

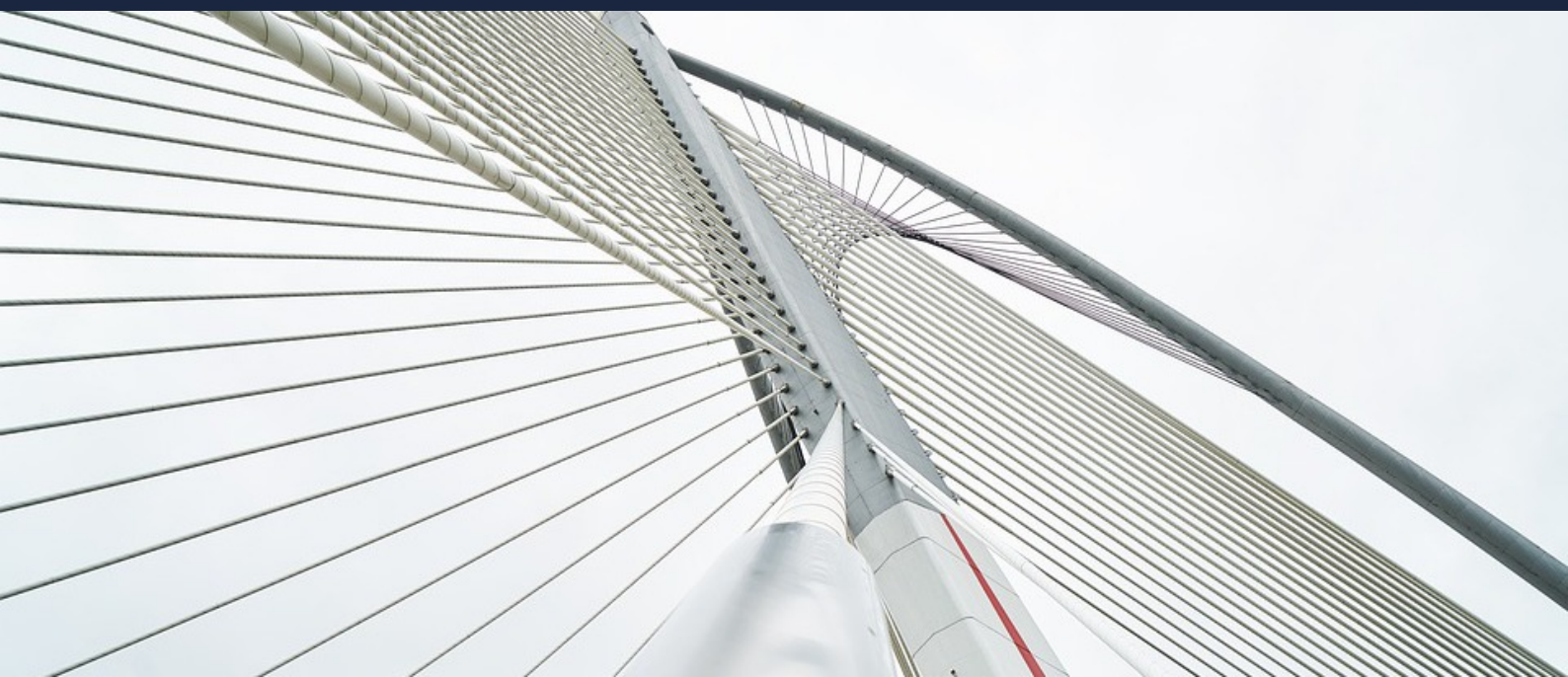
BEYOND SPONSORSHIP

The Sponsor Who Owns Everything and Decides Nothing

A Leadership Essay on Accountability Without Authority

Giovanni Leonardi

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“Collective accountability often means that everyone can influence a decision and no one is answerable for making it.”

1. Executive Summary

Executive sponsorship is one of the most heavily emphasised and least precisely designed roles in organisational change.

The sponsor is commonly described as accountable for the business case, governance, outcomes and benefits. That language appears decisive. In practice, many sponsors own an extraordinary breadth of responsibility while exercising surprisingly little explicit authority. They chair boards, receive reports, resolve escalations and defend programmes in senior forums, yet the decisions that determine success remain dispersed across finance, operations, technology, risk, procurement and business-unit leadership.

The result is symbolic accountability: one individual is named as the owner of the whole while the organisation retains the right to negotiate every consequential trade-off around them.

This paper argues that sponsorship should be understood as a decision system, not a status, title or set of meeting obligations. The sponsor's role is to preserve the continuing case for investment, make or secure cross-organisational trade-offs, design the delegation of authority, maintain the conditions for benefit realisation and accept the consequences of changing direction.

