



ARTPETTY

Art Petty Executive Sponsor Interview

Podcast Transcript

Why are you so passionate about the role of the executive sponsor?

For strategic initiatives, along with the right project manager, the sponsor is the next most important role on the team. The biggest and most important projects are filled with obstacles and land mines almost by definition. The sponsor isn't going to solve technical issues, but when it comes to wrangling resources, calibrating with recalcitrant stakeholders and defending the teams from the Dilbert like distractions that we tend to throw at them, the sponsor is priceless!

You singled out "strategic projects." What about those slightly below the level of strategic? Do those projects require a sponsor?

I will trot out everyone's favorite answer; "It depends." There are some key variables that come into play. Is the project crossing multiple functions? Will the finished product impact multiple areas and systems? Will delays to the project impede other initiatives? Is it a heavily matrixed team? If there are a lot of "Yes" answers to those questions, then I would encourage the use of a sponsor. Of course, one other key factor is the supply of competent sponsors. Supply and demand for sponsors are often out of whack...demand grossly exceeds supply and overextending the limited number of available sponsors is bad for everyone.

What have your experiences as a sponsor been like?

My first experience was honestly a disaster. I tripped all over myself. I was at times too uninvolved and at other times I was pushing the project manager out of the way and asserting my at the time Type A young executive's personality. Fortunately, the PM on this team was both patient, a good teacher and someone delivering comfortable at delivering blunt but needed feedback. She told me she was going to fire me if didn't fall into line!

We worked on a number of projects together and thanks to her guidance, I developed a philosophy on what this role was supposed to deliver and I worked to deliver on my responsibilities.

What are those responsibilities by the way? Where should an executive sponsor focus?

Great question. And while there is not a universally agreed upon job description, there are some activities that should in my opinion be at the center of every sponsor's world:

- *Chartering the project with the PM...helping give it legitimacy.*
- *Securing resources*
- *Key stakeholder management*
- *Support PM: team development*
- *Ensure project team alignment with strategy/key business objectives*
- *Values development and reinforcement w PM*
- *Advocacy & Visibility (team)*
- *Defense (team)*
- *BIG Problems/Decisions*

That's quite a significant list. What about the issue of accountability for project outcome?

This is another key issue that is often really fuzzy inside organizations. A number of years ago, I asked my MBA students in my Project Management course to go back inside their organization and talk to PMs, PMO leaders and executives and ask questions about the role of the sponsor. In particular, I asked them to ask about this accountability? "Who owns the project outcomes: the project manager or the executive sponsor?"

The answer was a resounding: 50% or so, the PM and 50% or so the ES! It was as clear as muddy water. Worse yet, it varied not just from organization to organization but from executive to executive within the same organizations.

What else did your students learn?

While the students initially focused on the accountability issue a number of them were curious and started asking more questions about responsibilities and results. What started as an assignment in my first year course turned into an annual event for the next 8 years. While the data might not withstand the rigors of peer review, it matches my own findings as a consultant and the findings underscore some of the challenges all of us have in getting the most out of this role.

Enquiring minds want to know...! What has this longitudinal study told you?

- *A fairly consistent split on the issue of accountability. This actually creates a great debate with PMs. (BTW, for strategic initiatives and for a lot of reasons to focus the ES...I hold them accountable for outcomes.)*
- *A consistently frightening dose of reality: most firms don't have any formal training or mentoring for ESs.*
- *Most ESs learn OTJ...which is one of the least effective ways to learn a critical role.*
- *Inconsistent practices and no formal role description in many organizations*
- *Few firms formally evaluate their ESs.*

- *Those firms where there is an active ES culture...suffer from a supply/demand problem...and many ESs feel they are over extended.*

It's kind of a hot mess!

Doesn't this fly in the face of the studies that suggest the ES role is critical?

Absolutely it does! The PMI's own research outcomes that suggest "Having actively engaged executive sponsors is the top driver of project success. If it's the top driver of success...and if as the PMI research suggests that 1 in 3 projects fail to meet goals due to poorly engaged executive sponsors, we've got a lot of work to do.

Whose fault is this?

The sin of omission...the lack of focus on this issue is a top leadership issue. For many CEOs and senior management teams, executive sponsorship is a blind spot. This fits sadly with my thesis that in spite of the critical nature of projects in executing strategy, navigating innovation and creating critical infrastructure, we still give short shrift to the PM area..not just with the ES but in other areas as well.

Since you bring it up, what other areas?

Sure. We underinvest in developing our PMs....in coaching and supporting the development of the critical soft skills needed to drive high performance.

We also chronically under utilize team coaching...something that I think may even be more important than the PMIs effective engaged sponsor.

However, those are great topics for another event!

Let's focus on what the PM can do to mitigate the risk of an ES who doesn't quite get his/her role. Say for example someone like you in your first outing! What's your guidance for this PM?

Yes, this is the heart of what we wanted to get at today.

The first and perhaps most important step is for the PM and Sponsor to get on the same page about their respective roles...and to do that, I want to share a technique I learned from a great PM....Angela.

But first a little backstory on how I learned this. (The story of Angela.)

That question: "At the end of this when we are successful, what will you say that I did?" is a nearly perfect question to use with your soon to be ES. It is a great way to share views on the roles and start what can otherwise be an awkward dialog. I have worked with PMs who would do this live with execs...others would suggest it as a homework assignment...just to get them on the same page.

Another great practice is for the two of them to roll the ideas into their own mutual charters. These don't have to go public or they can. The calibration that this discussion drives is priceless.

