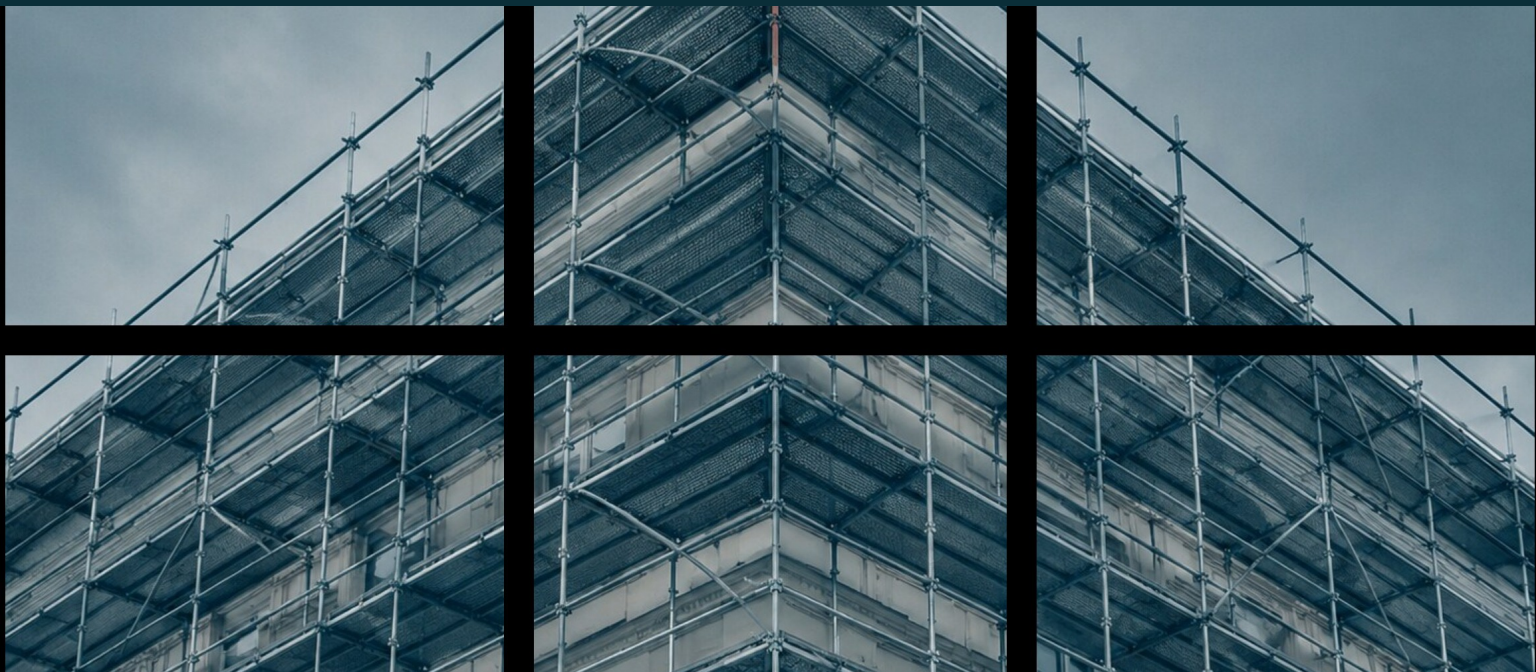


BEYOND ROLE ASSIGNMENT

The Structural Failure of Sponsorship

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Structural Failure of Programme Sponsorship



Giovanni Leonardi

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“The sponsor who signs the business case but never attends the steering committee is not failing to perform a role – they are performing a different one: the role of providing organisational cover without organisational commitment.”

1. Executive Summary

Absent programme sponsorship is widely acknowledged as the single most common cause of programme failure, yet it persists across sectors, organisation types, and maturity levels with a consistency that suggests the problem is structural rather than individual. This paper argues that the root cause lies not in the character or capability of individual sponsors, but in how organisations define, resource, and govern the sponsorship role. It examines the mechanisms by which sponsorship degrades, the consequences for programme delivery, and the structural interventions that can make absent sponsorship visible and addressable before it becomes fatal. The central proposition is that programme sponsorship, as currently conceived in most organisations, is designed to fail – and that addressing this requires changes to governance design, not merely better sponsor selection.

