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Essay

BEYOND CEREMONIAL SPONSORSHIP

The Sponsor Who Signs but Never Leads

The enduring executive absence behind complex organisational change

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> *"A sponsor's absence is not empty space; it is an instruction to the organisation about which promises may be broken safely."*

1. Executive Summary

At 8:35 on a Monday morning, the programme director places three papers at the empty seat at the head of the steering table. One asks whether two regional service centres should close. Another records a six-week delay in the systems build. The third requests a decision on who will carry the first-year savings target. The executive sponsor has approved the programme, signed the investment case and sent a deputy. The deputy can discuss all three papers but is authorised to decide none of them.

By June 2006, this scene is familiar across large-scale change. It appeared in earlier computerisation programmes, returned in the process redesign campaigns of the 1990s, and is visible again in enterprise systems, shared services, outsourcing and post-merger integration. The methods alter. The empty chair remains.

The persistence of the pattern tells us that weak sponsorship is rarely a defect of personal diligence alone. It is produced by an organisational bargain: the sponsor grants formal approval, the programme accepts operational responsibility, and both sides quietly pretend that authority has travelled with the budget. It has not. The programme can coordinate activity, but only the sponsor can settle conflicts between powerful functions, bind line managers to benefits, and absorb the consequences of choices that alter the institution.

The sponsor therefore has three distinct obligations: a financial signature that authorises expenditure, a political signature that makes disputed choices legitimate, and an operational signature that binds the changed business to new performance. Many programmes receive the first and are starved of the other two.

This essay takes the longer view. It argues that sponsorship failure survives because absence is often convenient before it becomes expensive. Ambiguity preserves executive room for manoeuvre, protects line managers from early commitments and lets programme reports remain reassuring. The eventual cost appears elsewhere: delayed decisions, diluted design, benefits without owners and a programme director made answerable for matters beyond the director's authority.

The remedy is not constant executive attendance. It is visible ownership at the few moments when a transformation changes who holds power, who bears cost, or who must perform differently. Delegation remains essential; disappearance does not.

2. The Empty Chair Is Not an Accident

Organisations usually describe the missing sponsor in the language of diaries. The executive is travelling, the trading review has overrun, an acquisition matter has intervened, or the board pack is due. Each explanation may be entirely true. Yet when the same absence recurs through several generations of management practice, the diary is not an adequate diagnosis.

The pattern has a recognisable rhythm.

1. A senior executive lends a name to an investment case because the proposal needs sufficient rank to pass the capital gate.
2. Once approval is secured, a programme office is formed and responsibility drifts towards the programme director.
3. Difficult choices are translated into issues, then into papers, then into red items on a monthly report.
4. Deputies attend steering meetings but seek clearance before committing their functions.
5. The sponsor reappears when cost, delay or resistance has become visible enough to threaten reputation.

At that point the programme is said to have failed to escalate. In truth, it has often escalated repeatedly. What it lacked was not a channel for information but a recipient willing and able to convert information into an institutional decision.

This distinction matters because governance is too often designed as a circulation system for papers. Papers travel upward; comments travel downward; no one can identify the instant at which uncertainty became a decision. The meeting occurs, the minutes are approved, and the organisation remains exactly where it was.

A sponsor's absence is not empty space; it is an instruction to the organisation about which promises may be broken safely. Functional managers observe that participation is optional. Benefits owners learn that targets may be negotiated later. Suppliers discover that unresolved internal questions can be converted into time and money. The programme team learns to protect the appearance of progress by advancing what it can control and postponing what it cannot.

3. The Pattern Outlives the Fashion

The language of change has altered considerably over the past several decades. Large computer installations were once presented as matters of technical modernisation. Later came quality campaigns, process redesign, enterprise-wide systems, strategic sourcing, shared services and increasingly elaborate post-merger programmes. Each wave arrived with new disciplines and new claims about integration.

Yet the sponsorship problem has remained remarkably stable because every serious transformation crosses the same boundary: it begins as an approved proposition and becomes a contest over resources, status and obligation.

