

The Major Project Sponsorship Model

The Major Project Sponsorship Model draws upon two models that are extensively used in major projects executive education programmes at Alliance Manchester Business School and University of Liverpool Management School: the Major Project Leadership Model and the Four Domains of Major Projects. Before introducing the Major Project Sponsorship Model, an overview of these two foundational models is presented.

The Major Project Leadership Model

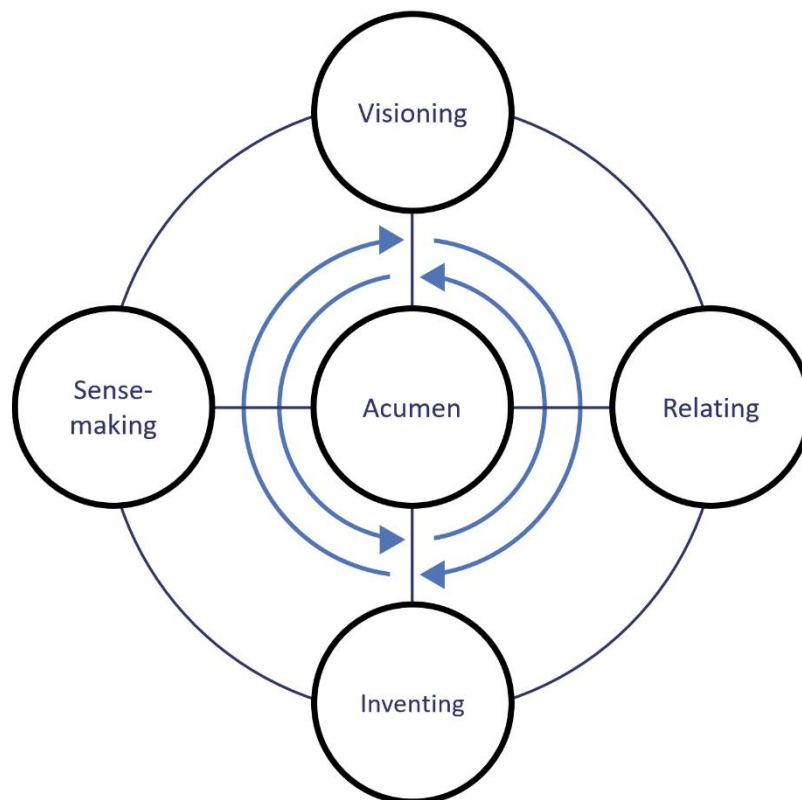


Figure 1. The Major Project Leadership Model
(adapted from Forsyth and Gavin 2017)

As the project sponsor plays an important leadership role, it seemed appropriate to use a suitable leadership model or framework as the foundation for a major project sponsorship model. The Major Project Leadership Model is a leadership framework used in major project executive education programmes that deftly summarises the leadership capabilities of a major project leader.

The Major Project Leadership Model draws upon research by several well-known leadership thinkers at MIT Sloan Management School led by Professor Deborah Ancona. An influential article written by Professor Ancona and her colleagues—and published in Harvard Business Review in 2007—challenged what they called '*the myth of the complete leader*' (Ancona et al. 2007). At the time there was—and

some would argue still is—a traditional, and often ingrained, expectation of a leader as a perfect ‘hero’; that those who lead us know all and can do all, with great intellectual capacity, future visioning powers, operational know-how and the requisite interpersonal skills to enable, influence and motivate their staff. Such a flawless, perfect, complete leader does not exist—no single person could possibly live up to these standards, staying on top of everything that is happening within their projects or organisations and possessing all of the required skills in equal measure. As the saying goes: *‘not everyone is good at everything’*. This is especially pertinent for project sponsorship, as there is an expectation of the project sponsor knowing all and if not doing all, certainly doing a great deal.

‘It’s time to end the myth of the complete leader: the flawless person at the top who’s got it all figured out. In fact, the sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organisations will be’ (Ancona et al. 2007:92).

Ancona and her team argued that the weight of this myth of the complete leader has led organisations to have unrealistic expectations of their leaders, and the leaders themselves to struggle to be someone they are not (feigning ability and confidence for fear of appearing incompetent), burning themselves out, and causing damage to their organisations along the way. Such a myth damages both leaders, organisations and projects—and yet the myth continues to persist since the article was published.