A sponsor does not need to make every decision. Indeed, sponsorship fails when routine choices accumulate at executive level. But the sponsor must ensure that every material decision has one authorised owner, a defined boundary, adequate evidence, a time expectation and a route for escalation. Where the sponsor delegates authority, that delegation must be protected from informal reversal by functions or committees.

The central distinction is between being accountable for an outcome and possessing agency over the choices that shape it. When accountability and agency separate, sponsors become commentators on delivery. Programme teams seek repeated consensus. Decisions travel upward without becoming clearer. Boards provide assurance without exercising governance.

A sponsor who is accountable for everything but authorised to decide nothing is not an owner; they are the organisation's designated witness.

Effective sponsorship therefore requires five forms of authority:

- authority over the continuing business case;
- authority to shape governance and delegation;
- authority to resolve enterprise trade-offs;
- authority to commit or release organisational capacity;
- authority to stop, pause or redesign work when evidence changes.

These powers must be balanced by transparency, assurance and accountability to the sponsoring body. The objective is not executive dominance. It is a coherent relationship between decision, authority and consequence.

2. The Sponsor as Organisational Fiction

Every major initiative needs a point of accountability. Without one, difficult decisions diffuse across committees and benefits become everyone's aspiration but no one's obligation.

The sponsor role exists to solve this problem. It links the investing organisation to the temporary delivery structure. It carries strategic intent into governance and brings delivery evidence back into investment decisions. It should keep the work aligned to organisational need, protect the business case and ensure that outputs become outcomes.

Yet organisations often treat the appointment itself as the solution. A senior name is attached to the programme. Terms of reference assign accountability. A board is convened. The governance chart now appears complete.

The fiction begins when this formal accountability is not matched by the authority required to act across the organisation.

A sponsor may be expected to deliver benefits controlled by operational leaders. They may be accountable for schedule while specialist resources are allocated elsewhere. They may own the business case while finance controls funding changes, technology controls architecture, procurement controls commercial options and business units retain vetoes over implementation.

No single constraint is unreasonable. Organisations need checks and balances. The problem is cumulative: the sponsor owns the outcome but must continuously renegotiate the means.

This turns sponsorship into influence. Exceptional sponsors can sometimes succeed through relationships, credibility and persistence. But a governance model that depends on personal heroics is not a governance model. It is a workaround.

3. Accountability Is Not Authority

Accountability answers: who must explain the result and accept its consequence?

Authority answers: who is permitted to choose?

Responsibility answers: who performs the work?

These concepts are often blended in role descriptions. A sponsor is “responsible and accountable” for success, while the practical decisions are distributed across a board. The board “owns” governance, while no member can be identified as the owner of a particular trade-off. The programme director “manages” delivery, while boundaries between management discretion and sponsor approval remain unclear.

The ambiguity feels collaborative until interests diverge.

When a transformation requires one business unit to absorb cost for enterprise benefit, who decides? When a programme must choose between schedule certainty and design integrity, who accepts the consequence? When benefit evidence weakens but political commitment remains high, who can reduce scope or stop? When several programmes compete for the same operational capacity, who can change priority?

If the answer is “the board,” the next question is how the board decides. Consensus may be appropriate, but what happens when consensus cannot be reached? Voting may be possible, but do all members carry equal authority and consequence? Escalation may be available, but to whom, and by when?

A collective forum can inform and legitimise a decision. It cannot replace an identifiable decision owner.

“Collective accountability often means that everyone can influence a decision and no one is answerable for making it.”

4. Why Sponsors Become Passive

4.1 Seniority is mistaken for capacity

Sponsors are appointed because they have organisational standing. The same standing usually brings a large operational portfolio, external responsibilities and several other change commitments.

Sponsorship is then added to an already full role and treated as a periodic governance obligation. The sponsor attends the board, reviews papers and intervenes on escalations, but lacks time to shape decisions before they become crises.

The organisation has appointed authority without providing attention.

4.2 Boards absorb the role

A programme board is meant to support governance by representing investing, delivery and user interests. It can broaden evidence and expose consequences. But boards often become the apparent decision owner.

The sponsor chairs rather than decides. Disagreement is deferred for further analysis. Members seek alignment with their functions before committing. The forum produces collective comfort instead of clear choice.

4.3 Assurance becomes a substitute for judgement

Assurance can show whether governance is operating and whether risks are understood. It cannot decide what risk the organisation should accept.

Sponsors may lean on assurance ratings because they provide independent confidence. But assurance is input to judgement, not outsourced judgement. A programme can comply with process while its strategic rationale weakens. It can receive recommendations while the sponsor still needs to decide what to do.

4.4 Escalation arrives without options

Programme teams often escalate problems rather than decisions. The sponsor receives a description of delay, risk or conflict without a clear set of choices, consequences and recommendation.

The sponsor asks for more analysis. The team interprets this as indecision. Both are partly right: decision quality was not designed into the escalation.