What are some other things the PM can do to build a great sponsor...or build a great relationship with the sponsor?

After aligning on roles, make certain the accountability issue is resolved. I stand behind my recommendation that for strategic initiatives, the ES is only invested if she owns the outcomes.

Next...formalize what I call a communication protocol between the PM and Sponsor. Everything that goes wrong usually ties to communication and I've observed PMs and Sponsors that have failed miserably in this area. It's important for the PM to understand the Sponsors needs for information and involvement. Get as specific as you can. Assumptions are dangerous here. Assuming the sponsor doesn't want to hear of "small" problems or flareups could find the sponsor unaware of something her peers or worse her boss hears about. Too much detail will aggravate a sponsor.

As a caveat to this communication issue..., PMs have a responsibility to learn what I term Execu-Speak. Sponsors are dealing with their constituents in the language of executives...when will this be monetized; how much will it cost us; are you certain this is going to be the strategic hit we imagined... . The PM must provide the Sponsor with the ammunition to deal with those questions. It goes beyond status updates and earned value reports.

What else. What about when big problems surface?

Absolutely! The two need to have a 911 protocol. When IT hits the fan...and IT always does at some point on a project, there can be almost no gap between knowledge of the PM and knowledge of the sponsor.

The mistake I see by PMs on this one is not wanting to bother the ES or believing they can contain the fire on their own. When the fire engulfs the entire initiative and everyone knows its there and you haven't called the sponsor in to help, you've got a major relationship problem.

Along those same lines, I encourage the two to live to the code of "got your back." The two roles are conjoined and there must be no doubt in either parties mind that they have each other's backs.

Obviously if one of the parties isn't performing, this breaks down. Then it's time to move to the next item: regular Relationship Check-Ups.

That sounds so Dr. Phil like...what do you mean?

I encourage all ESs/PMs to do this monthly. It's an opportunity to sit down and focus on the big issues of the project and to offer direct feedback on what's working/what's not with the project and the collaboration between the two. If this is built into the process, it affords both

parties an opportunity to vent a bit...and importantly, it sets the stage for one or both to take constructive action to improve. It's one way to attempt to infuse mutual accountability into the relationship.

What should the PM do if they have an uncooperative or absentee sponsor?

This is always the toughest issue for the PM to deal with. Try the techniques above several times. And then do it again. And then, if there's a PMO executive, it's time to bring her in to support the efforts. If there's no PM involved, the PM has a choice to make. For the benefit of the company and the project, will he raise the issue with the sponsor's boss? That's a bad spot.

One enterprising and courageous PM I worked with had this problem and after exhausting his efforts to bring the ES into the game, he finally indicated that the ES should carefully facilitate a transition. He never directly threatened the ES...but he did indicate that the ES's inability to live up to the Charter was hurting the team. The ES was genuinely buried with overseas travel and used that as cover to bring in a pinch hitter.

At the end of the day, moral courage is required to navigate this issue. That and hopefully the PM has developed a fair amount of political capital!

Any closing thoughts here?

For both parties, the Sponsor and the PM, recognize how tightly coupled you need to be to drive great results.

For the sponsor, do your homework on what great sponsorship is and looks like. Take this role seriously. It's much more than ceremony. But remember that there is a distinct difference between your role and the PMs.

For the PM helping teach the sponsor...regular care and feeding. Use Angela's question. Define what the relationship looks like when you are successful.. Build your communication protocol and make sure to always have your sponsor's back.

Use the guidance in pursuit of great projects!

OK, last parting question. What type of work do you do in the project community?

Three key things: I write, I speak, I coach project managers and teams and I run workshops on teaming and project leadership

My contact information; website address are all on the site at: <http://artpetty.com/>

--

About Art Petty

Art Petty is a multi-decade software industry executive and a popular leadership and management speaker, author, and coach. After guiding multiple software firms to positions of market leadership as a senior strategy and marketing executive, Art now serves clients as a management team and executive coach. Additionally, he regularly serves as a graduate management educator at DePaul University in Chicago, IL.

Art's practical and powerful business guidance is reflected in his highly ranked Management Excellence blog at <http://artpetty.com/blog/> and in his popular Leadership Caffeine posts (regularly featured in the SmartBrief publications, Information Management, ProjectManager.com, Government News, Switched on Leadership Magazine and others). Additionally, Art is the leadership and management expert and lead blogger at The Balance (formerly About.com at <https://www.thebalance.com/management-4073997>).

Art is the author of three books, including the recently released: "Leadership Caffeine for the Project Manager," as well as "Practical Lessons in Leadership" (with Rich Petro) and "Leadership Caffeine—Ideas to Energize Your Professional Development." All of Art's books are used as professional development resources in leadership programs for organizations in manufacturing, law enforcement, software and technology and units within the U.S. Government.

Whether serving as an educator, coach, executive or speaker, Art's passionate and no-nonsense guidance for navigating strategy, driving change and promoting organizational health through values-centered leadership is widely respected. From presenting highly rated leadership programs at The Data Warehouse Institute to delivering keynotes and programs to corporate clients such as IBM, Citigroup, Best Buy and various associations in higher education, banking and marketing, Art's passion for great leadership and management practices and practical advice earn high acclaim.

Clients credit Art with helping them reconceive their strategies and their approaches to leading and operating through his ability to ask and help them find the answers to the difficult questions that derail most teams. Art attributes his success to his sheer passion for the pursuit of high performance with and through others and to his focus on practicing and perpetuating values-based leadership.