As an alternative, Ancona et al. championed the concept of the *‘incomplete leader’*: a leader who recognises that they are not complete, with both strengths and weaknesses in various areas, and actively complements their skills with the skills of those around them. They recognise that they are not a perfect leader and do not try to be one; instead, they concentrate on maximising their strengths, improving upon their weaknesses where possible, and seeking out colleagues with the requisite skills to complement and compensate for their acknowledged shortcomings.

The *‘incomplete leader’* knows when to delegate and *‘let go’*—to trust the expertise, vision, ideas and commitment of others within their project(s) or organisation. This is a trait also identified by the research of Ed Merrow into the behaviours and practices of successful complex project leaders (Merrow and Nandurdikar 2018:113). *‘Letting go’* requires an appropriate culture and environment where such delegated—or distributed—leadership is encouraged.

The concept of the incomplete leader led Ancona and her team to define an approach to distributed leadership: a leader operating in their best leadership ability whilst leveraging others in theirs. They synthesised their research and that of others into four key leadership capabilities:

- **Sensemaking:** understanding the context in which an organisation and its people operate
- **Relating:** building relationships within and across organisations
- **Visioning:** creating a compelling picture of the future
- **Inventing:** developing new ways to achieve the vision

'Sensemaking, relating, visioning, and inventing are interdependent. Without sensemaking, there's no common view of reality from which to start. Without relating, people work in isolation or, worse, strive toward different aims. Without visioning, there's no shared direction. And without inventing, a vision remains illusory' (Ancona et al. 2007:99).

As the *'incomplete leader'* concept acknowledges, rarely—if at all—will someone be equally skilled in all of these four capabilities.

These four distributed leadership capabilities form the basis for the Major Project Leadership Model (see figure 1). We adopted the four capabilities for major projects leadership training because they emphasise *'what leaders do'*—that is, leadership capability and behaviour—and are particularly suited to the leadership of major projects.

We added a capability to emphasise *'who leaders are'*—the accumulated experience that the major projects leader brings to their role. This fifth capability—which after considerable discussion we called *acumen*—lies at the heart of the Major Project Leadership Model as it underpins, contextualises, and enables the other four capabilities of the model, as well as emphasising the *'incomplete leader'* concept.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking—a term introduced by organisational psychologist Karl Weick (1969: passim)—is the process of making sense of our surroundings. Major project leaders need to make sense of the world around them and understand the contexts in which they are operating in i.e. to create a map of the project terrain. This is accomplished by obtaining data from multiple sources and stakeholders, involving others in the sensemaking process, testing what they believe they are seeing, and remaining open to new possibilities. The leader then ensures that everyone is working from this same map.

Relating

Major project leaders need to build effective and trusting relationships with their stakeholders and in an environment where leaders don't necessarily know the answers have to work with others to explore options and determine the answers—to build a community of confidants who they can collaborate with to solve problems. Building such relationships requires trust, mutual understanding, and respect. Ancona et al. (2007) identified three key ways for achieving this as:

- **Inquiring:** asking questions and listening, with an open mind, with the intent to understand others' viewpoints
- **Advocating:** explaining your own point of view, with a clear description of the reasoning that led to it
- **Connecting:** cultivating a network of confidants who can help the leader accomplish the project goals

Sensemaking and relating represent the *'enabling'* axis of the Major Project Leadership Model as they are the capabilities through which the project leader collects information on what is happening in and around the project—this information is then used for visioning and inventing, the *'action'* axis of the model.

Visioning

Visioning creates the compelling images of the future for the project; whereas sensemaking creates a map of *'what is'*, visioning produces a map of *'what could be'*: the project leader's intent. The vision gives those working on the project a sense of purpose and meaning in their work, and inspires and motivates them—if the vision is compelling and credible, the team will want to find ways to make it a reality. In a project context, Winch et al. (2022:41) call this capability *'projecting'*. The project leader should be a role model for the vision, embodying the core values and ideas, and communicating what can be achieved to the team. Visioning is dynamic and collaborative; when done right, visioning produces *'an extraordinary collective sense of possibility'* (Ancona et al. 2007:98).

Inventing

Inventing turns the vision of the future from an idea into a tangible reality. Rather than using the term *'execution'*, *'inventing'* implies the creativity and innovation required in determining what is needed including new ways of organising and interacting. The vision is the *'finish line'* as seen from above – inventing creates the new methods, systems and actions needed to get there. Implementing a new vision is very rarely reliant on *'doing the same things we've been doing'*—the project leader should encourage creative ways of getting it done, asking: *'what other options are possible?'*, and experimenting with new ways of doing things.