4.5 Organisational incentives remain untouched

A sponsor may advocate an enterprise outcome while functional leaders continue to be measured on local performance. The transformation requires capacity, behavioural change or temporary disruption that their objectives discourage.

Without the authority to alter incentives, priorities or resource commitments, the sponsor relies on goodwill. Sponsorship becomes persuasion at scale.

5. The Five Authorities of Sponsorship

A meaningful sponsor mandate needs more than a list of accountabilities. It needs explicit authority.

5.1 Authority over the continuing case

The sponsor owns the question of whether the initiative remains worth doing.

This is not limited to approving the original business case. The sponsor must ensure that assumptions, expected outcomes, disbenefits and strategic relevance are revisited as evidence changes.

They should be able to recommend increased commitment, redesign, pause or termination. Where final approval sits with a sponsoring body, the sponsor must still own the recommendation and make the consequence visible.

5.2 Authority over governance

The sponsor should design governance appropriate to the work: decision forums, delegations, assurance, escalation, reporting and benefit ownership.

This includes removing governance that no longer adds value. Programmes often accumulate committees because each new concern produces another forum. The sponsor must prevent control from becoming congestion.

5.3 Authority over enterprise trade-offs

Major change crosses boundaries. The sponsor must be able to resolve or escalate trade-offs that no function can decide alone.

This does not grant unlimited power over business units. It creates a defined route through which enterprise outcomes can prevail over local optimisation.

5.4 Authority over committed capacity

A programme is not funded merely by money. It consumes leadership time, specialist capability, operational attention and willingness to absorb disruption.

If those resources are promised in the business case but remain optional in practice, the sponsor cannot protect delivery or benefits. The mandate must include a mechanism to secure, reallocate or formally renegotiate capacity.

5.5 Authority to stop

The ability to initiate work is common. The ability to stop it is rare.

Stopping challenges prior decisions, political commitments and sponsor identity. Yet a sponsor unable to withdraw support when the case weakens is accountable only for continuation.

Stop authority may require approval above the sponsor, but the sponsor must be able to trigger the decision without being treated as disloyal to the programme.

Sponsor authority	Essential question	Failure when absent
Continuing case	Is this still worth doing?	Momentum replaces investment judgement
Governance	Who decides and how?	Forums multiply while choices stall
Trade-offs	Which enterprise interest prevails?	Local optimisation defeats the outcome

Sponsor authority	Essential question	Failure when absent
Capacity	What will the organisation truly commit?	Plans depend on optional resources
Stop or redesign	What changes when evidence fails?	Weak commitments become permanent

6. Delegation Is the Sponsor's Real Leverage

A powerful sponsor is not one who makes more decisions. It is one who creates a system in which decisions are made at the lowest responsible level.

Delegation must be explicit. A statement that teams are “empowered” is not enough. The sponsor should define:

- which decision is delegated;
- the role receiving authority;
- financial, risk, design and policy boundaries;
- required consultation;
- evidence needed;
- conditions that trigger escalation;
- how the decision is recorded;
- when the delegation will be reviewed.

This prevents upward drift. Without explicit boundaries, teams escalate defensively because the cost of acting without permission is unclear. Senior leaders then complain that the programme lacks pace while continuing to reward caution.

Delegation also needs protection. Functional leaders should not be able to reverse a delegated decision informally because it affects their area. Challenges must follow the agreed governance route.

The sponsor's role is therefore constitutional. They establish the rules by which temporary authority operates inside the permanent organisation.

7. The Sponsor and Programme Director Contract

The relationship between sponsor and programme director is often described in interpersonal terms: trust, openness, challenge and no surprises. These matter, but the relationship also needs a clear division of decision rights.

The programme director should control integration and delivery within agreed boundaries. They need authority over plans, teams, sequencing, suppliers, issue resolution and adaptation.

The sponsor should control strategic intent, the continuing case, enterprise trade-offs, governance, major commitments and organisational conditions for benefits.

Confusion emerges when the sponsor reaches into delivery detail or the programme director is left to negotiate enterprise politics.

A useful contract includes:

1. Decisions the programme director may make without approval.
2. Decisions requiring sponsor approval.
3. Decisions the sponsor must take to the sponsoring body.
4. Evidence expected for each class.
5. Maximum decision times.
6. Rules for urgent decisions.
7. How disagreement between sponsor and director is resolved.
8. How both will respond to evidence that weakens the case.

The contract should be reviewed when the programme changes phase. Mobilisation, design, delivery and transition require different balances of authority.

8. The Sponsor as Benefit Architect

Benefits frequently fail because sponsorship concentrates on delivery while operational ownership remains vague.

The sponsor should ensure that each material benefit has:

- a named operational owner;
- an agreed baseline and measurement method;
- a credible causal link from output to outcome;
- explicit adoption conditions;
- known disbenefits;
- a review rhythm extending beyond closure;
- authority to change the operational environment.

