

BEYOND THE TITLE

The Sponsor Who Signs Off But Never Shows Up

Why Executive Sponsorship Fails When It Matters Most



The Sponsor Who Signs Off But Never Shows Up

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1. The Name on the Board Paper

Every significant programme has an executive sponsor. The governance frameworks demand it. PRINCE2 requires it. The board paper names them. The terms of reference list them first.

And in a remarkable number of cases, that is where their involvement ends.

The executive sponsor signs the business case. They attend the launch meeting. They say the right things about strategic importance and organisational commitment. And then they disappear — into the next board cycle, the next restructure, the next set of competing priorities that feel more urgent than the programme they have nominally agreed to own.

This is not a failure of individuals. It is a structural problem — one that the current generation of governance frameworks has inadvertently created by defining sponsorship as a role to be filled rather than a function to be performed.

2. The Governance Paradox

The irony is that the frameworks designed to ensure executive accountability have, in many organisations, achieved precisely the opposite.

PRINCE2, ITIL, MSP, and their derivatives have brought enormous discipline to programme and project delivery. They have created common language, repeatable structures, and clear escalation paths. But they have also created something more problematic: a governance layer that can be satisfied by compliance rather than engagement.

When a framework says "appoint an executive sponsor," the organisation appoints one. When it says "the sponsor must approve the business case," the sponsor approves it. When it says "the sponsor chairs the programme board," someone books the meetings and sends the papers.

The framework is satisfied. Every box is ticked. And the programme has a sponsor who is structurally present and functionally absent.

The distinction between structural presence and functional engagement is the fault line on which most sponsorship failures occur. A sponsor who attends every board meeting but never challenges the assumptions behind a green RAG status is not sponsoring – they are witnessing.

This is the governance paradox: the more precisely you define sponsorship in procedural terms, the easier it becomes to comply with the definition without performing the function. The framework becomes a ceiling rather than a floor – the maximum that sponsors do, not the minimum.

3. Three Patterns of Absence

Sponsorship failure is not random. It follows predictable patterns, each with its own structural cause.

3.1 The Delegator

The most common pattern. The sponsor delegates day-to-day engagement to a programme director or SRO and progressively withdraws from active involvement. They receive reports, occasionally attend boards, and intervene only when something has already gone wrong.

The structural cause is straightforward: sponsors are typically senior executives with portfolios of responsibilities that extend far beyond any single programme. The programme that felt urgent when it was approved competes for attention with operational crises, board reporting cycles, and the next strategic initiative. Delegation is rational. But delegation of engagement is not the same as delegation of accountability – and the distinction is rarely made explicit.

3.2 The Endorser

The second pattern is the sponsor who confuses sponsorship with endorsement. They are visible at the start – championing the programme, securing funding, building political support. But their involvement is fundamentally promotional rather than directional. They sell the programme upward and outward but do not engage with the substance of delivery.

This pattern is particularly dangerous because it looks like good sponsorship from the outside. The programme has visible executive support. The board believes it is well-governed. But when difficult decisions arise – scope trade-offs, benefit reductions, timeline resets – the endorser is not equipped to make them because they have not maintained the depth of understanding required.

3.3 The Conflict Avoider

The third pattern is the sponsor who disengages when the programme encounters political difficulty. Stakeholder resistance, benefit ownership disputes, cross-divisional dependencies that require someone senior to broker agreements – these are precisely the moments when sponsorship matters most, and precisely the moments when conflict-averse sponsors retreat into process.

The programmes that need sponsorship least are the ones that get it most. Well-running programmes with green dashboards attract sponsor attention because they are comfortable to be associated with. Troubled programmes – the ones where a sponsor's intervention could change the outcome – are the ones sponsors avoid.

4. Why the Frameworks Cannot Fix This

The instinctive response to sponsorship failure is to define the role more precisely. Add more responsibilities to the terms of reference. Create sponsorship competency frameworks. Run training programmes for senior executives.

None of this addresses the structural problem.

