply. The following diagram is a generic template for planning a project. Below is specific information on how that applies to Executive Sponsorship.



### Gather Information

Understanding the purpose and context for the project are critical to getting on the right track from the start. If good information is not gathered from the beginning, tremendous effort can be expended without achieving real results. Listen and respond to feedback from the organization; actively seek input from all levels of management. At a minimum, gather information to answer the following questions:

- What is the objective and scope of this project?
- How will this project benefit the organization?
- What will make this project succeed or fail? (Also known as “success factors”)
- What do my colleagues or other industry experts think about the issues involved?
- What additional information is needed?

## **Organize and Analyze**

Synthesizing the information from the first step, develop a clear charter for your project. This charter is an overview of what is expected as an outcome. Outline the organizational or customer expectations, the requirements for success, limits, priorities, and constraints for the project.

Begin to formulate who you want to work with you to execute the project, whose agreement is needed, and who will be influential in the process. Help select the right people for the team and ensure adequate time availability of these resources; consider what type of budget will be needed to reach completion.

Analyze data, as needed to understand how the current circumstances have occurred, and what has contributed to their evolution.

Be able to explain why the change is happening; discuss the business reasons for the change and the costs or risks of not changing.

## **Strategize and Prioritize**

Building on your analysis, formulate your plans and approach to addressing the project charter. If possible, involve key people from your desired project team in considering the options.

Create a detailed plan of how the project objectives will be met. Include milestones and timeframes. Know how you will manage the risks that this project poses. Who will be held accountable for results? How will you hold them accountable? Also know how you will get people excited about being involved with this project. Be able to succinctly communicate the advantages

After selecting an approach, plan to check your strategy with key stakeholders and decision-makers **before** you propose in the next stage. Plan to communicate with your manager to ensure their buy-in in your strategy before you propose the plans to the entire group. If the project requires re-direction or other modifications, you want to know that before you proceed.

## **Propose**

At this stage you are obtaining formal approval to move forward from the relevant decision-making body, in this case, the Executive Council. In addition, you are enlisting support for your approach. During your proposal, provide a concise outline of the following:

- What is the context for this project? Why is it important?
- What are the business goals this project will meet?
- What will the project cost, and what are the returns?
- What support do you need to complete the project?
- How will communications about this project happen to the larger organization?
- How will progress be communicated?
- What will success look like?

## **Implement**

At this stage the most critical aspect of executive sponsorship is communication. Most senior and executive managers strongly support their major change projects, but many fail to take the proper steps to communicate that support.

- Reinforce why the change is happening; explain the organizational reasons and the priority of this change to the core business.
- Share the change with all levels in the organization.
- Provide answers to, "What does this change mean to me?" and "What is expected of me?"
- Listen to resistance and respond to feedback from the organization.
- Create a positive network of conversation about the project with peers and project stakeholders.
- Endorse regular project meetings to work on the issues. Attend as needed.

The second aspect of this phase is to be vigilant about tracking progress and removing barriers. Be accessible for resolving issues as they arise.

- Provide updates on the project's progress; let employees and management know what they can expect and when.
- Keep other senior managers and stakeholders informed on project status and issues; help clear calendars for key decision-making meetings with these stakeholders.
- Enable employees to attend training as needed; personally attend as well.
- Remove obstacles encountered by the team.

### *A note on status reports:*

Status reports are generally produced on a weekly or biweekly basis by key project team members. These team members should know what areas of execution they are responsible for. Status reporting is an integral part of the project management processes. It is the means by which the project team, the contractors and executive management stay informed about the progress and key activities required to successfully complete the project. The purpose of the status report is to develop a standard format for the formal exchange of information on the progress of the project.

Status reports should be prepared by the project team detailing activities, accomplishments, milestones, identified issues, and problems. Some level of recovery plans should be prepared for activities that are not on schedule and abatement plans prepared for anticipated problems.

An example format of a status report would include:

- Current status.
- Significant accomplishments for the period.
- Scheduled activities.
- Issues and how they will be resolved

## **Evaluation**

As the project draws to a close, you will want to gather team members together to discuss what worked well, and what could be improved about the project process. Enlist the assistance of others who helped manage the project. Do not allow defensiveness during this evaluation. Put egos aside, and evaluate objectively what was most effective in achieving results. Record this information for reference next time you or those you work with sponsor a project.

Consider who needs to be appreciated, and specifically what they have done to add value to the project. Ask others to consider who they need to appreciate as well.

Also review the content of the project. Are there refinements needed? How will those be handled over time? Does a new project need to be initiated to address those issues? If so, then it's back to the beginning!

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This tool was prepared by Jessica Hartung, founder of Integrated Work Strategies, LLC. Jessica is an experienced manager, business coach, and consultant. Her 12 years of professional experiences with a variety of organizations-- non-profits, Fortune 500, small businesses, and entrepreneurial ventures—have provided strength and flexibility to her skills. She helps her clients create high performance teams and design enjoyable and productive work environments. Jessica holds an undergraduate degree in Sociology from University of Michigan and a graduate degree in management from Regis University. She is a member of the International Coach Federation, The National Association of Female Executives, and continues her education through Corporate Coach University. She has been active in the Boulder business community, providing volunteer services to assist high school students learning leadership skills in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce.