

BEYOND CRISIS SPONSORSHIP

The Sponsor Disappeared into the Crisis — and the Programme Inherited Risk Without Authority

What emergency leadership reveals about the fragile political contract behind major change



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“A programme without active sponsorship does not become apolitical; it becomes political without an authorised referee.”

1. The third cancelled board

At 7:42 on a Tuesday morning in November 2008, the programme director received a short message: the steering committee was cancelled again. The sponsor had been called into the daily cash meeting. Every capital commitment was under review, customer forecasts were moving by the week, and the executive team was rebuilding the operating plan.

The cancellation was entirely understandable.

It was also consequential. A supplier extension worth £2.4 million needed approval by Friday. Two divisions disputed which one would absorb the cost of a delayed migration. A site closure had entered consultation, but the future operating model remained unconfirmed. The programme could continue working, yet every available path crossed an executive boundary.

The third cancellation did not merely remove a meeting. It removed the place where the organisation had agreed to exercise authority over its own change.

This is what sponsor disappearance looks like in a crisis. The individual has not vanished. The sponsor is more present than ever – in liquidity calls, cost reviews, customer discussions and emergency decisions. What disappears is sponsorship as a distinct act of governance. The programme remains, the politics remain, and the authority that once contained them is absorbed by the crisis.

2. Crisis changes the gravity of leadership

In stable conditions, a major programme competes with operations for executive attention. In crisis, the competition becomes unequal. Immediate survival exerts a different gravity from future transformation.

A sponsor who once protected a monthly programme board now spends each morning examining cash, credit exposure, order cancellations and cost. Decisions that appeared strategic in the annual plan are compared with obligations due in days. The language of leadership contracts from advantage to resilience, from future capability to present control.

We should not moralise this shift. Autumn 2008 has made the reasons visible. Forecasts lose reliability. Capital becomes scarce. Suppliers seek reassurance. Employees hear rumours before leaders can establish facts. A responsible executive must turn towards the immediate threat.

Yet the programme does not become less political because the sponsor has more urgent work. It becomes more political because scarcity intensifies every unresolved trade-off.

Budgets that were negotiated when growth was assumed are now contested. Divisions seek to protect people and cash. Functions reclassify previous commitments as discretionary. Suppliers price uncertainty. Benefits move further into the future while costs remain stubbornly present.

The programme is asked to proceed inside conditions that have invalidated the bargain on which approval rested.

3. What sponsorship was quietly doing

The importance of sponsorship is often described in visible acts: chairing meetings, communicating support, removing obstacles and holding leaders accountable. These matter. The deeper contribution is less visible.

A sponsor provides political cover for decisions whose enterprise value and local cost sit in different places.

When a common process disadvantages one division to benefit the whole, the sponsor authorises the imbalance. When a function refuses to release scarce specialists, the sponsor establishes priority. When benefits deteriorate, the sponsor decides whether to reinvest, reduce scope or stop. When executives disagree, the sponsor prevents the programme manager from becoming the unofficial judge of matters beyond the role's authority.

Remove that cover and the programme does not simply lose escalation. It inherits questions it was never constituted to answer.

- Which business unit should carry an exceptional transition cost?
- Which strategic benefit is still credible under the revised forecast?
- Which supplier commitment is protected by enterprise priority?
- Which local resistance reflects legitimate operational risk?
- Which part of the original case should be abandoned?

A programme leader can analyse these questions, frame options and expose consequences. Deciding them requires an authority derived from the organisation, not from the schedule.

A programme without active sponsorship does not become apolitical; it becomes political without an authorised referee.

4. The dangerous competence of the programme team

Strong programme teams often respond to sponsor absence by becoming more capable. They negotiate bilateral agreements, reshape the plan, secure temporary funding and keep work moving. This looks like resilience, and much of it is.

It can also conceal the transfer of authority.

The programme director begins agreeing trade-offs that should belong to executives. The programme office maintains a "working assumption" because the formal decision is unavailable. A supplier is given verbal reassurance. A division accepts a temporary exception that gradually becomes permanent. The plan remains green because decisions are represented as actions in progress.

The team protects momentum by borrowing authority from the sponsor's silence.

This is dangerous precisely because competent people can sustain it for months. Problems appear operational: a late interface, a resource gap, an unresolved scope point. Beneath them sits a governance debt. Each workaround depends on a political settlement that has not occurred.

When the sponsor eventually returns, the programme presents a landscape of accumulated facts. Contracts have been extended. People have been reassigned, designs constrained and expectations created. The executive can still decide, but the cost of choosing differently has risen.

What looked like leadership below the line has narrowed leadership above it.

5. A composite programme under pressure

Consider a representative transformation at the end of 2008. An organisation with four operating divisions was consolidating finance administration into one shared-service centre. The approved case required £18 million of investment and forecast £8.5 million in annual benefit. Migration of the first two divisions had begun.

As the external environment deteriorated, the executive committee imposed a capital freeze and began weekly cash reviews. The programme sponsor, also responsible for the largest division, shifted almost entirely to revenue protection and liquidity.

Three issues reached the programme simultaneously.

- The shared-service building required a final £1.6 million fit-out commitment.
- A software supplier requested a £900,000 extension after the migration sequence changed.
- One division refused to release 28 experienced staff because its transaction volumes had risen by 14 per cent.

The formal programme board was cancelled twice. The programme director assembled an options paper, but no forum accepted it.

To maintain progress, the team split the fit-out into smaller orders, negotiated a three-month supplier letter and allowed the division to retain 16 staff temporarily. Each action was defensible in isolation. Together they changed the business case.

Six weeks later, the programme had spent £430,000 more than the revised cash plan, the supplier believed the extension was effectively agreed, and the annual benefit forecast had fallen by £1.2 million. None of these consequences had been authorised as an enterprise trade-off.

The turning point came when the finance director challenged the programme's cash variance. What first appeared to be weak cost control exposed something more serious: the programme had been forced to manufacture continuity from decisions nobody had made.

The sponsor did not return to the former monthly routine. That was no longer realistic. Instead, a 30-minute weekly decision session was established with the sponsor, finance director and affected division leader. Papers were limited to one page and only three categories reached the session:

- cash commitments above an agreed threshold;
- changes to benefit, scope or migration sequence;
- disputes between executive owners that the programme could not settle.

Within two sessions, the fit-out was approved in a reduced form, the supplier extension was renegotiated with an explicit ceiling, and the 16 retained roles received a closure date linked to transaction volumes. The annual benefit was formally reset to £7.1 million.

The programme had not restored normal governance. It had restored authorised choice.

In crisis, sponsorship should shrink to the smallest form that still preserves enterprise decision – not disappear into a diary too full to govern.

6. The strongest defence of the absent sponsor

The strongest opposing view deserves respect. During a severe crisis, the sponsor's first duty is to protect the enterprise, not preserve the programme's governance calendar. If cash, customers or employment are at risk, a transformation board may be a luxury. Programme leaders are senior professionals; they should exercise judgement, adapt and avoid escalating every difficulty.

All of this is true.

A programme that demands business-as-usual attention while the enterprise is fighting for stability has misunderstood its context. Many activities should pause. Some programmes should stop. Sponsors cannot remain equally available to every prior commitment. Programme teams must take more operational responsibility and tolerate greater uncertainty.

But the conclusion does not follow that sponsorship can be suspended while the programme continues.

If the work is important enough to spend cash, alter operating structures, bind suppliers or move people during crisis, it is important enough to retain an authorised route for those decisions. If the organisation cannot provide that route, it should consciously pause the work rather than let delegated delivery turn into undeclared strategy.

The choice is not full governance or heroic improvisation. It is between a deliberately reduced sponsorship contract and an accidental vacuum.

7. The politics of air cover

The phrase air cover can sound like protection from accountability. Used badly, it is. A sponsor may shield a favoured programme from legitimate scrutiny or silence local expertise with executive force.

Proper air cover does something different. It makes the boundary between programme judgement and executive judgement visible.

The programme leader should be able to say:

- this decision is within the approved scope and tolerance, so the programme will make it;
- this decision redistributes cost or risk between executives, so sponsorship must settle it;
- this evidence weakens the investment case, so the sponsor must reaffirm or change direction;
- this local objection concerns feasibility, so the programme must adapt;
- this objection concerns enterprise priority, so the executive authority must decide.

Without air cover, these distinctions collapse. Every disagreement becomes a negotiation with the programme team. Powerful functions can delay without formally objecting. Cooperative divisions carry more burden because they are easier to persuade. Suppliers exploit ambiguity. The programme leader appears accountable for outcomes that depend on authority held elsewhere.

Air cover is not the sponsor telling everyone to comply. It is the sponsor accepting public ownership of the choices that only sponsorship can make.

8. What survives when the routine cannot

Crisis governance must be lighter than normal governance, but lighter should mean concentrated rather than vague.

The essential elements are few.

- A named sponsor remains accountable, even if day-to-day participation is delegated.
- The programme knows which decisions are retained by the sponsor.
- A short, protected route exists for time-critical decisions.
- Thresholds distinguish programme discretion from enterprise trade-off.
- Changed assumptions enter the business case rather than living in side agreements.
- A conscious pause is available when sponsorship capacity falls below the work's political demand.

This is not a methodology for restoring the old meeting. The old meeting may have been too slow even before the crisis. It is a recognition that executive attention can contract without executive accountability evaporating.

9. Leadership in the sponsor's absence

Programme leaders still have choices when sponsorship weakens.

They can make the vacuum visible. A decision log that names the absent authority is more honest than an action log that disguises the issue as delay. They can frame options with consequences rather than send repeated requests for guidance. They can protect the

sponsor's attention by escalating only matters that cross agreed thresholds. They can resist verbal assurances that create commitments without record.

Most importantly, they can refuse the flattering invitation to become the sponsor by default.

There is courage in keeping work moving. There is equal courage in stating that continued movement would require authority the programme does not possess.

This is not passivity. It is respect for the distinction between delivery leadership and enterprise governance.

10. When the sponsor returns

Sponsors often return after the most intense period expecting to resume the programme from the last formal report. They find instead that time has changed the meaning of the work. Assumptions have moved, informal bargains have accumulated and people have acted on silence.

The return should therefore begin with reconstruction, not reassurance.

What has been committed? Which decisions were provisional? Where did cost and risk move? Which benefits remain credible? What obligations have participants inferred? Which work should now stop?

The sponsor's first task is not to restore confidence. It is to restore authorship of the programme's political contract.

11. The structural lesson

The disappearing sponsor is easy to describe as a failure of individual commitment. In crisis, that judgement is usually too simple. The structure produces the absence.

The same executive is asked to defend the present enterprise and sponsor its future form. When threat intensifies, the immediate role consumes the transformational one. Unless governance is deliberately reduced and protected, sponsorship becomes whatever time remains.

The programme then inherits risk without authority and calls the result empowerment.

The better response is neither to demand the old ceremony nor excuse the vacuum. It is to preserve the minimum act of sponsorship: an authorised person, a protected decision route, explicit thresholds and visible ownership of changed commitments.

A crisis can justifiably take the sponsor away from the meeting. It cannot make the decisions waiting in that meeting disappear.

If the programme must continue, sponsorship must continue in a form the crisis can bear. Otherwise the organisation is not leading through crisis. It is allowing urgency at the top to become ungoverned consequence below.