A mainframe installation could be described as an equipment decision until departments had to standardise information and surrender local routines. A process redesign could be described as analysis until management layers and measures were altered. An enterprise system could be described as an application until common data definitions displaced local practices. An outsourcing agreement could be described as procurement until managers had to specify the service they truly required and accept the disciplines of a contract.

The technical object changes. The political passage does not.

This is why adding more programme technique has never been a sufficient answer. Better plans expose dependencies; they do not resolve the interests behind them. More detailed risk registers make uncertainty visible; they do not assign an executive to bear it. A carefully prepared benefits schedule can show that £18 million depends on head-count reduction, purchasing compliance and faster billing; it cannot compel three directors to accept those obligations in their operating plans.

The recurring mistake is to treat sponsorship as an ornament of method rather than a source of authority. A programme may borrow the sponsor's name at the start, but it requires the sponsor's judgement throughout. When that judgement is withheld, method becomes theatre: correct forms surrounding undecided substance.

> *“Every transformation eventually asks a question that a programme office cannot answer: which part of the existing organisation are we now prepared to disappoint?”*

4. Three Signatures, Only One Pen

It is useful to distinguish three signatures because the literal act of approval conceals how incomplete sponsorship can be.

Signature	What it authorises	The moment it is tested	The failure when absent
Financial	Expenditure, resources and formal commencement	Approval gates and major changes to cost or scope	The programme cannot begin or must proceed on an implausible basis
Political	Choices between functions, regions and competing interests	Standardisation, closures, role changes and disputed priorities	Decisions are deferred, diluted or reopened
Operational	Ownership of benefits and changed performance	Transfer into line management and the first operating cycle	The programme delivers outputs while the business avoids outcomes

The financial signature is visible and usually documented. It sits on the business case, the capital request or the contract authority. For that reason, organisations frequently mistake it for the whole of sponsorship.

The political signature is less comfortable. It is written when an executive says that one common process will take precedence over several local preferences; that a regional centre will close despite a strong local case; or that a business unit must release its most capable people to the programme. This signature spends influence rather than money. It creates losers as well as winners, and therefore cannot be supplied by a programme director whose legitimacy depends on serving all parties.

The operational signature is often the last to be noticed and the most costly to omit. It is written when line leaders accept that the programme's benefits will appear in their budgets, measures and management routines. A saving is not realised because a spreadsheet contains it. It is realised because somebody changes a roster, removes a vacant post, closes a ledger, alters a purchasing authority, or collects cash sooner. Each act belongs to the operating business.

A sponsor who provides only financial approval has authorised a project, not led a transformation. The distinction explains the puzzling spectacle of a programme that is simultaneously well governed on paper and ungoverned in practice.

> *The sponsor's real task is to make authority travel across the boundary between the temporary programme and the permanent organisation.*

That boundary is where accountability becomes confused. The programme director controls plans, coordination, reporting and much of the delivery machinery. The sponsor controls neither every task nor every specialist, but holds the authority to bind the organisation to consequential choices. When the second role retreats, the first is quietly inflated. The director is asked to own outcomes that require powers the role does not possess.

5. How Absence Converts into Cost

Consider a composite shared-services programme typical of the present period. The approved case commits £31 million over two years to consolidate finance and personnel administration from eleven operating units into two centres, supported by a common system. Annual savings of £14 million are expected from 420 fewer posts, lower accommodation cost and more consistent purchasing. There are thirteen workstreams and a steering committee of seven directors.

During the first nine months, the sponsor attends two of eight steering meetings. The chief financial officer's deputy chairs the others but has no authority over the operating units. The reports remain amber-green because the systems build and building work are broadly on plan.

Beneath that colour, four connected decisions are waiting:

- Two units reject the common chart of accounts because it would disturb their local reporting.
- Three directors will not confirm which posts may be removed before the next budgeting round.
- The personnel function and finance function disagree about who will own the master records.
- The centre manager cannot issue firm job offers until the final transfer date is confirmed.

None of these is a technical problem. Each requires the organisation to choose whose preference, budget or timetable will give way.

Over eleven weeks, the programme office records 37 actions arising from these matters. Twenty-three are referred outside the programme. Their average age reaches 26 working days. To protect the opening date, the team approves local interfaces, retains temporary staff and sequences the transfers around the least resistant units. Those accommodations add £2.6 million to cost and remove £3.8 million from the first two years of forecast benefit.

The apparent turning point arrives when the systems supplier requests an eight-week extension. That request is real, but it is not the original cause. The supplier has been waiting for data definitions that depend on the unsettled operating model. A technical delay has become the respectable face of an executive decision deficit.

When the sponsor finally convenes a three-hour session with all seven directors, the core choices take 95 minutes. A single chart of accounts is confirmed; benefits are placed into unit budgets; the records owner is named; and the transfer date is fixed. The elapsed months were not necessary for analysis. They were the price of waiting for authority to enter the room.

This mechanism recurs because delay is dispersed. No single deferred decision appears fatal. Each can be worked around, and programme teams are rewarded for ingenuity. But workarounds accumulate into a second design—more interfaces, more exceptions, duplicate staff, extended leases, interim procedures—which is expensive to build and harder to retire. The organisation then blames complexity for costs created by indecision.

6. The Convenient Ambiguity

Why would capable executives permit this? The strongest answer is not that they are careless. In many cases the structure rewards partial sponsorship.

The executive's line responsibilities are immediate and measurable. This quarter's revenue, service levels, budget variance and regulatory obligations demand attention now. Transformation benefits are deferred, distributed and often debatable. A sponsor who spends political capital on a painful decision bears the resistance immediately, while the benefit may arrive after responsibilities have changed.

Ambiguity also preserves coalitions. At approval, different directors may support the same programme for incompatible reasons. One expects central control; another expects better local information; a third expects cost reduction without loss of autonomy. Precise sponsorship would expose the contradiction early. Absence allows each party to believe that its preferred version remains possible.

There is also a respectable theory behind delegation. Senior executives should not manage programmes day to day. If every issue is drawn upward, the programme becomes slow and dependent. Strong directors appoint capable people, define tolerances and intervene only by exception. This argument is correct as far as it goes. Constant attendance can indeed become interference, and a sponsor who redesigns plans in every meeting may do more damage than one who stays away.

But this opposing view depends upon a boundary that is seldom made explicit. Execution can be delegated; institutional authority cannot. A programme team should decide how to run a workshop, sequence testing, manage a supplier or recover a late task. It should not decide unilaterally which business unit loses autonomy, whose budget carries the benefit, which executive accepts a service risk, or whether the organisation will honour a contested commitment.

The test is not whether the matter is important. Many important matters properly belong below the sponsor. The test is whether the decision changes the bargain among parts of the organisation.

A useful division is:

- Delegate completely: planning detail, technical coordination, routine supplier management, issue resolution within agreed tolerances.

- Require sponsor confirmation: material changes to the investment case, benefits ownership, operating-model choices and exceptions that set precedent.
- Require sponsor presence: conflicts between executive peers, closure or transfer decisions, commitments that alter line budgets, and moments when the programme's public promise must be defended.

This is a small demand on time but a large demand on nerve. The absent sponsor is not usually avoiding hours of meetings. The sponsor is avoiding a handful of moments in which leadership becomes unmistakable.

7. Presence Is a Sequence, Not a Personality

Calls for stronger sponsorship often collapse into exhortation: be visible, be committed, communicate more. Such language is difficult to disagree with and almost impossible to operate. Visibility without decision can become another performance.

A sponsor's presence is better understood as a sequence of acts.

7.1 Before approval: expose the bargain

The sponsor should require each executive beneficiary to state what will change in that person's operation, what resource will be released, and which loss of discretion is accepted. Agreement on an attractive destination is not enough. The difficult question is what each party is conceding to reach it.

For a £50 million programme, the most revealing paper may not be the investment appraisal. It may be a single page listing ten executive commitments: posts removed, facilities closed, measures changed, local systems retired and specialist staff released. If those commitments cannot be named, the case is not ready for approval.