The sponsor does not personally realise every benefit. They create the accountability system in which benefits can survive the end of the programme.

This is especially important when benefits are distributed. A transformation may create modest improvements across several units while imposing concentrated costs on one. No operational owner will naturally optimise the enterprise result. Sponsor authority must hold the whole.

9. Sponsorship Under Uncertainty

Traditional governance can imply that the sponsor protects certainty: the approved scope, budget, schedule and benefit forecast.

Transformational sponsorship must protect something different: the organisation's ability to change its commitment as learning improves.

This requires intellectual independence. Sponsors become attached to programmes they champion. Public commitment increases the cost of reversal. Teams and suppliers build identities around continuation. Evidence that challenges the thesis can feel like opposition.

A mature sponsor separates commitment to the outcome from commitment to the current solution.

They ask:

- What would have to be true for this investment to create value?
- Which assumption is least supported?
- What evidence would change our direction?
- Are we funding delivery or learning at this stage?
- What are we no longer able to do because this work continues?
- Would we initiate this programme today?

These questions make sponsorship an active investment discipline.

10. Measure Sponsorship by Decisions

Sponsor performance is often inferred from attendance, engagement and stakeholder visibility. These are weak proxies.

A better assessment examines the decision system:

- Are material decisions owned?
- Are delegations explicit?
- How long do escalations wait?
- Are enterprise trade-offs resolved?
- Does the programme receive committed capacity?
- Are benefit assumptions revisited?
- Has funding changed when evidence changed?
- Can the sponsor identify what they would stop?
- Do operational owners accept accountability before closure?
- Are decisions recorded with rationale and consequence?

These indicators reveal whether sponsorship changes conditions or merely observes them.

They also help sponsoring bodies. A sponsor may be accountable but constrained by authority retained elsewhere. Performance assessment should expose whether the mandate itself is coherent.

11. Designing the Mandate

An effective appointment should specify more than objectives and reporting lines.

The sponsor mandate should state:

1. Outcome accountability
 - a. What outcomes and benefits the sponsor is accountable for protecting.
2. Decision authority
 - a. Which strategic, financial, organisational and risk decisions the sponsor can make.
3. Delegation authority
 - a. What the sponsor can delegate and how that delegation is protected.
4. Resource authority
 - a. How committed capacity is secured and conflicts are resolved.
5. Escalation route
 - a. Which decisions belong to the sponsoring body and expected response times.
6. Assurance relationship
 - a. How independent advice informs but does not replace sponsor judgement.
7. Tenure and capacity
 - a. Expected time commitment and continuity across programme phases.
8. Stop conditions
 - a. Evidence or events requiring formal reconsideration.
9. Transition responsibility
 - a. How benefits and accountability move into operations.
10. Transparency
 - a. How major decisions, deviations and rationales are recorded.

This makes sponsorship inspectable. It also prevents the organisation from assigning a role whose obligations exceed its power.

12. The Courage to Be the Owner

Authority alone does not create sponsorship. The sponsor must be willing to use it.

Some decisions cannot be made comfortable. An enterprise trade-off will disadvantage a function. Reallocation will disappoint a team. Stopping will expose prior optimism. Accepting risk will attract scrutiny. Delaying launch will challenge external promises.

The sponsor exists because these consequences cannot be managed through coordination alone.

Courage in sponsorship is not impulsiveness or dominance. It is the willingness to make a reasoned choice, state the consequence, remain accountable and revisit the decision when evidence changes.

It also includes the courage to delegate. Senior leaders may retain decisions because acting feels safer than trusting the system. But executive intervention in routine choices

trains the programme to wait.

The sponsor must know when ownership means deciding and when it means enabling others to decide.

13. Conclusion: From Named Accountability to Usable Authority

The language of sponsorship is already ambitious. Sponsors are accountable for objectives, governance, outcomes, benefits and the business case. The problem is not that organisations expect too little. It is that they often define the obligation more clearly than the authority.

A sponsor cannot guarantee success. Complex change contains uncertainty, conflict and dependence. But the sponsor can ensure that the organisation has a coherent way to choose.

That means owning the continuing case, shaping governance, resolving trade-offs, protecting committed capacity, delegating intelligently and creating a credible route to stop or redesign.

When these authorities are absent, sponsorship becomes ceremonial. The sponsor chairs the meeting, receives the assurance, explains the delay and remains accountable for a system they do not control.

When they are present, sponsorship becomes an organisational capability. Decisions move at the right level. Accountability follows authority. Evidence changes commitments. Benefits remain owned after delivery.

The question for every sponsoring body is not simply whether a senior person has been appointed.

It is whether the organisation has given that person enough usable authority to deserve the accountability it has placed upon them.