The structural problem is that sponsorship – real sponsorship, not the procedural version – requires three things that cannot be mandated by a framework:

Time. A sponsor who is genuinely engaged with a complex programme needs to spend meaningful time understanding its dynamics, not just reading board packs. In most organisations, the executives senior enough to sponsor significant programmes are the executives with the least discretionary time. The framework can specify that the sponsor should be "sufficiently senior." It cannot create the hours in their diary.

Political courage. The most valuable thing a sponsor does is make decisions that other people cannot or will not make. Scope reductions that disappoint stakeholders. Benefit reforecasts that embarrass the original business case. Escalations that force peer executives to release resources. These are inherently political acts, and no framework can mandate the willingness to perform them.

Sustained attention. Programmes do not fail in a single moment. They drift – slowly, incrementally, through a series of small compromises that individually seem reasonable and collectively prove fatal. Catching drift requires sustained attention to trajectory, not periodic attendance at milestone reviews. A sponsor who engages quarterly is reviewing snapshots. A sponsor who engages continuously is reading the trend.

5. What Functional Sponsorship Actually Looks Like

The difference between procedural and functional sponsorship is observable in practice.

A procedural sponsor asks: "Is the programme on track?" A functional sponsor asks: "What has changed since last month, and what does it mean for the business case?"

A procedural sponsor reviews the risk register. A functional sponsor asks which risks are not on the register and why.

A procedural sponsor chairs the programme board. A functional sponsor has conversations between boards – with the programme director, with key stakeholders, with the people closest to delivery – that surface problems before they become agenda items.

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In programmes with functional sponsors, three things are consistently different:

1. Decisions happen faster. When the sponsor is engaged and informed, escalations are resolved in days rather than weeks. The sponsor does not need to be briefed from scratch because they already understand the context.
1. Bad news surfaces earlier. Programme teams that trust their sponsor to act constructively with difficult information share it sooner. Teams whose sponsors react to bad news by demanding explanations learn to delay disclosure until the problem is either solved or unsolvable.
1. Stakeholder resistance is addressed, not accommodated. Functional sponsors broker the political agreements that programmes cannot broker for themselves. Without this, programmes route around resistance — adding scope, extending timelines, creating workarounds — rather than resolving it.

6. The Organisational Design Problem

The deeper issue is that most organisations treat sponsorship as a governance appointment rather than an organisational design decision.

When a programme is established, someone is assigned as sponsor — usually the most senior person in the relevant business area, or whoever championed the initiative through the approval process. The assignment is made on the basis of seniority and political proximity, not on the basis of capacity, capability, or willingness to perform the function.

This would be considered absurd for any other critical role. No organisation would appoint a programme director by asking “who is the most senior person available?” without assessing whether they had the skills, the time, and the track record to deliver. Yet this is precisely how most sponsors are selected.

The result is predictable: sponsors who are too senior to have time, too politically exposed to take risks, or too detached from delivery to add value. The governance framework is satisfied. The programme is exposed.

7. The Question Nobody Asks

Every programme post-mortem that identifies sponsorship as a failure factor reaches the same conclusion: the sponsor was not sufficiently engaged. And every post-mortem treats this as a finding about the individual rather than about the system.

The question nobody asks is whether the organisation's governance model is designed to produce engaged sponsors or merely to produce named ones. Whether the meeting cadence, the reporting structure, the escalation protocols, and the allocation of executive time are configured to make functional sponsorship possible — or whether they are configured to make procedural sponsorship inevitable.

In most organisations, the honest answer is the latter. The governance framework requires a sponsor. The organisational design makes it nearly impossible for that sponsor to perform the role as intended. And when the programme fails, the post-mortem blames the person rather than the system that set them up to fail.

The uncomfortable truth is that executive sponsorship, as currently practised in most process-driven organisations, is a governance fiction — a role that exists on paper, that satisfies the framework, and that consistently fails to deliver the one thing it was designed to provide: an executive who owns the outcome and acts accordingly.