Acumen

The four leadership capabilities above encapsulate, in a very effective way, *'what leaders do'*. The fifth capability, acumen, captures the consolidated experience of project leaders that forms the basis for good judgement, and the ability to draw on that experience—and the experience of others—to make effective decisions. Acumen provides leaders with a *'sense'* of a situation; a *'gut feeling'* based on experience that enables the leader, for example, to know when to challenge and when not to, when to trust and when not to, when to dive deeply into a problem and when to sit back and reflect on the situation.

The Major Project Leadership Model as presented in figure 1 is in itself a useful framework for project sponsors to understand their leadership of a major project—as project leaders they will execute the capabilities within the model, with their respective strengths and weaknesses in each capability. The model is also useful for a project sponsor in determining how best to optimally distribute their leadership responsibilities within the project as an *'incomplete leader'*.

The Four Domains of Major Projects

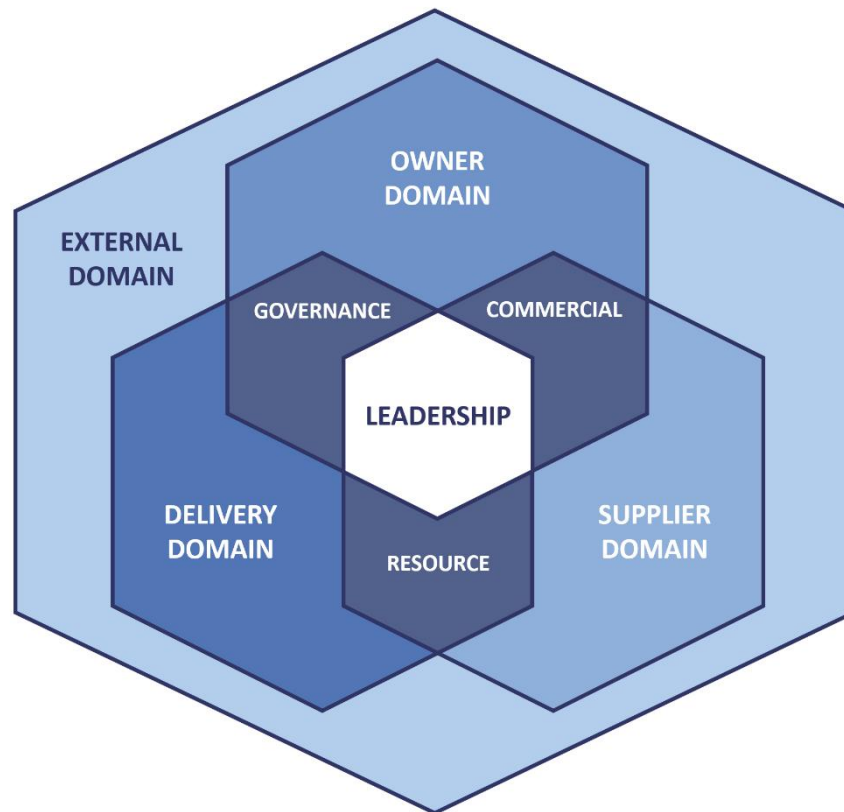


Figure 2. The Four Domains of Major Projects
(adapted from Winch et al. 2022)

The second model to be utilised as a foundation for the Major Project Sponsorship Model draws upon the research of Professor Graham Winch and colleagues in strategic project organising, specifically the Three Domains Model (Winch 2014; Winch et al. 2018; Winch et al. 2022) which, like the Major Project Leadership Model, is also used in major project executive education programmes.

Professor Winch developed the model to address what he termed '*a fundamental paradox in project organising*' (Winch et al. 2022:10) in that the focus of attention of project practitioners and scholars has been on projects as temporary organisations, and yet most project professionals work for permanent organisations.

The temporary project organisation—the delivery domain in the model—interfaces with two types of permanent organisations on which it is dependent: the owner organisation(s) and the supplier organisation(s):

- **The owner domain:** typically a single organisation or coalition, provides the financial resources for the project investment and shapes the project mission, and will typically utilise the outputs delivered by the project to realise the intended outcomes
- **The supplier domain:** typically multiple organisations, supplies the resources—human and material—that will deliver the project outputs

- **The delivery domain:** comprised of the temporary project organisations, drawing on the financial resources from the owner domain and the human and material resources from the supplier domain, to deliver the outputs to the owner

For an *'internal'* project within a single company, the domains will most likely be internal to that organisation with internal contracts—if perhaps loosely defined—between them. For a major project, there will be multiple organisations across the domains.

