

BEYOND AUTHORISATION

The Signature and the Empty Chair: Why Sponsors Authorise the Transformations They Will Not Lead

A reflection on the distance between approving a programme and sponsoring it — and why that distance has proved so durable.



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1. Executive Summary

Every large programme begins with a signature. A senior figure — a director, a group executive, the name on the mandate — puts their authority behind the business case, and the work is licensed to begin. What happens next is one of the most familiar and least examined patterns in organisational change: the person who authorised the programme is rarely the person who leads it. They sign, and then they recede. The chair at the head of the steering committee is theirs, but it is frequently empty, or filled by a nominee who cannot commit, or occupied in body while the mind is elsewhere.

This essay examines that pattern — the sponsor who signs off but never shows up — and argues that it is not, in the main, a failure of individual character. It is a structural outcome. The way we select sponsors, the way we account for their time, the way we let reporting stand in for presence, and the way the word sponsorship has been quietly hollowed out until it means little more than approval — these forces conspire to produce the absent sponsor as reliably as a badly set thermostat produces a cold room. The essay holds that the first cost of this absence is not delay or overspend but something subtler: the slow starvation of a programme's ability to make the decisions that cross the boundaries no programme manager can cross alone. And it takes the longer view — that the gap between the intent expressed at authorisation and the reality of what follows is, in the end, the truest measure we have of whether an organisation meant what it signed.

2. The Chair That Is Never Sat In

The launch event is always well attended. The sponsor is there — visible, warm, genuinely committed in that moment. They speak about how much this matters, how the organisation cannot afford to fail, how they are personally behind it. The room believes them, because in that moment the belief is true. Then the programme starts, and the calendar begins its quiet work.

By the third month the pattern has usually declared itself. Consider a composite that will be recognisable to anyone who has run a programme of any size: a steering committee chartered to meet monthly, a fourteen-month delivery, a sponsor who attended the launch and the first two meetings and then, as other priorities arrived, began to send apologies. Of the fourteen scheduled meetings, the sponsor attended five in person; of the nine they missed, a deputy sat in for six — but a deputy who could listen and report back was not a deputy who could decide. The programme did not stop. It did something worse: it learned to route around the empty chair. Decisions that needed the sponsor's authority

were quietly reshaped into decisions that did not, which is to say they were made smaller, safer, and less true to the original intent. The transformation renegotiated itself downward, meeting by meeting, to fit the level of sponsorship actually available.

This is the mechanism that matters, and it is worth stating plainly. An absent sponsor does not simply slow a programme; the programme adapts to the absence, and the adaptation is the damage.

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3. What a Signature Buys, and What It Does Not

We should be precise about what the act of signing off actually is, because much of the confusion begins here. Authorisation is a transaction. The sponsor exchanges their organisational credibility for a business case: they agree that the problem is real, the approach is plausible, and the funding is justified. It is a necessary act and usually a sincere one. But it is a transaction that completes itself in a single moment. Once the signature is dry, the transaction is over.

Sponsorship, properly understood, is not a transaction but a relationship, and relationships are not concluded in a moment — they are sustained, or they decay. The confusion between the two is the root of the pattern. An organisation that treats sponsorship as a species of authorisation has designed the absence in from the start, because it has asked the sponsor for the one thing that is complete the instant it is given.

Consider what a programme actually needs from its sponsor across those fourteen months, none of which a signature can supply:

- The supply of decisions at the pace the programme generates them — not the quarterly cadence of a governance calendar, but the irregular, inconvenient rhythm of real cross-boundary choices.
- The provision of air cover when the programme takes something away from a part of the organisation that will resist — the political weather that only a senior figure can change.
- The holding of the line on scope and intent when the easier path is to let the ambition erode a compromise at a time.
- The visible expenditure of the sponsor's own credibility — the signal to everyone watching that this matters enough for someone senior to spend something they cannot easily recover.

None of these is purchasable at the point of authorisation. All of them require the sponsor to keep showing up. This is why the signature and the empty chair are not in tension: the same person can perfectly well provide the first and withhold the second, and most of the time that is exactly what happens.

