

Leading Project Teams to Success

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE PROJECT TEAM SPONSOR

When teams are formed for new product development, process improvement, failure mode & effects analysis (FMEA), and other projects, a senior manager should always be appointed as the team sponsor or "champion." Following are guidelines that will help sponsors lead their teams to successful completion of their projects.

General Responsibilities of the Team Sponsor

- Approves and signs off on project contract. The sponsor must clearly communicate and assure that the team understands the purpose, scope and expected results of the project.
- Removes roadblocks. This is the number one responsibility of the sponsor. Project teams are given a lot of responsibility, but they seldom (if ever) have any authority. For example, a team's requests for tests and data analysis may be rejected by a very busy analytical lab that's trying to support high levels of production. The team has no authority over the analytical lab manager and can't direct him or her to get hot on their tests. They must be able to escalate the matter to their sponsor and it is the sponsor's responsibility to remove the roadblock.
- Demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the methodology and concepts
 - ◆ Appreciates the tools (statistical methods, risk analysis, etc.)
 - ◆ Willing to accept the "front end" time that's required. I once had a senior program manager sit in on one of my FMEA seminars. She came up to me at the end of the workshop and said, "I had no idea what's involved in doing this correctly. I will never again impose an unreasonable deadline on one of my teams!"
- Monitors team's progress
- Provides guidance and resources when needed
- Communicates the team's progress to others on the Senior Management Team

Reviewing and Nurturing Project Teams' Progress

Either in person, by telephone or by other means, the sponsor must review and nurture his or her project team's progress throughout the course of the project. There is no set schedule (eg., weekly or bi-weekly) for the review sessions; but bear in mind that a typical process improvement project will last about three or four months. This would suggest that the review and nurturing sessions occur every three weeks or so.

What happens in these periodic review meetings? And what is meant by “review and nurture?” Below are listed some of the typical objectives and activities in an effective review session with a project team:

1. Discuss the team’s progress since the last review meeting. Review data collected, analyses completed and progress versus the team’s project plan.
2. Discuss any problems the team has encountered. Such problems may include lack of support or cooperation from team members’ supervisors or department heads; problems in trying to apply some of the statistical methods; confusion over what methods should be used in the first place; and just getting “in over their heads” on some technical issue.
3. Determine and arrange the help or resources needed to overcome the problems. Action may include some re-training; help from facilitators; bringing in an outside consultant; or temporary assignment of a technical expert or specialist to help the team or provide guidance.
4. Discuss the team’s plans for “next steps.” If those intentions are in line with the purpose, scope and expected results, the sponsor will give his or her approval along with any appropriate suggestions. If, however, the team’s intentions are not consistent with the project purpose, scope and expected results – or if those intentions might require more resources than are available – the sponsor will redirect the team.
5. Schedule priority time for the next review meeting.

In summary, effectively reviewing and nurturing teams’ progress involves seeking and taking action on answers to the following questions throughout the course of all projects.

- How are you doing?
- What have you learned?
- How can I help you?
- What problems are you having?
- How can I help you?
- What do you plan to do next (and is it consistent with the project purpose and scope)?
- How can I help you?

The Bottom Line

If a sponsor’s project team fails in its assignment, it is the fault of the sponsor. If a sponsor’s project team succeeds, the sponsor will have credit – to pass on to the team!