2. The Scale of the Problem

The pattern is so common that it has become almost unremarkable. A senior leader is appointed as programme sponsor. They attend the launch. They sign the business case. They appear at the first steering committee. And then, gradually or suddenly, they disappear from the programme's operating reality. Their name remains on the governance chart. They may still receive the highlight report. But the active sponsorship – the decision-making, the political brokering, the resource protection, the visible commitment that signals to the rest of the organisation that this programme matters – ceases.

The scale of this problem is difficult to overstate. In my experience, a significant majority of complex programmes operate for extended periods with sponsorship that is nominal rather than active. The consequences are well documented: delayed decisions, eroded scope, loss of organisational commitment, and ultimately programme failure or the quiet absorption of the programme into business-as-usual with a fraction of its intended benefits realised.

What is less well understood is why this pattern is so resistant to intervention. Organisations have been identifying absent sponsorship as a critical risk for at least two decades. Programme management methodologies universally emphasise the importance of active sponsorship. Training programmes exist for senior sponsors. And yet the pattern persists. This persistence demands an explanation that goes beyond individual failings.

3. Why Sponsorship Fails: A Structural Analysis

The conventional explanation for absent sponsorship focuses on the individual: the sponsor is too busy, too senior, too disengaged, or insufficiently trained. While these factors are real, they are symptoms of a deeper structural problem. Sponsorship fails because of how the role is designed within the organisational system.

3.1 The Dual-Role Trap

Programme sponsors are, without exception, senior leaders who hold the sponsorship role alongside their primary operational or functional responsibilities. The sponsorship is an addition to their existing portfolio, not a replacement for any part of it. When demands compete — as they inevitably do — the operational role takes precedence because it is where the sponsor's performance is measured, where their career risk sits, and where their peers and superiors expect them to focus.

This is not a failure of commitment. It is a rational response to incentive structures that reward operational performance and treat programme sponsorship as an uncompensated obligation. The organisation asks the sponsor to invest significant time and political capital in the programme while continuing to deliver fully against their operational targets. When something has to give, the programme loses.

3.2 The Authority Illusion

Programme governance frameworks typically grant the sponsor formal authority over the programme: they can approve scope changes, allocate resources, and make strategic decisions. In practice, this authority is contingent on organisational consensus. The sponsor can only exercise their programme authority to the extent that other senior leaders accept the programme's priority claims. When those claims are contested — as they are in any programme that touches multiple business units or competes for scarce resources — the sponsor's formal authority proves hollow unless they are willing to spend political capital to enforce it.

The sponsor who signs the business case but never attends the steering committee is not failing to perform a role — they are performing a different one: the role of providing organisational cover without organisational commitment.

Most sponsors learn quickly that enforcing programme decisions against the wishes of their peers carries personal cost. The rational response is to avoid confrontation: to defer difficult decisions, to allow scope to be nibbled away rather than defended, and to reduce their own visibility in the programme so that they are not associated with its conflicts. This is not cowardice. It is a sophisticated reading of organisational politics by people who are, by definition, skilled political operators.

3.3 The Accountability Gap

Perhaps the most significant structural driver of absent sponsorship is the absence of accountability for the role itself. Sponsors are accountable for the programme's outcomes — at least in theory — but they are almost never held accountable for the quality of their sponsorship. There is no mechanism in most organisations for measuring sponsor engagement, no reporting on sponsor attendance or decision-making, and no consequence for a sponsor who disengages from the programme they are nominally

leading.

The programme manager who notices that their sponsor has become absent faces a structural impossibility: they cannot escalate the sponsor's performance because the sponsor is, by definition, the most senior person in the programme's governance structure. Escalating beyond the sponsor means going to the sponsor's peers or superiors — a career-risking act that most programme managers are unwilling or unable to perform.

4. The Consequences of Nominal Sponsorship

The effects of absent sponsorship manifest in a predictable sequence that accelerates as the absence persists.

4.1 Decision Starvation

Complex programmes generate decisions that can only be made at senior level — trade-offs between competing business priorities, resource commitments that cross organisational boundaries, changes to scope that affect the programme's strategic alignment. When the sponsor is absent, these decisions do not get made. They accumulate in a growing backlog that the programme team either works around — narrowing their ambitions to avoid the need for senior decisions — or escalates fruitlessly through governance mechanisms that depend on a sponsor who is not engaging.