4. Why the Pattern Survives Everything We Throw at It

If absent sponsorship were simply a matter of individual failure, we would expect it to vary as individuals vary — some sponsors present, some absent, distributed more or less at random. What we observe instead is a pattern too consistent to be personal. Conscientious, well-meaning executives produce the absent-sponsor pattern just as reliably as careless ones. That consistency is the signature of structure, not character. Four forces, in my observation, sustain it.

The first is portfolio overload. The senior figures qualified to sponsor a major programme are, almost by definition, the same figures sponsoring several others, running a division, and carrying the operational load of the present quarter. A sponsor is not choosing between attending this programme and doing nothing; they are choosing between this programme and a dozen equally legitimate claims on the same hour. In that competition the programme almost always loses, because the programme is about a benefit some quarters away while the operational demands are about a crisis this week, and the crisis is louder. This is not weakness of will. It is a rational response to an impossible allocation, and no amount of exhortation to be a more engaged sponsor will change the arithmetic.

The second is accountability diffusion. When a programme has a steering committee, a sponsor, a senior responsible owner, a programme board and a delivery director, it can feel as though accountability has been strengthened by distribution. The opposite is true. The more shoulders a responsibility rests on, the less it weighs on any one of them. The sponsor who misses the meeting knows the committee will proceed; the committee that proceeds without the sponsor assumes someone senior must be across it. Everyone is covered and no one is exposed — and a responsibility that exposes no one is a responsibility that will, under pressure, be quietly set down.

The third is the reporting machine that simulates presence. This is perhaps the most insidious, because it wears the appearance of good governance. A programme produces its monthly report — a status summary, a set of milestone indicators, a risk log — and the sponsor reads it. Reading the report feels like sponsorship. But a report is a representation of the programme, constructed by the programme, and it is constructed, consciously or not, to be receivable. Its rough edges are sanded; its genuinely alarming ambiguities resolve into an amber that means "manageable." The sponsor who governs by report governs a version of the programme prepared for their consumption, and the distance between that version and the real thing is precisely the distance that presence would close. The better the reporting, the less the sponsor feels the need to show up — which is to say the machinery we build to keep sponsors informed is often the machinery that makes their absence comfortable.

The fourth is the definitional drift of the word itself. Over the years the term sponsor has migrated, in common usage, from something closer to patron — one who lends active protection and advancement — toward something closer to approver. When many organisations appoint a sponsor today they are, in their own minds, appointing the person who signs. If that is what the role has come to mean, then the absent sponsor is not failing at the job; they are performing it exactly as defined. The pattern survives partly because we have redefined it into compliance.

*“The machinery we build to keep sponsors informed is often
the machinery that makes their absence comfortable.”*

5. The Case for Staying Away

It would be too easy to stop here, with the structures indicted and the sponsors excused. There is a serious argument on the other side, and it deserves to be met at its strongest rather than waved past.

The argument runs like this. A well-run programme should not require the constant presence of a senior executive. The entire purpose of professional programme management — the discipline, the delivery director, the governance framework — is to let a busy leader delegate with confidence. If a sponsor has to attend every steering committee and adjudicate every cross-boundary decision, then the delivery machinery has failed; a good programme is precisely one that frees the sponsor's attention rather than consuming it. On this view the empty chair is not a symptom of neglect but a sign of a programme mature enough not to need hand-holding. And there is an efficiency dimension: an executive's time is the scarcest resource in the organisation, and spending it in meetings a competent delivery director could run is a waste of exactly the capacity the organisation most needs deployed elsewhere.

This is a real argument, and it is right about something important: a programme that cannot function without the sponsor physically present for every decision is indeed badly designed, and sponsors should not be dragged into detail that others are paid to handle.

But it mistakes the nature of what the sponsor is there to do. The sponsor's presence is not required for the decisions a delivery director can make; it is required for exactly the decisions a delivery director cannot. A programme manager can run the plan, manage the risks and drive the delivery — all of it — right up to the boundary of their own authority. What they cannot do is compel a peer division to release its best people, overrule a functional head who is quietly strangling the initiative, or change the scope in a way that reallocates power between parts of the organisation. Those decisions live above the delivery machinery by their nature, and they are the decisions on which transformations actually turn. The steelman is correct that the sponsor need not attend to the routine; it is wrong to conclude that the sponsor may therefore be absent, because absence does not discriminate between the routine and the decisive. The sponsor who stays away to avoid the trivial is, in practice, also away when the decisive arrives — and the decisive rarely sends an invitation in advance.

