



Community of Practice

IT Project Management

March 31, 2022

Effective Governance (A three-part series)

Part I: Growing strong, confident and engaged executive sponsors.

Project Management Partners

Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) at WaTech

Good executive sponsors are essential to project success. Sponsors are often the determining factor in success or failure of a project. [The Chaos report](#) by Standish Group indicates 61% of successful projects have a highly skilled sponsor and 70% of failed projects have a moderate to poorly skilled sponsor¹.

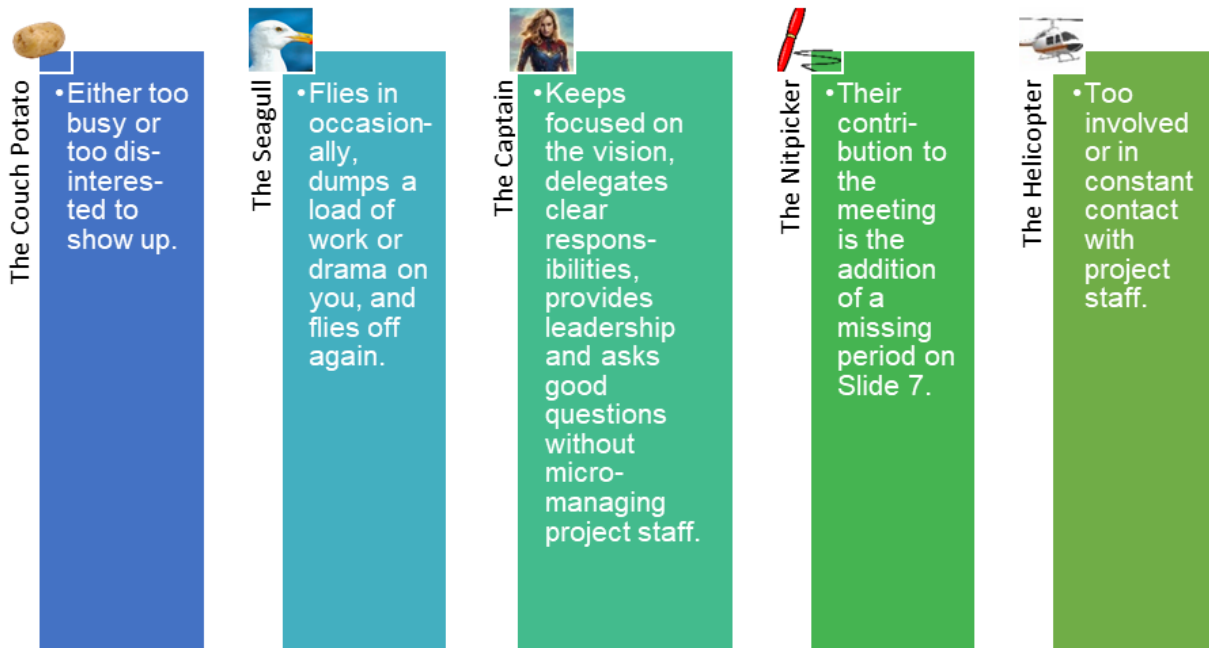
The project management partners (PMP) at Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) at WaTech, have observed a variety of sponsorship styles and strengths. Washington State has some very good sponsors both in large and small agencies. From observing dozens of projects over the past 18 months, the PMP team has have developed some archetypes and related characteristics that can illustrate the common styles of sponsorship. From sponsors missing meetings to sponsors that spend every waking minute working on your project, we get a birds-eye view of behaviors to replicate and those that lead to problems.

Common sponsorship archetypes include:

- The Couch Potato.
- The Seagull.
- The Captain.
- The Nitpicker.
- The Helicopter.

The following graphic summarizes the key characteristics of each. Our goal is to develop "Captains" and avoid the other types.

¹ https://www.standishgroup.com/sample_research_files/CHAOSReport2015-Final.pdf.



