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COMMENTARY

Driving Project Delivery from the Top Down: Engaging Executive Leaders as Project Sponsors

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My organisation, like so many others realised that if it was going to succeed it needed to get better at doing projects. After establishing all the usual elements of good portfolio management, ePMO, business unit PMOs, and business case & benefits teams (among others), our leaders decided a Chief Project Officer (CPO) would be needed as the driving force for change. Through a series of serendipitous events I became that CPO. My brief was pretty simple...make us great at project delivery.

In the spirit of all great evidence-based practice I began with research...field research in this instance. I hunted down any project manager I could find and asked them for their thoughts and opinions. It probably comes as no surprise that they told me what most people have told me in other organisations..."It's not us it's them—sponsors!" Great, I thought, one week in the job and I have to tell the people that hired me that they're the problem.

And so I accepted the challenge. My first problem was that I didn't know any of our sponsors and none of them knew me. I spent the first 6 months "making friends" and met as many of the executives I could find. I hired a small team of Uber Project Directors and put them in to run our most complex projects. I asked them to model what 'good' looks like for their sponsors. If sponsors are the dreamers of an organisation, project managers are the dream-weavers, so I tasked my team with making dreams come true for their sponsors.

Their projects began to take shape as scope was pinned down, schedules firmed up, resources optimized and the magic of project management began to deliver projects. As this rolled out I moved around the organisation spreading the word. Slowly but surely sponsors

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started to come out from behind projects to see what was happening and how they could get in on the action. As they did, I did a digital “Tag & Release,” capturing names and ID’s as they came through events slowly building my network of sponsors.

Now I knew all the people to whom I needed to say “you’re the problem” and they knew me. The message was still not one I was looking forward to giving. Success was going to be all in the delivery. I decided it was best that I was not the messenger. The message would be more powerful if it came from within the group...so, I went on a hunt for a great sponsor to be the messenger. This person needed not only the skills to sponsor projects themselves, but was passionate about the need for all executives to develop project sponsorship skills. I found our deputy CFO.

Together we started the conversation with our executives and project leaders in a ‘big bang’ event in November 2016. We invited four sponsors to share their experiences of being a project sponsor, how they learnt to sponsor, and what great sponsorship means to them. Our cohort of excited sponsors walked out of the session clutching the first *Project Sponsor Handbook* to help them on their way. Behind the scenes, I armed every project manager with a copy as well and asked them to help their sponsors put the concepts into action. My hope was that the platform had been set for dreamers and dream weavers to build a lasting relationship.

Having delivered the difficult message of “the problem is you,” I faced into the second challenge of, “what do I do now to actually lift capability?” For this question I went back to basics and applied the principles of design thinking. I asked my customer. The persistent theme was learning by modelling from other great executives. Our executives weren’t keen on formal project management training, e-learning, podcasts, conferences, seminars, and coaching. What they wanted was to learn from other executives who’d developed the skill of sponsorship.

I got lucky and found the John Grill Centre at Sydney University developing a one-day program for executives covering this very topic. Even better...the presenters are not university academics or project management trainers, they’re two highly experience executives from the corporate world. They’ve both moved beyond executive roles and now focus their time as non-executive directors on the boards of some of Australia’s largest companies including IAG & NRMA Corporate Superannuation, Bank of Queensland, Cricket Australia and Canstar. I found my Uber Sponsors!

As the New Year dawned, we declared 2017 the *Year of the Project Sponsor*. We’ve run several of the one day programs which we’ve called *Sponsor Peer to Peer Forums* (not training), and so far so good. Project sponsors are leaving the sessions appreciating how real and important the work of project sponsorship is. The ripple effect is felt across the business with evidence at the project level emerging of better decisions.

I’m still cautious because, well, you can lead people to knowledge but you can’t make them learn. But this week I received a text to let me know that in the last sponsor session we held our deputy Chief Financial Officer made an unexpected appearance. He turned up, joined in and enjoyed it. Through one simple act he committed to honing his own sponsorship craft and modelled what good looks like for everyone else. He showed that no one is too important, too senior to participate in and learn from the activities of 2017 the year of the sponsor. This is a great beginning and a journey that I look forward to sharing.

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About the Author

Dr. Alicia Aitken is actively involved in several industry groups and peak bodies. She is a director of the International Centre for Complex Project Management, Chief Project Officer for Telstra Australia's largest telecommunication company. Previously Alicia held the position of CEO, Human Systems International. Her experience ranges through several industries including Telecommunications, Banking & Finance, Defence & Aerospace, Pharmaceutical, Engineering & Construction, Mining, Oil & Gas and Government. Alicia holds a PhD in project management and psychology with a particular focus on how project managers cope with stress. Alicia is a regular keynote speaker at conferences around the world and contributes to academic programs at universities in both Australia and Europe.