The interfaces between these domains are critical to the success of the project:

- The **governance interface** between the owner domain and the delivery domain is concerned with the structures and processes to ensure that the delivery domain delivers the outputs to meet the project mission
- The **commercial interface** between the owner domain and the supplier domain is concerned with the contracting of the supplier organisations providing the required resources to the project
- The **resource interface** between the supplier domain and the delivery domain is concerned with the provision of the right human and material resources at the right time, in order for the project outputs to be delivered.

'Leading' or *'leadership'* is at the heart of the model, integrating and pulling the domains together, orchestrating collaboration and innovation. Note, that in line with the thinking behind the Major Project Leadership Model, within major projects this leadership will most likely be distributed through a network of project leaders across the three domains. Regarding the leadership role of project sponsors specifically, there will be one or more sponsors within the owner domain, multiple sponsors within the supplier domain, and depending on how the temporary organisation is structured and resourced, there may be multiple sponsors within the delivery domain. The *'ultimate'* sponsor, be they a person or a group, will reside within the owner domain.

For our purposes of exploring project sponsorship, we have added a fourth domain to the model: the external domain. Each organisation in the three domains, including the project itself, operates within a wider external environment, interacting with individuals, groups and organisations that, whilst not involved in the delivery of the project (within the three domains), may be affected—or perceive themselves to be affected—by the execution of the project and its resulting outputs and outcomes. Indeed, the project outcomes will typically be generating benefits into the external environment—impacting people and society—be it new infrastructure, a new product, or a new service. Changes in the external domain, such as war, natural disasters, changes in government and law, etc., may also have an effect on one or more of the three domains, and thus the project.

The Major Project Sponsorship Model

The model of project sponsorship combines the Major Project Leadership Model and the Four Domains Model, summarising the expected role of the project sponsor into four primary responsibilities and interfaces. The model can also be used to explore the responsibilities and interfaces at the different levels of project, programme and portfolio.