Lack of strong executive sponsorship can be shown by:

- Project decisions made in a vacuum; or few or no decisions made at all.
- Inability to commit to and clearly articulate the project's business objectives.
- No commitment to regular attendance at executive steering committee meetings (ESC) and/or lack of engagement during the executive steering committee meetings.
- Incomplete knowledge of the project's critical issues; ineffective or no resolution of issues brought forward.
- Significant changes in project scope, schedule or budget; an excessive number of process gaps identified during design.
- Dogmatic pursuit of a flawed vision or plan of execution.
- Unwillingness to make hard staffing decisions.
- Too many conflicting priorities.
- Lack of communication outside ESC meetings.

The sponsor's role is a difficult one. There are many pressures to contend with, especially at the higher levels of state government. Sponsors often balance multiple priorities and stakeholders. They deal with heavy workloads and compete for scarce organizational resources, funding and attention. In addition, most sponsors are either a manager or executive and continue with their operational responsibilities and add on the additional role of a sponsor to their already demanding jobs. Sponsors often are assigned or volunteered to be a sponsor without providing clear expectations of what an effective sponsor is.

Project sponsors are ultimately responsible for the success of the project. They are expected to have sound knowledge of the business case and an understanding of modern project management practices. However, there is very limited training or literature about project sponsorship and few guidelines as to what good project sponsorship entails.

The role of the sponsor is a “chief enabling officer.” As a chief enabling officer, the project sponsors job is to make sure they provide the support, resources and guidance to allow the project team to be successful. Per the [Standish Group Executive Sponsor Report](#)², the four most important skills that will increase project sponsor effectiveness are:

1. Getting the right project resources.
2. Making quick decisions.
3. Recognizing team member contributions.
4. Demanding objectivity and transparency.

In general, sponsors need to be doing certain things – and thinking certain things. The following tables contain some helpful tips for what a sponsor should be doing – as well as thinking and asking during each of the four major project phases.

Project Initiation

What a sponsor should be doing...	What a sponsor should be thinking...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure funding. • Champion the project. • Select the right project manager for the job and make sure the project organization is optimal. • Allow sufficient time to perform initiation activities. • Provide input and meaningful evaluation of the charter. Ensure it adequately presents a true need and is aligned to strategic priorities. • Participate in kick-off meetings and other key phase transitions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other options have we considered to address the stated purpose of the project? • What will be my top concerns if this project charter is approved? • Which past projects have we looked at for comparison? • How strong is my project manager and do I need to be super engaged, or can I give my PM some space to roam?

Project Planning

What a sponsor should be doing...	What a sponsor should be thinking...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check that plans are realistic and approve only those that are feasible. • Serve as a timely and relevant escalation point for issues and roadblocks. • Observe the team's dynamics and behaviors. • Ensure clear go/no-go phase or gate criteria established • Ensure realistic estimates. • Acquire adequate resources. • Check if critical path is identified, whether it is realistic, and what percentage of activities are on the critical path. • Ensure cross-coordination of other agency projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have functional managers agreed to the staffing plan? • What are the most critical project success factors? What tradeoffs would we need to deliver them? • How were project cost estimates derived? • Is there a Plan B? • Are we on track with our investment plan, gates, deliverables, funding allocations? • Do YOU think the project will be successful?

² Executive Sponsor Research Report, The Standish Group, 2013.

Project Implementation, Monitoring and Control

What a sponsor should be doing...	What a sponsor should be thinking...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is the critical path identified, is it realistic?• Work with the project manager and do not overstep their lane.• Evaluate progress against plans and objectives and provide feedback to the PM.• Empower and motivate project team members and encourage them to problem solve.• Ensure that everyone follows established processes.• Focus on risk mitigation and following the risk/change/issue processes.• Keep an eye on team productivity, mood and dynamics. Celebrate milestones. Monitor frequent crises for root cause analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What tools or training would make the team more successful?• What are the three biggest project risks? Issues?• What stakeholders will pose challenges?• Which stakeholders do I need to consult, manage or monitor?• Track team members' overtime and reasons for overtime.

Project Closeout

What a sponsor should be doing...	What a sponsor should be thinking...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participate in post-project evaluation.• Evaluate project performance (people and results) based on established performance criteria.• Foster a constructive conversation about project achievement.• Realize all benefits and sign off on lessons learned / closure activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Did my customer(s) feel satisfied with the effort?• What should we do differently next time?• What went right? And what went right due good planning and not heroics?