4.2 Legitimacy Erosion

A programme's priority within an organisation is signalled, above all, by the visible commitment of its sponsor. When other senior leaders see the sponsor actively championing the programme — attending governance meetings, presenting at board level, defending resource commitments — they calibrate their own behaviour accordingly. When the sponsor is absent, the signal is equally clear: this programme does not matter enough to warrant senior attention. Other leaders respond rationally, redirecting their own resources and attention away from a programme that the organisation has, in effect, deprioritised.

4.3 The Substitution Trap

In the absence of active sponsorship, the programme manager is forced into a role they are not equipped or authorised to fill. They begin making decisions that should be the sponsor's, conducting stakeholder relationships at a level above their grade, and attempting to provide the political cover that only a senior leader can credibly offer. This substitution is well-intentioned but ultimately corrosive. It masks the sponsorship failure from the wider organisation, allowing the problem to persist, while exposing the programme manager to risks and demands that their position cannot sustain.

“The programme that survives on the programme manager's heroics is not a success story. It is evidence of a governance failure that the organisation has chosen not to see.”

5. Structural Interventions

If absent sponsorship is a structural problem, it requires structural solutions. Individual interventions — sponsor training, better matching of sponsors to programmes, more persuasive programme managers — have their place, but they will not address the underlying dynamics. The following interventions target the system, not the individual.

5.1 Making Sponsorship Visible

The most fundamental intervention is measurement. Organisations that are serious about programme sponsorship need to track it with the same rigour they apply to any other critical dependency. This means reporting on sponsor engagement — attendance at governance meetings, timeliness of decisions, participation in stakeholder management — as a standard element of programme reporting, visible at board level alongside the programme's RAG status and milestone progress.

This is not about creating a surveillance mechanism. It is about making visible a factor that everyone in the programme world knows is critical but that currently exists in a measurement blind spot. When sponsorship engagement is tracked and reported, the conversation changes. A sponsor who sees their engagement metrics alongside those of their peers is far more likely to maintain their commitment than one whose absence goes unnoticed.

5.2 Separating Sponsorship from Operational Load

Organisations need to acknowledge that programme sponsorship carries a real time cost and factor this into the sponsor's overall workload. This may mean reducing the sponsor's operational responsibilities during the programme's critical phases, or it may mean appointing sponsors who have the capacity to absorb the additional demand. What it cannot mean is the current practice of adding sponsorship to an already full portfolio and expecting the sponsor to find the time through personal effort alone.

5.3 Creating Escalation Paths for Sponsorship Failure

The structural impossibility of escalating a sponsor's poor performance must be addressed. This requires creating a mechanism — through the programme management office, through the portfolio governance board, or through a peer review process — that allows sponsorship failures to be raised without requiring the programme manager to challenge their own governance superior directly. Some organisations have experimented with portfolio-level sponsorship reviews, in which a senior governance body periodically assesses the effectiveness of sponsorship across the programme portfolio. Where these are conducted with genuine rigour, the results have been significant.

5.4 Building Sponsorship Resilience

Programmes that depend entirely on a single sponsor are fragile by design. More resilient models include co-sponsorship arrangements, where two senior leaders share the sponsorship role and can cover for each other; sponsorship deputies, who maintain continuity when the primary sponsor is unavailable; and programme boards that are empowered to make certain categories of decision even in the sponsor's absence, within clearly defined parameters.

6. The Conversation Nobody Wants to Have

The central difficulty with addressing absent sponsorship is that it requires telling senior leaders that they are not doing their job. This is a conversation that most programme managers are structurally unable to have, most programme management offices are politically unwilling to have, and most boards are culturally unprepared to have.

Until organisations are willing to treat sponsorship as a genuine accountability — one that is measured, reported, and has consequences — the pattern of absent sponsorship will continue. The programmes will continue to fail, and the post-mortems will continue to identify sponsorship as the root cause, and nothing will change because the problem sits at the one point in the governance structure where accountability is assumed rather than enforced.

The organisations that break this pattern will be those that recognise a simple truth: programme sponsorship is not a title conferred upon a senior leader. It is a commitment that requires time, political capital, and active engagement, and it is too important to be left to the goodwill of individuals operating within a system that gives them every incentive to disengage.