The Owner Project Sponsor

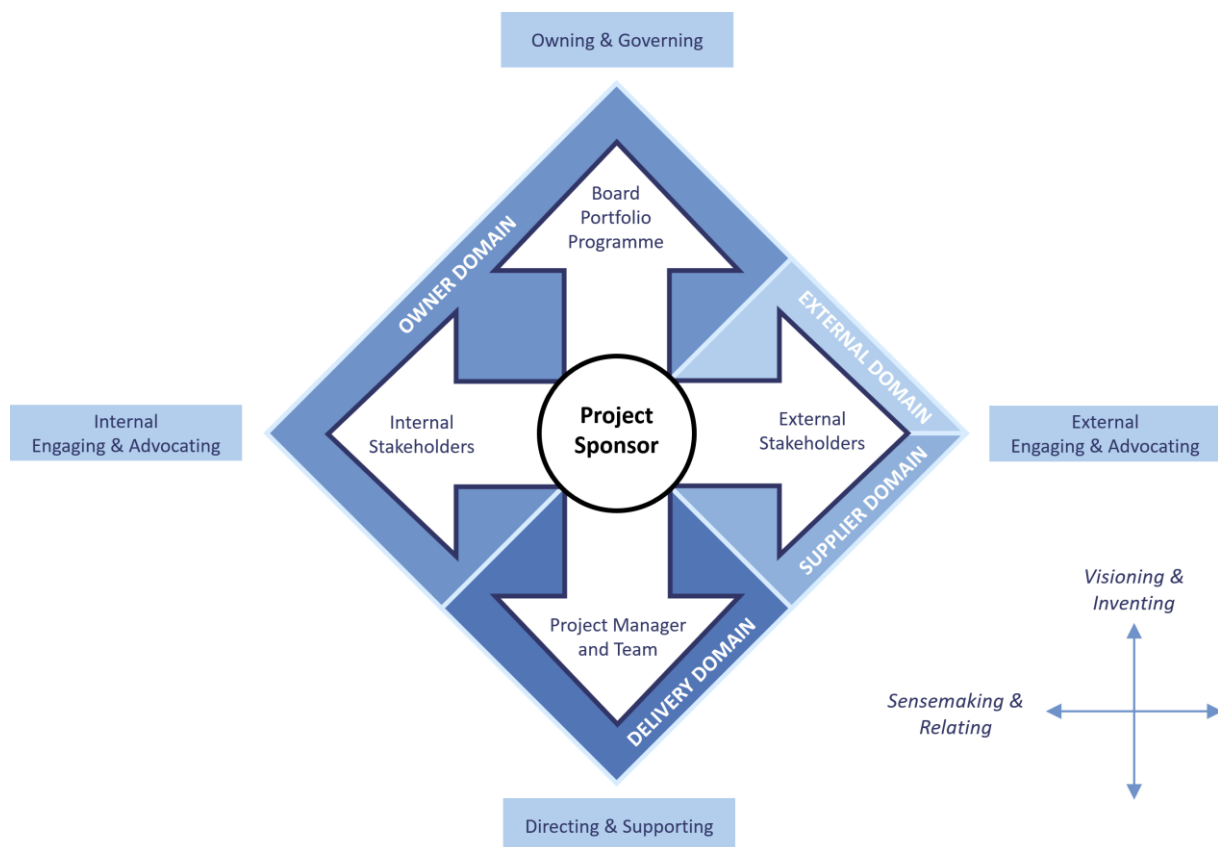


Figure 3. The Owner Project Sponsor
(Gavin 2023)

Figure 3 shows the project sponsorship model for a project sponsor based within the owner domain, which we will refer to as the '*owner project sponsor*'. The four arrows represent the four main responsibilities of the project sponsor, each of which interacts with one or more domains.

The four main responsibilities were derived from an analysis of the expected roles, responsibilities and tasks of the project sponsor during an exhaustive review of project sponsorship literature.

The horizontal arrows represent the '*enabling*' axis of the Major Project Leadership Model—sensemaking and relating—and the vertical arrows represent the '*action*' axis of the Major Project Leadership Model—visioning and inventing.

The four key responsibilities of the owner project sponsor are:

- **Owning and governing—representing the owner:** the project sponsor represents the owner domain of the project, and on behalf of the owner, is accountable for ensuring the project—through effective governance—successfully delivers the intended outputs to meet the owner’s project mission and to realise the anticipated benefits from the owner’s investment
- **Directing and supporting—directing the project manager and team:** the project sponsor provides leadership, direction and guidance to the project in the delivery domain, creating and sustaining the conditions for the project manager and the project team to succeed in their delivery of the project outputs to the owner
- **Internal engaging and advocating—communicating with internal stakeholders:** the project sponsor communicates and negotiates with the internal stakeholder groups within the owner domain—including other related projects—developing relationships, collecting information on what is happening in and around their project, but also acting as an advocate for the project, championing it within the owner organisation(s)
- **External engaging and advocating—communicating with external stakeholders:** the project sponsor communicates and negotiates with the external stakeholder communities within both the supplier domain and the external domain, similarly developing relationships, collecting information on what is happening in and around the project, but also acting as an advocate for the project, championing it to the external stakeholders

At the project level, the interfaces for each responsibility will be:

- **Owning and governing:** if the project is part of a programme, with the programme sponsor and programme board or equivalent; if the project is standalone, with the portfolio sponsor and executive board or equivalent
- **Directing and supporting:** with the project manager and project team
- **Internal engaging and advocating:** with internal stakeholders, groups or communities within the owner organisation(s)
- **External engaging and advocating:** with external stakeholders, groups or communities within supplier organisations and the wider external environment

The Owner Programme Sponsor

The model can also be used to depict programme sponsorship within the owner domain—the ‘owner programme sponsor’ (see figure 4). The four main responsibilities are the same, but the people and groups that the programme sponsor interacts with are different:

- **Owning and governing:** with the portfolio sponsor and executive board or equivalent
- **Directing and supporting:** with the programme manager and programme team
- **Internal engaging and advocating:** with internal stakeholders, groups or communities within the owner organisation(s)

- **External engaging and advocating:** with external stakeholders, groups or communities within supplier organisations and the wider external environment

