

THE INVISIBLE SPONSOR¹

Background

Some executives prefer to micromanage projects whereas other executives are fearful of making a decision because, if they were to make the wrong decision, it could impact their career. In this case study, the president of the company assigned one of the vice presidents to act as the project sponsor on a project designed to build tooling for a client. The sponsor, however, was reluctant to make any decisions.

Assigning the VP

Moreland Company was well-respected as a tooling design-and-build company. Moreland was project-driven because all of its income came from projects. Moreland was also reasonably mature in project management.

When the previous VP for engineering retired, Moreland hired an executive from a manufacturing company to replace him. The new VP for engineering, Al Zink, had excellent engineering knowledge about tooling but had worked for companies that were not project-driven. Al had very little knowledge about project management and had never functioned as a project sponsor. Because of Al's lack of experience as a sponsor, the president decided that Al should "get his feet wet" as quickly as possible and assigned him as the project sponsor on a medium-sized project. The project manager on this project was Fred Cutler. Fred was an engineer with more than twenty years of experience in tooling design and manufacturing. Fred reported directly to Al Zink administratively.

Fred's Dilemma

Fred understood the situation; he would have to train Al Zink on how to function as a project sponsor. This was a new experience for Fred because subordinates usually do not train senior personnel on how to do their job. Would Al Zink be receptive?

Fred explained the role of the sponsor and how there are certain project documents that require the signatures of both the project manager and the project sponsor. Everything seemed

to be going well until Fred informed Al that the project sponsor is the person that the president eventually holds accountable for the success or failure of the project. Fred could tell that Al was quite upset over this statement.

Al realized that the failure of a project where he was the sponsor could damage his reputation and career. Al was now uncomfortable about having to act as a sponsor but knew that he might eventually be assigned as a sponsor on other projects. Al also knew that this project was somewhat of a high risk. If Al could function as an invisible sponsor, he could avoid making any critical decisions.

In the first meeting between Fred and Al where Al was the sponsor, Al asked Fred for a copy of the schedule for the project. Fred responded:

I'm working on the schedule right now. I cannot finish the schedule until you tell me whether you want me to lay out the schedule based upon best time, least cost, or least risk.

Al stated that he would think about it and get back to Fred as soon as possible.

During the middle of the next week, Fred and Al met in the company's cafeteria. Al asked Fred again, "How is the schedule coming along?" and Fred responded as before:

I cannot finish the schedule until you tell me whether you want me to lay out the schedule based upon best time, least cost, or least risk.

Al was furious, turned around, and walked away from Fred. Fred was now getting nervous about how upset Al was and began worrying if Al might remove him as the project manager. But Fred decided to hold his ground and get Al to make a decision.

At the weekly sponsor meeting between Fred and Al, once again Al asked the same question, and once again Fred gave the same response as before. Al now became quite angry and yelled out:

Just give me a least time schedule.

Fred had gotten Al to make his first decision. Fred finalized his schedule and had it on Al's desk two days later awaiting Al's signature. Once again, Al procrastinated and refused to sign off on the schedule. Al believed that, if he delayed making the decision, Fred would take the initiative and begin working on the schedule without Al's signature.

Fred kept sending e-mails to Al asking when he intended to sign off on the schedule or, if something was not correct, what changes needed to be made. As expected, Al did not respond. Fred then decided that he had to pressure Al one way or another into making timely decisions as the project sponsor. Fred then sent an e-mail to Al that stated:

I sent you the project schedule last week. If the schedule is not signed by this Friday, there could be an impact on the end date of the project. If I do not hear from you, one way or another, by this Friday, I will assume you approve the schedule and I can begin implementation.

The president's e-mail address was also included in the CC location on the e-mail. The next morning, Fred found the schedule on his desk, signed by Al Zink.