So the honest reconciliation is this: the argument for delegation is an argument against the wrong kind of presence, not an argument for absence. What a programme needs is not a sponsor in every seat but a sponsor who is reliably reachable and genuinely willing to spend authority when the moment demands it. That is a far higher bar than attendance, and far harder to fake with a well-written report.

6. Presence as the Supply of Authority

If attendance is the wrong measure and absence the wrong outcome, what is the thing itself? The most useful reframing I know is to stop thinking of sponsorship as a matter of time and start thinking of it as a matter of authority supply.

A transformation consumes authority the way an engine consumes fuel. Every time it crosses a boundary — between functions, between divisions, between the interests of the present operation and the demands of the future one — it needs a quantum of authority the programme itself does not possess. The sponsor is the supply. When the supply is steady, the programme keeps crossing boundaries and the intent survives contact with

the organisation. When the supply is intermittent, the programme crosses the boundaries it can reach on its own authority and stops at the ones it cannot — and since the hardest and most valuable boundaries are exactly the ones a programme cannot cross alone, the parts of the transformation that get delivered are systematically the least ambitious. This is why so many programmes deliver something and so few deliver what they set out to. They deliver up to the limit of the authority actually supplied.

Understood this way, the discipline of good sponsorship becomes clearer and more demanding. It is not attend the meetings. It is:

1. Be reachable at the programme's pace, not the calendar's. The decisions that need authority do not queue politely for the monthly meeting. A sponsor who can be reached in the week a decision arises is worth more than one who chairs every committee but is unreachable between them.
2. Spend credibility deliberately and visibly. The organisation reads where senior attention goes. A sponsor seen to spend something — to overrule, to protect, to insist — tells the organisation the programme is real in a way no communications plan can.
3. Hold the intent when erosion is easiest. The moments that most need the sponsor are the unglamorous ones: the scope reduction proposed for sensible-sounding reasons, the milestone quietly slipped, the compromise that saves this quarter at the cost of the whole point. Presence at those moments is worth more than presence at ten launches.

The reframing disciplines the organisation, too, not just the sponsor. If sponsorship is the supply of authority, then appointing as sponsor someone who lacks the authority to supply it — a figure senior in title but unable to overrule the divisions the programme must cross — is an error made at the very start, and no amount of engagement will fix it. The absent sponsor and the under-powered sponsor produce the same programme; we should learn to see them as the same failure wearing two faces.

7. The Longer View

Return, finally, to the signature. The reason the gap between authorisation and sponsorship is worth this much attention is that it is, in the end, a measuring instrument. Organisations say a great many things about their intentions. They say this transformation is a priority; they say they are committed; they say failure is not an option. Words are cheap and everyone knows it, which is why the words are not where the truth lives. The truth lives in the distance between the intent expressed at the signature and the authority actually supplied over the months that follow. That distance is not rhetoric. It can be observed, and it can nearly be measured, in the pattern of the empty chair.

I have come to believe that if you want to know what an organisation genuinely means to do, you should pay less attention to what it announces and more to what its senior people spend their scarcest resource — their own attention and credibility — upon. The programmes that succeed are not, in my experience, simply the ones with the best business cases or the most disciplined delivery, though those help. They are the ones where the gap between the signature and the sustained supply of authority stays narrow. The absent sponsor is the visible sign of that gap widening, and the widening usually begins not with a decision to disengage but with the quiet accumulation of reasonable, individually defensible absences — each of which the structures around the sponsor make easy, comfortable and safe.

Which is why the remedy, if there is one, is not to exhort sponsors to try harder. It is to change the structures that make absence rational: to appoint fewer sponsors to fewer programmes, so the arithmetic of their time is survivable; to concentrate accountability rather than diffuse it, so that someone is genuinely exposed; to build reporting that surfaces the uncomfortable rather than sanding it smooth; and, above all, to restore to the word sponsor its older and harder meaning – not the one who approves, but the one who protects, advances and spends themselves on the thing they have licensed. Until we do that, the launch events will remain well attended, the signatures will remain freely given, and the chair at the head of the table will remain, meeting after meeting, quietly empty.