7.2 At mobilisation: place authority where work will need it

The programme director needs explicit tolerances and a direct route to the sponsor. Steering members must know whether they attend as advisers, delegates or decision makers. Benefits require named line owners, not collective ownership by a committee.

The sponsor should also state which decisions are reserved. Without this, every function protects itself by referring upward, while the programme assumes authority until challenged. Both behaviours are rational; together they create paralysis.

7.3 At points of collision: decide in the room

When executive interests conflict, papers should prepare the decision rather than replace it. The sponsor's contribution is not to ask for more analysis whenever disagreement appears. It is to test whether the remaining uncertainty is material, hear the strongest case on each side, and choose.

A sound decision record is brief:

1. Question: the choice that must be made.
2. Evidence: the facts that would genuinely alter the choice.
3. Interests: who gains, who loses and which obligation moves.
4. Decision: what has been chosen, by whom and on what date.
5. Consequence: the changes to cost, timing, risk and benefits.

This discipline prevents a familiar evasion in which disagreement is disguised as insufficient detail. More analysis is valuable when it can change the answer. When it merely delays ownership, it is an expensive courtesy.

7.4 At transfer: make benefits part of ordinary management

Programmes naturally concentrate on delivery milestones: a contract signed, a system accepted, a centre opened, a migration completed. The sponsor must turn attention towards the first operating cycle after delivery. Have budgets changed? Are old procedures closed? Do managers use the new information? Has the planned capacity actually left, or merely moved into a different cost code?

The benefits review should therefore be chaired as a business performance discussion, not a programme post-mortem. The permanent organisation must account for the promise it inherited.

8. What the Sponsor Owes the Programme—and What the Programme Owes Back

Sponsorship is not a one-sided complaint. Programme teams sometimes contribute to executive absence by making governance unrewarding. Papers are long, decisions are buried, reports celebrate activity, and meetings spend an hour reviewing the past before reaching the first matter requiring judgement. A capable sponsor may reasonably conclude that attendance adds little.

The programme owes the sponsor a decision environment fit for executive work:

- No paper should reach the steering table without stating the decision sought.
- Options should reveal consequences, not merely display three variations of the preferred answer.
- A red status should identify the commitment at risk and the person able to protect it.
- Escalation should occur while choices remain, not after every recovery route has closed.

- Minutes should record decisions and obligations, not produce a transcript of discussion.

In return, the sponsor owes the programme predictable access, protection for unwelcome truths and decisions that survive the corridor conversation after the meeting. Nothing damages authority faster than a formal choice quietly reopened with one dissatisfied director.

The relationship works when both sides refuse a common fiction: that information itself governs. Information supports governance. Only accountable people govern.

9. The Longer View

The sponsor who signs but never appears is often treated as a weak individual inside an otherwise sound arrangement. The longer view suggests the reverse. The individual is enacting an arrangement built to obtain approval without forcing ownership.

That arrangement is attractive because it allows an organisation to announce change before it has settled the terms. The business case gathers consensus around benefits; the programme inherits the unresolved costs; the sponsor's name supplies legitimacy; and the steering machinery distributes responsibility so widely that no single absence seems decisive.

We should therefore be cautious when the next management fashion promises to solve sponsorship through new templates, assurance reviews or reporting disciplines. Such devices can help, particularly when they make reserved decisions and benefits ownership explicit. But they cannot substitute for the act at the centre of leadership: choosing which present interest will yield to a longer purpose, then remaining answerable for the result.

The true measure of a sponsor is not frequency of attendance. It is whether the organisation can point to the moments when that executive's presence changed what became possible. Did a disputed standard become binding? Did a benefit enter a line budget? Did a difficult closure proceed with its rationale intact? Did managers continue to honour the decision after the meeting dispersed?

If the answer is no, the signature on the case is ceremonial.

The empty chair has survived computerisation, process redesign and enterprise integration because it serves a purpose. It postpones the reckoning between aspiration and authority. Serious sponsorship begins when we stop describing that postponement as a scheduling problem and recognise it as a choice about who is prepared to lead the institution through its own resistance.