

BEYOND THE HANDOVER NOTE

When the Sponsor Changes Mid-Programme

A Practitioner's Perspective on Sponsor Transition in Complex Programmes



Giovanni Leonardi

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“We plan for the departure of a supplier; we should plan, with at least as much care, for the departure of the one person the whole endeavour reports to.”

1. The Risk No Plan Names

Open almost any programme plan and you will find the sponsor treated as bedrock. The business case rests on their authority. The escalation route ends at their door. The benefits are theirs to own and, in time, theirs to defend. In the risk register we diligently log supplier failure, scope creep, resource shortfall, technology immaturity — a dozen flavours of delivery risk. What we almost never log is the plainest fact of all: that the single most important person in the governance structure will, on a programme of any real length, quite possibly not be there at the end.

Senior leaders move. They are promoted, reorganised, poached, retired, or simply reassigned when the corporate weather changes. On a programme running two or three years, the odds that the sponsor who commissioned it is also the one who closes it are not good. And yet almost no methodology I have worked with treats sponsor transition as a managed event. The guidance will tell you that the Senior Responsible Owner is accountable for the business case; it will not tell you what to do on the morning you learn the SRO is leaving in six weeks. So the handover, when it comes, is improvised. Usually it is reduced to a briefing pack and a warm introduction, as though the difficulty were one of information.

It is not a difficulty of information. It is one of trust, narrative, and inherited commitment — and none of those things transfers in a document.

2. What the Incoming Sponsor Actually Inherits

When a new sponsor arrives, the organisation tends to reassure itself with the language of continuity: nothing changes, the programme carries on. That reassurance is precisely the trap, because it papers over three inheritances that are anything but continuous.

- A narrative they did not shape. Every programme is, among other things, a story its sponsor tells the organisation — why we are doing this, what it will cost, what we will refuse to do, what good looks like. The founding sponsor believes that story because they authored it, line by line, in a hundred difficult conversations. The successor is handed it finished and is expected to defend it, in front of the same board, with the same conviction. They cannot — not at first — because conviction is the one thing that does not come in the pack.
- Commitments they did not make. Somewhere in the programme's history sit promises: a go-live date named to the board, a benefit figure defended in the business case, a scope line drawn in a hard meeting and held. To the outgoing sponsor these

were hard-won positions, each with its context and its scars. To the incoming one they are constraints of unknown origin. And the organisation holds the new sponsor to them from the first day, as though the signature on the mandate had simply been re-inked.

- A team whose trust they have not earned. A programme team learns to read one person — when they mean it and when they are posturing, what they will defend to the last and what they will quietly trade, which risks make them lean in and which make them reach for the delay. That fluency, built over months, is gone overnight. The team now faces a stranger holding the most consequential role in their working lives, and they will spend the coming weeks doing what any sensible person does with a new and powerful figure: watching, testing, withholding.

“A programme rarely loses momentum in the week the sponsor changes. It loses momentum in the weeks afterwards, while everyone waits to find out what the new one actually believes.”

3. Two Ways It Goes Wrong

The transitions I have watched fail tend to fail in one of two characteristic shapes, opposite to each other, and it is worth naming both because the remedy for one is the cause of the other.

1. The over-correction. The new sponsor, needing to establish authority and instinctively mistrusting a plan they did not build, reopens settled questions. Scope is revisited. The business case is "refreshed." The approach is put under review. Sometimes this is genuinely warranted — a fresh pair of senior eyes occasionally catches what familiarity had stopped seeing. But more often it is a newcomer proving they are in charge, and the price is months of re-litigation that the programme's real problems never called for. Momentum built over a year is spent re-defending ground that was already won.
2. The vanishing. The opposite failure, and the more dangerous of the two. The new sponsor, wary of owning decisions they did not take, holds the role at arm's length. They attend, they nod, they sign — but they will not spend political capital defending a programme that does not yet feel like theirs. The team senses the air cover thinning and grows cautious in turn. Nothing visibly breaks; that is exactly why it is dangerous. The programme simply loses its edge, its willingness to push, its confidence that someone senior will stand behind a hard call. Decline by quiet withdrawal leaves no fingerprints.

Between these two — the sponsor who changes everything in order to own it, and the sponsor who touches nothing so as not to own it — lies the narrow path we should actually be steering towards.

The goal of a sponsor transition is neither continuity nor a fresh start. It is informed re-ownership: the new sponsor genuinely making the programme theirs, on the basis of an honest account of where it truly stands.

4. What Experience Actually Taught Us

If the problem is trust, narrative, and inherited commitment, then the handover has to be designed to transfer those things — which a briefing pack, however thorough, cannot. A few practices have earned their place, in my experience, across very different programmes.

- Treat the transition as a managed event with its own small plan. Not a coffee and a document, but a defined period of a few weeks with named outcomes: the new sponsor briefed, the commitments re-confirmed, the team engaged, the board reassured. We would never let a critical supplier change hands without a transition plan. The person the whole programme reports to deserves at least the same.
- Give the incoming sponsor an honest baseline, not a reassuring one. The most valuable thing an outgoing sponsor can leave behind is not everything is fine. It is: here is what I actually worry about; here is the commitment I am least confident we will meet; here is the board member who was never truly convinced and why. A handover that transfers only the official story sets the successor up to be ambushed by the real one, usually at the worst possible moment.
- Protect a re-ownership window — and say so out loud. The organisation should expect, and be explicitly told to expect, that the new sponsor will take a defined period to test the programme's premises before re-committing to them. Naming the window is the trick: it converts a dangerous ambiguity — does the new sponsor back this or not? — into a managed pause with a visible end date, which steadies the team instead of unsettling it.
- Let the new sponsor re-earn the team's trust deliberately. The instinct to arrive with a plan and a speech is usually the wrong one. The stronger first move is to listen — structured, visible, and genuine — to the people who have carried the programme this far. Trust is rebuilt by demonstrating that their hard-won knowledge is valued, not overwritten.
- Re-confirm every inherited commitment explicitly. Each promise the programme is carrying should be walked through and either re-adopted — in the new sponsor's own voice, so that it becomes genuinely theirs — or renegotiated openly. A commitment silently inherited is a commitment no one truly owns, and the ones no one owns are the ones that quietly slip.

5. The Lesson Underneath

The deeper point is uncomfortable, because it indicts how we design programmes in the first place. We build them as though authority were the fixed point and delivery the only variable. The reverse is frequently nearer the truth: the delivery machine — the teams, the plans, the suppliers, the disciplines — is often more stable than the sponsorship sitting above it. We have industrialised the management of everything below the sponsor and left the sponsor themselves as an unexamined constant.

If we took seriously that the sponsor is among the most likely parts of the structure to change, we would build for it from the start. We would keep a living account of the programme's commitments and where each one came from. We would write a benefits case legible to someone who did not author it. We would keep a governance record that explains not merely what was decided but why — so that the reasoning survives the person. We plan for the departure of a supplier; we should plan, with at least as much care,

for the departure of the one person the whole endeavour reports to. The programmes that survive a change at the top are not the lucky ones. They are the ones that quietly assumed it would happen.