

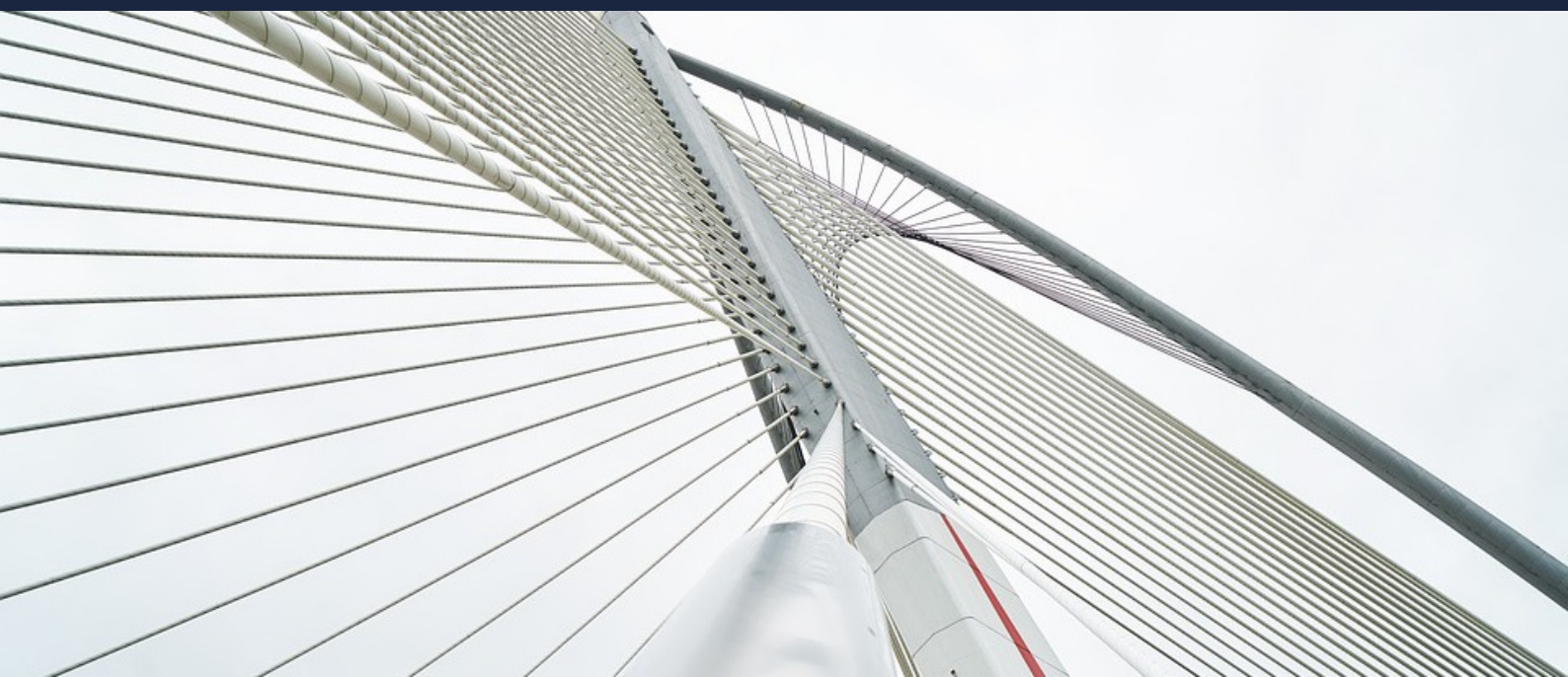
BEYOND THE CHARTER

Transformation Sponsorship Is a Job, Not a Title

Why Most Transformation Programmes Are Governed in Theory and Patronised in Practice

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Transformation Sponsorship Is a Job, Not a Title

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“Architecture without behaviour is theatre — and the programme pays the bill.”

The Ceremonial Sponsor

Every failed transformation programme had a sponsor. That sentence should trouble us more than it does.

The role has become so thoroughly institutionalised that it has stopped being examined. Governance frameworks require one. Business cases name one. Steering committees convene around one. The architecture of sponsorship is immaculate — and largely ceremonial.

What most organisations actually have is a patronage system dressed in governance language. A patron lends their name. They attend milestone reviews. They endorse the narrative when asked. What they do not do — because nobody has made explicit that it is required — is the work of sponsorship: making the decisions that only they can make, within days rather than months; spending personal political capital on the unpopular calls that no programme manager has the authority to land; and showing up when the programme needs air cover, not when the dashboard needs an audience.

The failure mode is invisible for a dangerously long time. A programme with a ceremonial sponsor can run for a year or more before the absence of real sponsorship surfaces in the numbers. By then the damage has compounded. Decisions that should have taken a week have taken a quarter. Scope has expanded not because the business case changed but because nobody with sufficient authority said no. Benefits have drifted because the person nominally accountable for realisation was never doing that work.

The Calendar Test

There is a simple, uncomfortable diagnostic. Pull the sponsor's calendar for the past month. Count the hours they spent not in the programme's meetings, but on its decisions. Escalations they initiated. Conversations with peer executives whose cooperation the programme requires. Trade-off calls between this programme and the competing demands on the same resources.

Four hours a week is a reasonable threshold for a major transformation. Not four hours in meetings about the programme — four hours of decision-work for it. A sponsor who sits through a two-hour steering committee once a fortnight and reads a highlight report is doing oversight. A sponsor who spends four hours a week making calls, brokering agreements, and resolving the issues the programme team cannot resolve on their own authority is doing sponsorship.

Most sponsors, subjected to this test, would fall short. Not through negligence — because the role was never scoped as a job. It was scoped as a designation. The charter names them. The RACI assigns them. The governance framework presumes they will do what is needed. But nobody negotiated the time commitment, quantified the decision load, or made the sponsorship role a line item in an already full executive diary. They were appointed, not contracted.

Two Honest Responses

If the calendar test reveals a patron rather than a sponsor, there are only two defensible moves.

The first is to re-sponsor: find an executive who can and will do the work, negotiate the time explicitly, and make it part of their performance objectives — not an implicit expectation layered onto a full operating role. This requires the organisation to admit that the original appointment was a formality, which is politically uncomfortable and therefore rarely done.

The second is to re-charter: scale the programme's ambition, scope, or pace to match the sponsorship it actually has. A transformation that needs an active sponsor four hours a week but has a patron four hours a month is not undergoverned in theory — it is ungoverned in practice. Matching the programme to its real sponsorship is more honest than pretending the gap does not exist.

A sponsor who cannot show four hours a week of decision-work is a patron, not a sponsor — and the programme should be re-chartered or re-sponsored before it fails politely.

What most organisations do instead is neither. They leave the ceremonial sponsor in place, ask the programme manager to "manage upwards," and hope that the governance architecture compensates for the absence of governance behaviour. It does not. Architecture without behaviour is theatre — and the programme pays the bill.