How to Make Your Sponsor Successful!

A View from Both the Public and the Private Sectors

Patrick R. Schambach
President – Civilian Sector
Nortel Government Solutions
My Background

- 25 years United States Secret Service
  - Financial Systems Accountant
  - Management Analyst/Systems Analyst
  - CIO
- 5 years Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms
  - Assistant Director – Science & Technology/CIO
- 3 years Transportation Security Administration
  - Associate Under Secretary for Technology/CIO
- Worked projects, managed projects, sponsored projects
- Now serve federal customers as service provider
My Sponsor follows all of the best practices!

- Understands the goals and challenges!
- Knows and can articulate the benefits!
- Liked and signed the project charter!
- Helps me find the resources I need!
- Recognizes all team member contributions!
My Sponsor follows all of the best practices!

- Breaks down barriers and arbitrates conflicts!
- Has power to make all the tough decisions!
- Understands and supports schedule slippages!
- Loves all of my deliverables!
- Has the business knowledge/operational responsibility!
What if he/she doesn’t?

- What if they want to, but can’t?
- What if they don’t know how?
- Where does your responsibility end with the Sponsor?
- Are you doomed to failure because of poor Sponsorship?
- What are some ways to “manage” your Sponsor to SUCCESS?
- Lessons learned are transferable…
#1 What if your Sponsor just doesn’t get it?

- Financial Mgt System experience
- 1972 – first year in government (Systems Accountant)
- New accrual accounting system
- Converting from punched-card system
- Assigned to help PM (from IT department)
- Sponsor – head of Financial Mgt (my boss)
- Going “live” in three months
- Tests revealed trial accounts still didn’t balance
So what happened?

- Sponsor removed a far distance from project
- I filled role of “subject matter expert”
- Tested until all functions worked correctly
- Trained staff
- Practiced trial balances – dual operation 3 months
- Went “live” – and stayed that way for 20 years!
Lessons Learned:

- PM has to discover any gaps in knowledge
- When there’s a gap, find someone who can fill it in (subject matter expert?)...
- Try not to let the gap point back to a weakness in the sponsor...
#2 What if your Sponsor has a preconceived solution?

- Patrol Officer motorcycle selection
- Sponsor: head of motorcycle training
- Problem: high rate of accidents on these “toys”
- Request: help us choose a better cycle
- And develop a better training session on “safety”
- PM worked for me
What they had...
What they wanted…
What they were afraid we would recommend...
Or this…
Our study included:

- Extensive research of other police motorcycle units
- Their vehicles and their training
- Analysis of accident/injury data
- Films of actual training sessions
- Comparison of cycle types to assignment types
- Narrowed choices with priority considerations
- Serious attention to “thoroughness” and defense of findings...
What they got!
Lessons learned

- Be objective, stick with the facts
- Impress them with comparison data
- Show them something they didn’t know – motorcycle turn training!
- Appeal to their sense of reason
- Negotiate the best you can
- Remember – you gotta care, but not that much!

"You can Negotiate Anything!" by Herb Cohen
#3 Does Sponsor have enough juice to force change?

- Democratic National Convention – 1992
- USSS Convention Coordinating Center
- “On-line Logistics” for first time
Lessons learned

- Sponsor who takes swift action is great
- “Don’t want to play, go home!”
- But – this kind of support is rare
- Prepare your sponsor with “what if” scenarios
- Encourage thoughts about non-compliance
#4 Put your Sponsor “out front” when necessary

- ATF Fire Center experience
- My need for new CSI forensics laboratory
- Need for research in arson investigation
- Arson fire reconstruction and experimentation
- Budget approved internally
- Conceptual design started
ATF National Laboratory
Put your Sponsor “out front” when necessary

- President’s budget office pushed back on me
- Sent “Sponsor” - along with his “most passionate” spokesman
- They were able to provide the “mission” business case
- Result:
Small and Medium burn cells
Large Cell: Big enough to replicate a 2-story townhouse fire!
Lessons learned:

- Controversial or costly changes are difficult
- At times, Sponsor won’t have the passion
- Find someone with “passion” to be on your project team
- Or get someone with “passion” to sell the results
#5 What if my Sponsor bails out on me?

- FBI – VCF experience
- Case management component of Trilogy project
- Long development timeline – big bang approach
- Constant turnover of “sponsor”
- $179m in taxpayer dollars wasted
- DOJ IG: “FBI management did not exercise adequate control over the Trilogy project and its evolution…”
Lesson learned:

- No sponsor – no project (shut it down!)
- New sponsor – same agreement, or start over!
#6 What if your Sponsor takes a left turn?

- Federal agency client
- Long partnership around a “solution”
- Wholesale swap-out of chain of command
- We took too long to assess this change
- We didn’t pick up on the desire to turn left
- Result: new provider took over the work
- Significant loss in revenue and lost current performance qualification
Lesson learned

- Don’t take a partnership for granted
- Personnel swap-out was an “indicator”
- Took our eye off ball
- They weaved, we bobbed – Knock Out!
Sponsor Problem Warning Signs:

- Not clear to everyone who the Sponsor is
- Can’t get the Sponsor’s attention
- Sponsor doesn’t help resolve issues

And solutions:

- Right-size time with your sponsor
- Develop written sponsorship agreement
- Clarify sponsor’s expectations
- Tell sponsor explicitly what you need
- Seriously consider stopping the project!
How to fire your Sponsor...

- Plan ahead – get a good one to start with
- Sign a pre-nup – if sponsor can’t perform, then…
- Do a reality check – will sponsor change really help
- Line up replacement – carefully/confidentially!
- Arrange a show ‘n tell – sponsor will show own colors
- Be factual – complaining to upper management
- Frame the future – if things don’t change
- Leave it to the Boss – just lay out the problem
- All else fails – Kill The Project!

Thanks to Gopal Kapur Center for Project Management
What level of Sponsor commitment is required?

- Believe in and champion the project
- Ensure the project is focused on the right outcomes
- Monitor the project’s direction, progress and budget
- Monitor the acceptance of the project across the org.
- Continually assess the team’s level of motivation
- Assess the overall quality of the work
- Ensure the project remains focused on original objectives
Sponsor Commitment?

- More than “concern” for the success of the project
- Chicken and Pig example
- Teenager with driving permit analogy
  - After license – you are concerned, but little you can do
  - Permit stage – your life and license are on the line, watch what they’re doing, eye on the speedometer, road positioning, behavior and overall level of attention to safety
  - Same with PM – your Sponsor can’t take over the wheel and the pedals; work through driver
Desired attributes of an excellent Sponsor...

- Focus – keep eye on the prize
- Tenacity – things don’t sound/smell right, take action
- Perseverance – remain interested
- Belief – articulate the importance and value of project
- Attitude – “will do” attitude to resolve problems
- Delegation – “hot topic”, but not yours to fix
- Leadership – “own” the project and be visible

Have this discussion if at all possible!
Contact Information

Patrick R. Schambach
- President – Civilian Sector
- Nortel Government Solutions
- pat.schambach@nortelgov.com
- 703-679-4785