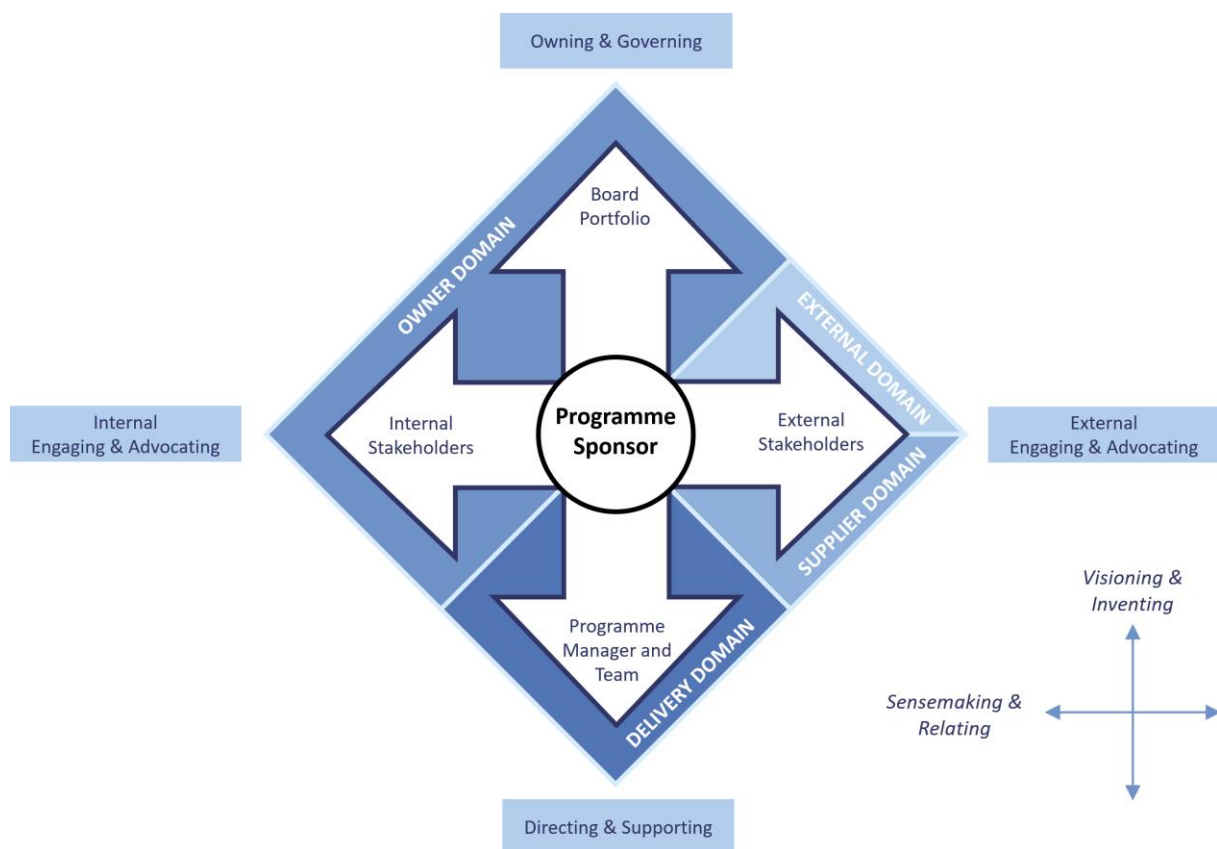


Figure 4. The Owner Programme Sponsor
(Gavin 2023)

The Owner Portfolio Sponsor

Similarly, the model can also be used to depict portfolio sponsorship within the owner domain—the ‘owner portfolio sponsor’ (see figure 5). Again, the four main responsibilities are the same, but the people and groups that the programme sponsor interacts with are different:

- **Owning and governing:** with the executive board or equivalent
- **Directing and supporting:** with the portfolio manager and portfolio team or equivalent
- **Internal engaging and advocating:** with internal stakeholders, groups or communities within the owner organisation(s)
- **External engaging and advocating:** with external stakeholders, groups or communities within supplier organisations and the wider external environment

