What is a sponsor?

The sponsor acts as the ‘champion’ for the improvement project providing senior management advice, support, direction and authority to a team and/or its leader. The sponsor will usually have the authority to ensure the recommendations of the project are implemented.

Key to the role of the sponsor is to ensure clear and effective governance of a project. This should include:

- agreeing the scope, objectives and timescales
- establishing and leading an appropriate project board to include the process owner, representative process players and users
- providing clarity of strategic direction and any pre-existing constraints
- confirming project objectives and benefits to be achieved
- managing project timescales
- agreeing requirements for reporting, discussion and sign-off of resource use, changes to scope
- approving project recommendations
- confirming progress into implementation phase and agreeing priorities.

Capabilities of an effective sponsor

- Has experience and knowledge of the organisation.
- Has awareness of organisational culture and attitudes.
- Has the knowledge to identify stakeholders, allies and potential resistance and the authority to engage with them.
- Can communicate this knowledge and experience to a wider team.
- Can advise, guide, mentor and support members of the project team.
- Recognises that different skills, or skills emphasis, may be required of a sponsor at different stages of a project.
- Remains engaged with and supportive of the project and its participants through all its various phases.
- Defines and clarifies the nature, purpose and scope of a project.
- Confirms objectives and benefits to be achieved.
- Champions and communicates the project to wider stakeholders.
- Ensures understanding of the project across the organisation.

Hints and tips

- Invest time and effort in building trust and relationships with process owners, process players and the wider team.
- Ensure you share your knowledge and experience.
- Remain engaged with the project throughout its lifespan.
- Provide direction but don’t impose or control.
- Keep everyone talking and sharing ideas and listen to them.
- Provide guidance or advice when unexpected outcomes or developments arising from a project occur.
- Manage expectations of those involved in the project, explaining why every change or idea may not be adopted.
- Challenge the assumptions or recommendations of the project team.