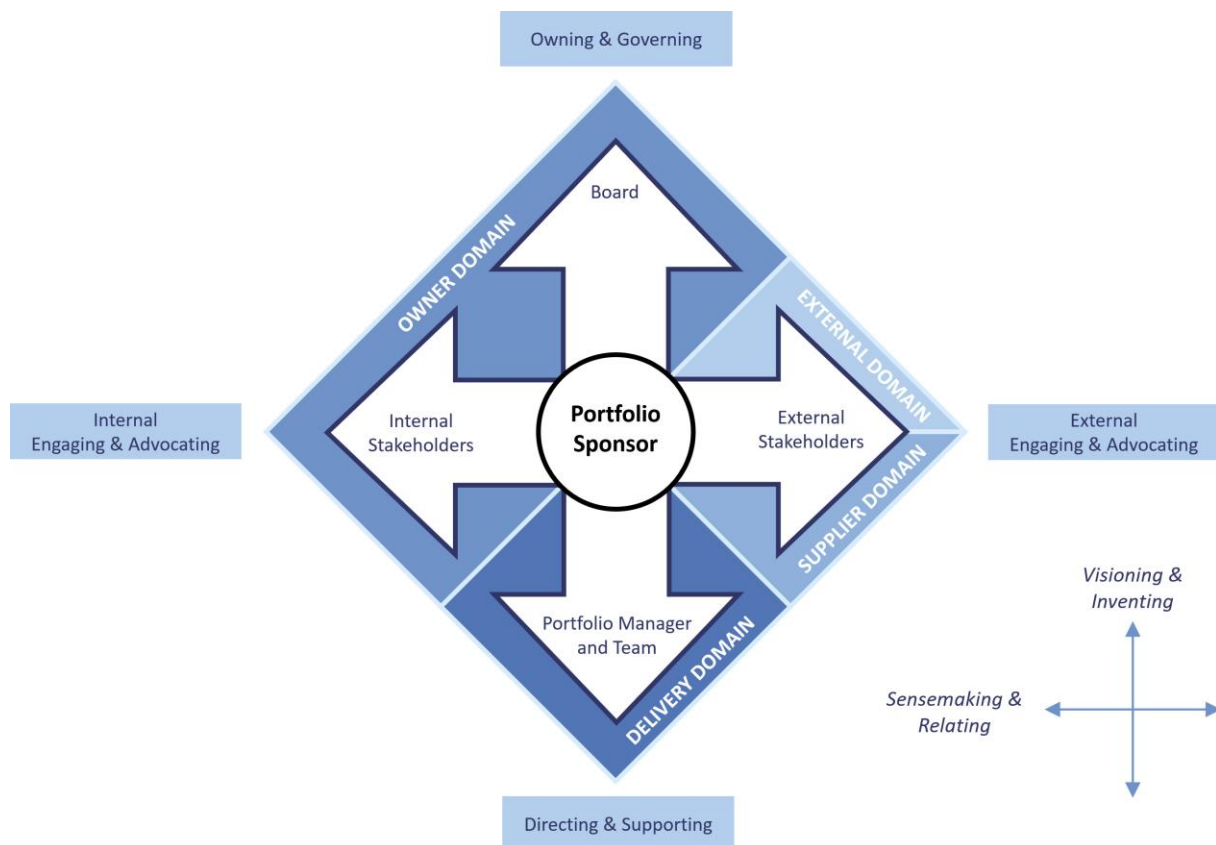


Figure 5. The Owner Portfolio Sponsor
(Gavin 2023)

The Supplier Project Sponsor

We can also use the project sponsorship model the model to represent sponsorship beyond the owner domain, for example, within the supplier domain. Typically, supplier organisations will also have sponsors for the project-based work they provide to the project, most commonly the managing director or director of the business unit concerned. Figure 6 depicts such a ‘*supplier project sponsor*’.

The supplier project sponsor has the same four primary responsibilities, but the internal stakeholders in this case belong to the supplier project sponsor’s own supplier organisation. The external stakeholders will include other supplier organisations, within the supplier domain, that are involved in the same project.

- **Owning and governing:** the supplier project sponsor is accountable to the project owner for ensuring the successful delivery of the elements of the project—and the resulting benefits—that their supplier organisation is responsible for
- **Directing and supporting:** in this case, the supplier project sponsor provides leadership, direction and guidance to their internal team delivering the supplier’s project-based work to the overall project
- **Internal engaging and advocating:** here, the supplier project sponsor communicates with individual stakeholders and stakeholder groups within

their own supplier organisation, to ensure that the contracting and supply of the project-based work aligns with the supplier organisation's overall business strategy

- **External engaging and advocating:** the supplier project sponsor communicates with external stakeholders (of their supplier organisation), including other supplier organisations involved in the project within the supplier domain, as well as stakeholders of the supplier's project-based work within the broader external environment

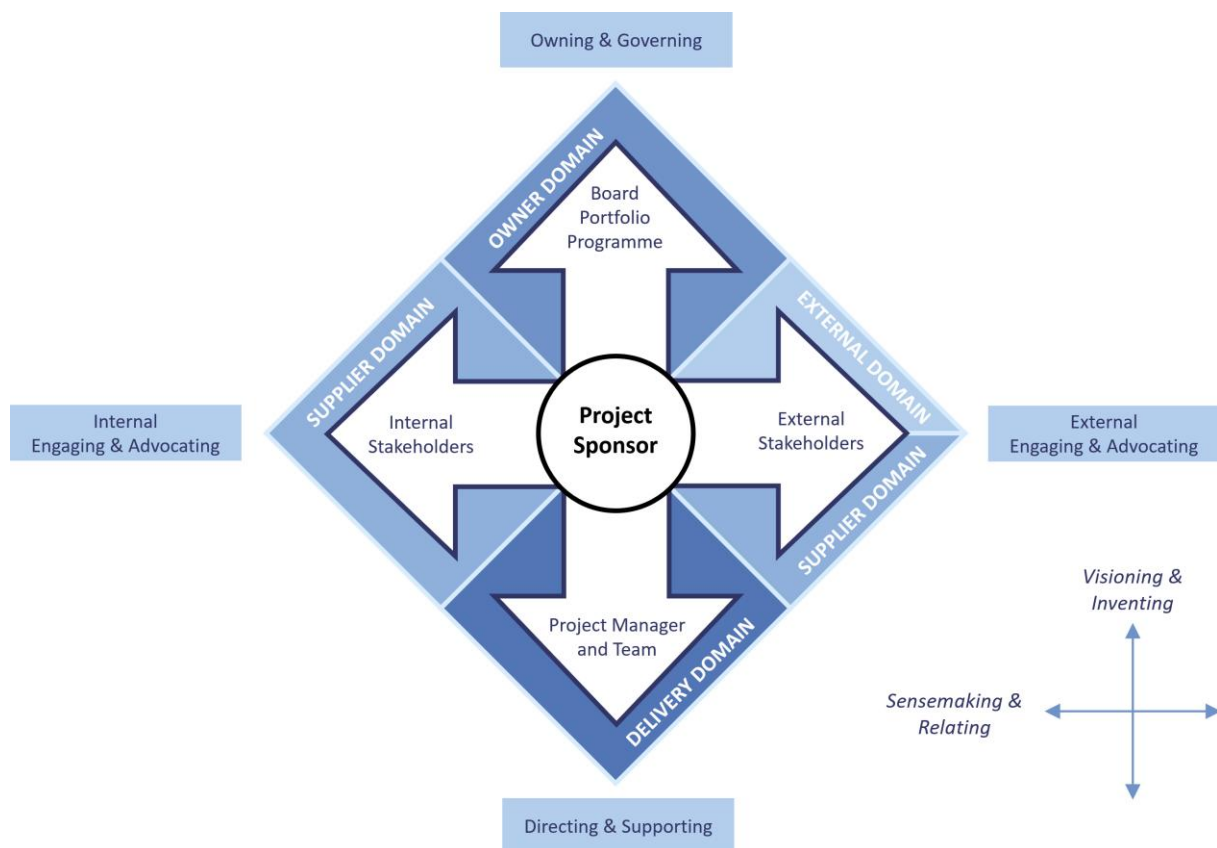


Figure 6. The Supplier Project Sponsor
(Gavin 2023)

Application of the Major Project Sponsorship Model

The Major Project Sponsorship Model was initially developed as a framework to critically review and assess the stated duties and responsibilities of the project sponsor in project management literature—particularly the bodies of knowledge of the professional project management associations, and best practice guides—so that the recommended practices could be compared and contrasted in a meaningful way. It was anticipated that a suitable model for major project sponsorship already existed and would be discovered during the literature review; however, this proved to be not the case, and the framework became the basis for a dedicated model of project sponsorship.

The development of this new model was an unexpected but hopefully significant contribution towards an improved understanding of project sponsorship. We hope that this model will serve as a useful conceptual framework for understanding the expected responsibilities and obligations of a project sponsor, and clarifying the key points of communication and interaction between the project sponsor and various stakeholders. It can also serve as the basis for an organisation to categorise and group the detailed duties and responsibilities of the project sponsor.

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